Serving Many Masters

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DOES THIS SCENARIO SEEM FAMILIAR?

Scene: Your cubicle, in the technical writing department of a software company. Enter your boss, accompanied by the vice president of R&D.
Boss: “Have you seen the Website they’ve set up for us at Head Office?”
You: “Yes, our network guru showed it to me a while ago.”
VP of R&D: “What did you think of it?”
You: “Well, it seems cute, but it’s full of ‘Under Construction’ notices.”
Boss: “Do you think you could do better?”
You (innocently): “How hard could it be?”
VP of R&D (with a gleam in his eye): “We’ll be back!”

45 minutes later …
Re-enter the boss, this time accompanied by the network guru, who is grinning.
Boss: “Congratulations, Webmaster. The corporate Website is now installed on your departmental UNIX box. Chris here will show you how to get at it. We’re looking forward to seeing great things!”
Exit the boss, hastily …

That’s how some people become Webmasters. Two or three years pass, then the battle-scarred Webmasters get asked how they did it. Why didn’t they scream and run out of the room the minute those guys showed up? No, really, it’s a cool job and we’ve learned a lot, some of which can appear in a respectable publication.

WHAT IT’S ALL ABOUT

You’re taking up the challenge of managing a corporate Website — starting from scratch, or building it up. Your goal is to support and enhance both the internal and the external activities of your organization. Initially, most Websites are seen simply as PR and advertising vehicles. Management has
heard that “there’s gold in them thar Webs,” but has no idea how to mine it. Soon, however, every department will get ideas about what your Website can do, and they won’t hesitate to tell you. As a point of first contact, the Webmaster is not without influence, and you may be surprised to learn how many diverse goals you can meet, plus a few that nobody expected.

GATHER THE TEAM

A Website needs a variety of skills. There are hundreds of publications about Web technology, graphics, coding, interactivity, writing style, and so on. The advice changes every day, so you’ll never stop learning. As a brief framework, here are the kinds of resources you’ll need:

• Toasterheads — technical gurus to set up the Webserver and connections, acquire software tools, troubleshoot, make backups, tell you about cool stuff they’ve seen.
• Writers/editors — to create and update the words about your business, products, and services. No matter what you may have heard, content IS king. Fast turnaround is essential. Edit ruthlessly for formality, brevity, and reading level.
• Artists — effective layout and creative graphics are what make your site a pleasure to visit. Make each pixel count; go easy on the bandwidth requirements.

It’s easy to forget how fast everything changes on the Web — not just the message, but the tools that say it. Keep renewing, revising, and rebuilding; your site will never be finished.

FACE THE MUSIC

If you think of all the people you must keep happy, you’ll hyperventilate, so let’s talk about the care and feeding of your many masters in the order in which they might come through your door.

CORPORATE PR

The first person to call on the Webmaster may well be the public relations officer. PR professionals appreciate the value of low-cost media that can be carefully managed. From your point of view, it’s a good place to start because both content and photographs are usually ready. Make sure you’re crystal clear about the corporate image and settle any approval requirements before the material goes live. Don’t chain yourself to a detailed sign-off for every page; establish your credibility and professionalism right away. While you’re talking to the PR officer, get items like these:

• Corporate mission statement
• Offices or factories (how to get there and what they do)
• Press releases and coverage in the news
Think of the corporate information from the surfer’s perspective, which is probably the reverse of how executives see things. News comes first then the products or services you offer. Don’t include too much about individuals, it facilitates headhunting and can expose people to junk mail. That mission statement should be simple, short, sweet, and last.

MARKETING

Right behind the PR officer, the Marketing department will bring their list. The digital age has made the Web a key element of any marketing strategy. Your site should say, “Here’s what our stuff is like; how can it help you?” Chat with the marketers often so you’ll get their orientation plus ideas about future strategies.

Earn some respect from marketing management by being specific about how your Website can work for them. Support lead tracking by setting up interactive pages where interested visitors can provide contact information. Popular features include:

- Visitor guest book or survey with space for comment
- A contest about your company, possibly with a freebie prize
- White papers or product demos
- E-mail to the president, marketing, or product development chief

When marketing has a special campaign, support it with new custom-designed Web pages. In your direct mail and advertising material (in print or on the Web), mention the URL of the new pages. For example: “For more info, visit www.mycompany.com/campaign/.” You’ll be able to address these pages to their own specific audience and include a form to retrieve information from visitors.

SALES AND PRODUCT DISTRIBUTION

Sales will naturally follow marketing to your door, since a Website can be a great sales and distribution channel. If your product or service can be delivered electronically, your Website can do the whole job. But even if you sell live aardvarks and deliver them by helicopter, the Website can still receive and process your orders. Many E-commerce products available now will let you quickly set up a complete online shop.

However, when the sales manager asks you to open a store on your Website, take a minute to talk about issues like these:

- Global reach. It’s a World Wide Web. Can you provide contact information for potential customers around the globe? How will you fill orders in remote locations? Who pays for shipping, handling, duties, and taxes?
- Pricing. It’s unlikely that you’ll have one price list for the whole world, and your prices may be negotiable. Can you give a price range? Should
you omit prices, but include an e-mail link and phone numbers for your sales offices?

• **Payment.** Electronic payment is more feasible now that the Web offers better security and people are getting used to online shopping. What payment methods will you be able to handle?

• **Delivery.** Can you deliver your product via the Web? Software, travel reservations, translation, and financial services are successfully sold and delivered online. Other products, like books, music, computer hardware and accessories are sold on Websites and delivered by traditional methods. Can you make a profit with your product that way?

• **Existing sales function.** Can your sales organization support this new channel? How will Web orders be passed to your order processing system? Which part of the sales team will handle these orders?

**INVESTORS**

If yours is a public company, current and potential investors will come to your site looking for the scoop. Probably your least technical users, these visitors are nevertheless accustomed to getting financial data like stock quotes online and they expect to find more than window dressing. Investor information can be judiciously selected from your corporate and marketing pages. Investors often don’t want to buy your product, they just want to be sure that lots of other people do.

Fill your investor pages with background data about the company, financial results, product direction, success stories, market recognition, etc. Add a link to a stock quote service and an e-mail link to the executive suite. Some of these data may be sensitive, so senior management will want to review it and you’ll want to conform to any legal rules about what and how much to include.

**CUSTOMER SUPPORT**

The people who man the hot lines and talk to troubled customers all day will be among your most enthusiastic clients. For them, you offer a reliable central source of the information that they’re repeating endlessly over the phone, and giving them a way of making customers feel special. You can easily set up a Customer Support Site, with password access, that supplies restricted information for customers only. It could include:

• A database of known problems and solutions, hints and tips, troubleshooting advice
• An e-mail link to the support coordinator
• Previews and demos of new products
• A suggestion box
• Freebies for faithful or frequent users
• A link to a user group Website
• Discussion groups or newsgroups
Once you start, the list will grow. You can use one general customer password, or add a bit more programming to give each registered customer a unique password.

SALES STAFF AND FIELD SUPPORT

The folks in the field should always get the latest news, but they often feel isolated and out of the loop. Since they can’t come to you, offer them a Field News Site as a reliable, informed source, containing:

- Current product data, proposed product direction
- Background and competitive information and related Websites
- Multimedia demos and ready-to-use sales presentations

Encourage field staff to use the site by offering an incentive, even if it’s just recognition as Best-Informed Representative of the month.

Make sure that your Field News, especially if it promises future goodies, is ready for possible leakage to the world. You could create problems for your company if you downplay current products and hype the dreamware that may never become reality. And, of course, talk to sales and product management to review and update the content frequently.

TRAINING

You probably distrust computer-based training; you’ve tried glitzy software tutorials and you’re not sure they do the job. But don’t overlook the potential of your Website to support internal and external training programs.

- For starters, post your course schedules, prices, descriptions, and locations, how to sign up and how to get more information
- With some programming input, set up online registration, administer precourse qualifying quizzes, and accept feedback from students and instructors
- Eventually, complete the back end to process your training statistics, monitor training cash flow, and print your course certificates automatically

If you’re intrigued by online training, your company may have material you can adapt. For example, suppose accounting has a training booklet called “Making sure we always get our discounts.” You could convert it into a Web tutorial that employees can follow on a Web browser and submit quizzes via e-mail.

DOCUMENTATION

If you can print it, you can put it on the Web. Your Website is a great place to keep all the documents that everyone needs but hates to find space for.
• Start close to home, with your employee handbook and directory, policy manuals, insurance and expense forms, local holiday calendar, messages from the CEO … you get the idea
• Turn your attention outward and make a place for press releases and success stories, marketing collateral, product documents or manuals, data sheets, white papers, and so on and on
• Provide online versions that can be downloaded and printed by the recipient, plus a list of printed publications that people can order

Your documentation mother lode on the Web should attract regular visits from the people who create the publications you’re offering, so you can receive updates as they occur. Pass the requests for printed copies along to the originators, too; you don’t want to be taken for a printing service along with all the other new tasks you’re rapidly acquiring.

INTERNATIONAL

Although English dominates the Web, more sites are now appearing in other languages. If you do business in foreign countries, you should consider translating at least parts of your Website. But be forewarned; multilingualism may induce migraines at update time. Will your Spanish, French, Japanese, Farsi, or Tagalog translator be available when you need her?

Some recommendations for this thorny field:

• Unless you speak in many tongues, you’ll need outside translators, preferably volunteer; your foreign offices and distributors should pitch in; the work is for their benefit
• Don’t forget the need for timeliness and fast turnaround; translations always lag your main site but they can’t wait forever
• Always have someone in the target location review translated material; languages grow and jargon varies in different places
• If you solicit feedback in other languages, make sure that someone on the receiving end can read the messages and respond appropriately.
• If you have satellite Websites, make sure there are reciprocal links between them and your main site

LEGAL

Beware the fine print. Sooner or later your legal advisors will ask you to add copyright notices, disclaimers, product warranties, or licensing information. Put the legal jargon on a separate page linked to your home page. Don’t forget to claim copyright on your own Web pages, and equally don’t forget to acknowledge the authorship of material you liberate from other Websites. Everyone copies from the Web and you will too, but a corporate Webmaster must uphold the copyright law.
EMPLOYEES

Within your organization, the corporate Website can enhance the social environment and build team spirit. If you already have an employee newsletter, publish a Web version; if not, create a space for company news with an employee focus. The bowling team and the softball league will enjoy seeing their schedule and pictures on the Web. Then there’s long-service awards, community achievements, weddings, babies, promotions, and retirements.

Don’t forget potential employees either; the Web is an active recruiting medium. Post job opportunities at your company and accept online applications. It’s much less expensive than print advertising and may significantly extend the reach and success rate of your recruitment efforts. Also think about Web-based recruiting services, who will usually be happy to set up reciprocal links between their Websites and yours.

INTRANET

Think big about the internal services that your Website can handle; you’re creating an “intranet.” The personnel department already has forms for expense reports, timesheets, insurance claims, vacation allocations, performance evaluations, employee address book, and the like. It’s a snap to put these paper forms on your Website as HTML pages and set a password to keep them private. When you have the resources (bribe your programmer with chocolate at regular intervals), code the forms so they can be filled out and submitted electronically. Tell the financial folks how an intranet system for personnel services can quickly pay for itself in increased accuracy and reduced manual processing.

If you link the intranet services to your employee news pages, as in Exhibit 36.1, you’ll increase readership and participation. Assuming that you have in-house e-mail, you could send each update of the intranet password along with a snippet of company news or the latest additions to the Website.

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

Many organizations keep R&D and product engineers far in the back room, well away from real people. Without speculating on the reasons for that policy, we suggest that your Website can help bridge the gap without disturbing anyone’s way of working. When the Website becomes a channel for interdepartmental communication, everyone benefits. Planning and product management could maintain project schedules in various levels of detail, and product package definitions could itemize what is to be delivered in what format. Don’t add to anyone’s workload; just offer a central place to post the information that’s already being used.
No matter what business you’re in, there will be corporate standards that you can post on the Web for employee reference. For example, list the rules about the corporate logo: size, color, spacing … for people sending mailers or making slide presentations. Create an archive of great graphics and packaging design, or boilerplate about company history and product features. These items are always being requested, so you’ll save everyone’s time and achieve better quality results.

PRODUCT TESTING

Manufacturers who conduct off-site testing, whether by employees or favored customers, know that contact and follow-up is a major challenge.
Your Website can be an efficient, low-cost way to handle beta test recruiting, managing, and reporting. Furnish your Beta Test Center with:

- Testing paperwork and reports
- Backgrounders on the products being tested
- Test announcements, plans, and schedules
- E-mail link to the testing coordinator
- Chat line or newsgroup for tester feedback and discussion
- A coffee mug or other prize offer for conscientious testers.

If your product can be distributed electronically, set up a download center where testers can get the beta versions they will be working on.

**BUSINESS PARTNERS**

Your Website can keep your main office in touch and in favor with far-flung business partners. A password-protected Partners section on your site could provide company news and product information. The Webmaster can be a clearinghouse for questions that a partner might not know where to direct, so include an easy way for partners to request information and to update their own records.

On the public side, use your Website to help generate additional business activity and attract new partners to your program. A partnership directory can list your partner businesses and describe their services. Encourage initial contact through a simple online application form. If you like, you could offer to host small advertisements from your partners as a membership bonus.

**USER ASSOCIATIONS**

Visitors will come back to your site if you focus on their interests. To support your customer base, list the user group meetings, upcoming seminars, and trade shows. As always, update the pages regularly, provide a channel to contact you, and offer incentives such as conference discounts, to encourage use of the site.

Many user associations suggest setting up an e-mail List Server or automated group mailing list so your customers, employees, and partners can exchange ideas, solve problems, announce events, and hold ongoing discussions on relevant topics. These mailing list programs register subscribers and let them send e-mail to the whole list or to specific members. Check your local college or Internet service provider for a List Server program you can use.

**AARDVARKS**

Finally, don’t forget that everyone needs some fun. Web surfers despise a vanilla cone; they crave a banana split with cherries, sprinkles, and fudge
sauce. Hard information is why you’re there, but don’t underestimate the value of entertainment or surprise. Animation is cool, provided it doesn’t clog transmission, and a light and lively editing hand makes technical data less painful. Many sites hide an Easter egg — an unadvertised link to a cool Web gizmo, a quick game or a bit of culture. Try a quiz or contest with answers somewhere on your site, and offer a nice trivial prize.

We know of at least one site that includes fake advertising slogans about the company — insider amusement for the Webmaster at least. And since you’re doing all the work, you and your gang can bury a few special features about yourselves deep in the bytes. Where else could you publish that novel of yours or display your vacation photos so easily? And why an aardvark? Got your attention, didn’t it?

**THAT’S ALL, FOLKS**

If you’ve decided that climbing Mount Everest sounds like a restful afternoon compared to the life of a Webmaster, you obviously haven’t spent enough time training a puppy. Veterans will tell you how maddening it all is, but they’ll fight like tigers to keep the job. If we’ve managed to give you just a few ideas about managing the insanity, that’s our contribution to a better Web for us all.

**Authors’ Bios**

**Kay Palkhivala** is currently Director of Technical Documentation and Education at Speedware Corporation in Montreal, Canada. She is a survivor of a dozen years as an educator and another dozen as manager of technical writing for various software companies. Having spent one third of her adult life as a parent and another third in high schools, she has found happiness among software manuals and thinks everyone should understand why she keeps a battery-powered plush pterodactyl in her bottom desk drawer.

**Anne Anderson-Lemieux** is an Electronic Publications Specialist with Speedware Corporation. She dabbles in “painless” drawing and painting. Many of her skills were acquired through the study of “what to see” and the rest was transferred to her by her parents through osmosis.

**Charles Mappin** is a Technical Writer and Associate Webmaster (a.k.a. Webslave) at Speedware Corporation. He prepared for this career with degrees in Linguistics and Urban Planning, which seems about as good a background as any to write all day long about computers.