From Grass Roots to Corporate Image— the Maturation of the Web

by Christine A. Quinn

This viewpoint discusses the growth of the World Wide Web at Stanford University as well as efforts there to bring diverse groups together on Web presentation, and offers some advice about building a Web site.

Much like other innovative ways of handling information, the use of the World Wide Web has grown from the bottom up. Many research universities’ Web servers were created within computer science departments by graduate students. Thus, the presentation of the university to the rest of the world was the concept of a single individual. As the popularity of the Web has increased, and the word gets out on how the Web works, others have become involved in what might be presented, how that might be presented, and what the links will look like. Questions arise as to who owns the information presented, who has responsibility for deciding what goes where, and who decides what the Web pages should look like.

Stanford, probably much like other universities struggling with these issues, started with such a Web site. As more and more individuals within the University (or affiliated sites) took to the Web, the organization, look, and responsibility of the pages became a more pressing issue.

How does a large, diversified, distributed organization such as a university begin to collect this information and provide a mechanism by which Web offerings could be presented in a similar way? Is it possible, for instance, for all Stanford pages to have a “Stanford” look? More importantly, is it desirable?

Something’s missing

Something’s missing from the Web; it’s not a search mechanism, it’s not a general index, and it’s not higher bandwidth. What’s missing is the corporate image. Some sites have tried for such an image and succeeded, some have tried and failed, but mostly Web sites are just not trying.

When a corporation hires an agency to create a million-dollar ad campaign, the CEO gets involved, vice presidents are consulted, marketing joins ranks with sales and provides focus groups, test beds, and so forth. When a company is about to bring a new piece of software into their product line, there are alpha sites, beta sites, and test groups, and developers meet and meet and meet.

When a brochure is being developed for an organization, artists are hired, graphic designers are contacted, art directors given direction, and printers told what quality of paper, type of ink, and printing style to use.

This is not commonly happening on the Web.

Joining the information superhighway has never been so easy

People are beginning to realize that the information superhighway is here, and the Webmasters are riding it like crazy. Crazy is the key word! Since the bulk of Web material today is created by computer scientists and/or technologists, the Web has the distinctive look and feel of a high-tech playground—toys, computers, video games—sprinkled here and there with little thought to order, discipline, or professionalism.

Now before you shout “Anarchy before order!” consider this:

• Even the simplest of TV ads require directors, camera people, production assistants, and so forth. And such a commercial may reach a million people—maybe a few times!
• When you put a Web site up and announce it at CERN or NCSA, you can reach 10 million people—many, more times than once, at sites that are far out of the reach of standard commercial TV.

Are you considering what your Web pages say about you?
Top Twenty Things Not to Do on a Web Page

1. Don’t release it until it’s tested, tested, tested.
2. Don’t forget to make the title very descriptive, so that when it’s saved to someone’s hotlist, she’ll know what it is.
3. Don’t let links be too non-descript—if someone prints your page out they won’t have the link to follow.
4. Don’t include references to “generic Web information”—there are plenty of those around; I came to your site for information about your organization.
5. Don’t do dangling links—avoid the word “here”—put the link on the item itself.
6. Don’t forget a Webmaster reference.
7. Don’t forget to tell people how big files are before they download them.
8. Don’t forget other platforms and browsers.
9. Don’t leave the important stuff for the bottom—someone may not make it down that far.
10. Don’t have dead-end links.
11. Don’t be sloppy with your HTML—know how the language works!
12. Don’t repeat the same link with different names.
13. Don’t steal someone else’s graphics.
14. Don’t make something look like a button and not work like a button.
15. Don’t violate white-space balance.
16. Don’t let links drop—check your hrefs.
17. Don’t forget a timestamp.
18. Don’t have too much information on a single page.
19. Don’t have a different style of icon for every bullet.
20. Don’t crowd images.

The last question asked is the first needed

Have you perused comp.infosystems.www.provider lately? Anyone there talking about aesthetics? I’ve seen “How do I set up an online database”; I’ve seen “Really COOL idea”; and I’ve seen “ANNOUNCE” far, far too many times. What I haven’t seen are questions like:

- How much graphics is too much?
- What should a button bar include?
- How much color should I use?
- Does anyone know a good artist?
- Just how much should go on a single Web page, anyway?

Stanford gets caught in the Web

Stanford caught onto the Web by virtue of the Computer Science department. A doctoral student learned about it, aliased his machine’s name to www.stanford.edu, and started organizing information. He scanned a number of images of Stanford, decided what topics would appear where, and offered it up to the world.

The world!

Then he waited for people at Stanford to tell him they had a site and he added a link to their pages. It was hit-or-miss for many months and gradually the home page went from being a single document, where all was equal (the freshman dorm and the Medical School were on the same level), to a sorted list with general bullets that linked on to other sites as it is now.²

When attempts at discussing Web standards met mostly with apathy, a consultant, formerly in higher education and now in the corporate world, was invited to meet with the Stanford Web-footed. The consultant showed several sites (including his own, of course) that had attempted to bring a semblance of unity and art to their pages. He discussed use of color (fifty per image, 150 per page max³), button bars as navigational aids (Top, Find, Help, Comments), and icons for consistency. He also took time to show Webmasters what not to do. Based on his instruction (and my own experience), see the sidebar above for a list of the top twenty things not to do on a Web page.

More than gossamer—where there’s strength, there’s fire

A concerted effort requires organizations working together, but more importantly it requires a leader, someone who will set the stage and move forward in the design and implementation of a set of pages—pages that will reflect the quality of the institution they represent. This piece had been missing for Stanford, as it is from many Web sites.
It was apparent that the standard paper documentation coming out of Stanford had a certain quality about it. The Stanford colors of deep red and sandstone are commonly used. The publication services group within Stanford had often used the distinctive architecture of the school and the richness of these colors to set their publications apart from those offered by other universities and organizations.

Where are these people now that the Web needs them?

The first time I had a chance to have the Web imitate art was when I became involved in the Stanford Center for Professional Development's pages. My first suggestion was to use Stanford Publication Services to design a “look.” By employing both a graphic designer and an art director we found a concept that brought architecture and color to SCPD’s World Wide Web catalog.

The ideas sound simple, but the implementation is not. It wasn’t simply a matter of creating a piece of art and turning it into a GIF file. The artist, unfamiliar with the new requirements of the medium, had no idea how to proceed. The art director, however, was able to instruct her on the need to keep the screen in mind and to apply such techniques as anti-aliasing to the text. With our combined efforts, the SCPD pages provided the image that was needed.

Beyond doing a set of pages for an individual group, the issue now is how to pursue this on a campuswide basis. As the primary promoter (or should I say, proselytizer) of a Well-Designed Web Architecture, my job at Stanford is to convince people of the beauty of the Web—the beauty not just in the gee-whiz nature of the user interface, but in the possibility of an overall design that embodies art as well as utility.

What does this say for you and your Web site?

It means you need to do some reflecting before reacting.

First, think about what you’re going to put on the Web before you put it on. It’s nice to get on the Web quickly, but only if your site reflects well on your campus once you’re on.

Second, consider what your pages say about your organization. Do they portray a professional quality that you would normally invoke with campus pamphlets or brochures? Or do they speak volumes about disorganization, disarray, and dissension?

Third, think about what you want to say with your pages, how you want to organize them, and how people might look through them. Are you trying to tell the world who you are, what you do, what you can do for them? Are you selling something? If the answer to any of these is yes, consider how someone with a marketing background might get involved.

Finally, if you’re willing to spend $20,000 on a brochure that gets used for a year, why not invest at least that much with a graphic designer and an art director to do your Web site well? In years to come, this legacy of your venture onto the superhighway will pay back in plenty.

Note:

This viewpoint is adapted from a paper presented by the author at “The Second International World Wide Web Conference: Mosaic and the Web,” Chicago, October 1994. Paper proceedings of this conference are available (inquire to well@osf.org or phone 617-621-7339); online proceedings are available at http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/IT94/Proceedings/. The original HTML version of this viewpoint is available at http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/IT94/Proceedings/Campus.Infosys/quinn/quinn.html

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