

Data PR

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Corporate web sites store amazing amounts of information. They are libraries of products and services information, financial results, news and press releases packed so densely that it is easy to get lost. Most web users have had the experience of knowing data is somewhere on a site but extended clicking never seems to reveal it and an internal search engine somehow doesn't seem to find it. A number of sites I use regularly have information lodged so deeply I hunt each time I access it. I suppose I could put relevant URLs in "favorites," but then, the favorites list becomes so cluttered I can't find it there either.

Most people are minimalists when it comes to finding data. They want to take the fewest number of steps to find what they need and get on about their business. The problem with minimalism in complex information delivery is that it is hard to stay simple. Too many information sources vie for top spots. Organizations rank information for the majority of users but not for those looking for one study out of 100, for example. This is the same as the "Long Tail" challenge with music database sites. One has thousands of artists to choose from, tens of thousands of songs and hundreds of musical styles. How does one find one artist and/or one song and/or musical style unless there is a powerful search engine and careful categorization?

Data has made transparency anything but transparent. However, evolving approaches to the web are changing transparency for the better. Huge amounts of information are being turned into presentation formats that are easier for individuals to comprehend – some visual and some aggregated in new ways. This is an opportunity for PR practitioners who work to achieve transparency on behalf of their organizations.

The technology approach is loosely dubbed "Web 2.0." Web 2.0 is one of several jargon words that has more use than meaning. It refers to a collection of technologies that allow one to take advantage of web pages in ways that were not used greatly before. The principal technologies are called "Ajax" -- (Asynchronous Javascript and XML). There is no need to know what those words mean. All one needs to remember is that these technologies allow one to update a page on a screen without reloading the entire screen of information again – the way it used to be. You have undoubtedly used Ajax-enabled web pages and might not have realized you were doing so. Think of the intuitive scrolling around maps on Google Maps. When you scroll off any edge of a Google map, new parts of the map appear instantly. That is Ajax. But, there is more to Web 2.0 than that. Tools allow one to grab data from many different

locations on the web and load, sort and prioritize it in one place. If you have used a news aggregation site, you are experiencing another part of Web 2.0. These tools also allow one to visualize data such as popping visible pins onto a map to mark the Chinese restaurants in an area along with reviews of their food or pins listing houses for sale or apartments for rent. They go by the name of “mashups,” a term taken from the music industry where individuals blend snippets of songs into new compositions. Officially, a mashup is layering data over data on a web page, much like placing acetate sheets with drawings over a photo of ancient ruin to show what it looked like originally. When Google published code freely that allowed anyone to combine multiple information sources with its maps, mashups took off. There are many mashups now, some inventive and changing industries; others merely interesting. For a long list of mashups, see programmableweb.com (<http://www.programmableweb.com>) We will cite just a few of hundreds of mashups to give an idea of what is being done already.

- Weatherbonk, (<http://www.weatherbonk.com/weather/index.jsp>) is an amalgamation of Yahoo traffic, Yahoo Maps, Yahoo geocode, WeatherBug, NOAA, NASA, Virtual earth, hostip.ino (maps location of IP addresses), Googlemaps and Google adwords. This mishmash provides a comprehensive weather site.
- Skibonk: (<http://www.skibonk.com/ski/index.jsp>) does the same thing to provide skiing conditions. It mashes together Flickr, Google Adwords, Google maps, hostip.info, NOAA weather, Yahoo geocoding and Yahoo local search
- Cellreception.com: (<http://www.cellreception.com/>) combines Google maps with a database of 117,000 cell phone locations.
- Zip code census dashboard: (<http://www.cynergysystems.com/blogs/blogs/andrew.trice/strikeiron/Dashboard.html>) Mashes together a tax service, yahoo maps and US census data. To provide graphical views of zips codes across the US.
- Zip code map: (<http://maps.huge.info/>) Mashes together zip code boundaries and maps in one place)
- Rentometer (<http://www.rentometer.com/>) Mashes together maps and real estate data to show whether one is paying an average rent for an area or more.
- Zillow.com (<http://www.zillow.com/>) Puts real estate data together with map data and provides valuation of homes

- Earmarks (<http://sunlightlabs.com/earmarks/>) Maps congressional earmark spending onto local communities and tells what the government money is for.
- Wiki Sky (<http://www.wikisky.org/>) -- a star map of the sky. As one clicks on each star, information about it appears in a dropdown box.

Part of the excitement of this ability to meld information into a new and more understandable information comes from the ease of doing it. For example, Yahoo pipes (<http://pipes.yahoo.com/pipes/>) allows someone with minimal knowledge of programming to link together and sort data sources in an aggregate output useful for tracking industries, issues and events. Yahoo widgets (<http://widgets.yahoo.com/>) provide code blocks a programmer can use to create similar aggregation sites and much more. Google, of course, with its application interface opened huge programming activity that have generated tens of thousands of map-data mashups. Microsoft provides programmers with visualization tools that tie to its Live Search Maps search and mapping site. Mashups are not restricted to the web. They are occurring as well in telephone technology where office voice mail to a doctor is transcribed into Short Message Text and sent to the doctor's cell phone, all through use of plug-in technologies and data overlays. It may take imagination to understand how these technologies can be used to make corporate information more useful, but let me provide a few examples that show how PR can provide creative insight into information presentation and increase transparency.

A typical web site newsroom today has categories of information, such as press releases ranked according to time, bios and photos of executives, a fact page on the company and perhaps the industry, studies or other reports and more. And, that's just the newsroom. There is more data in greater depth on investor relations pages and still more on the product and services pages of the web site. Good sites provide a site map as well as a search engine to help visitors wend through data, but it is still not easy. Consider what one might do to increase transparency:

- Place images of each product and/or service on the site and when one clicks on the image, all recent releases related to the product and/or service pop onto the screen. This would be updated automatically as each new release is posted into the web site's database.
- Show an organizational diagram with mini-photos of executives in the company. As one rolls over each executive, the bio of the executive drops down as well as references to the executive in press releases, annual reports, proxies and other company information.
- Take the corporate fact book out of pdf format and turn it into an active page of dynamic charts and graphs that update as new economic and company data is posted throughout the year. (Companies do this with

stock price effectively today, but there is so much more that could be done.)

- Insert a news page on the industry and company that combines feeds from hundreds of data sources so the visitor can get up to date on what is happening without having to go elsewhere.
- Place a national or world map on the site with pins placed on each city where the company has plants or offices. As the individual clicks on each pin, the address and general phone number of the office pops up along with a photo of the plant or office. (Starbucks [<http://www.starbucks.com/>] is already doing this in a store locator system using Microsoft's MapPoint software.)
- If one wants to make a point about the political importance of the company, use the same regional or global map to show the number of employees that work at a plant or office site, the amount of taxes paid to the local or regional authority and the total payroll that the plant or office brings to the community.
- If one wants to make a point about the philanthropic efforts that the company is making in plant communities, use the same map to list and update continuously contributions and employee volunteerism that has occurred at each pin.
- If there are security alerts, one can make a map and show where they are. (The Harvard-MIT Division of Health Sciences and Technology showed what can be done with disease alerts globally through a map that mashes together four data sources and visualizes all reports of disease outbreaks worldwide. See <http://www.healthmap.org/>)

In other words, organizations can take information piled lifelessly in their web sites and make it dynamic, interactive and useful. The ultimate information tool for users would be to provide them with simple-to-use tools so they can combine a web site in ways that best suit their needs. Organizations could let individuals break their web sites into sections that the individuals find most valuable with the opportunity to add on or remove information sources per need. What this achieves is something that has been discussed since the beginning of the web – personalization of data sources. Large portal sites like Yahoo allowed users to customize their Yahoo web page for years. There is no reason why corporations cannot do the same.

More data is not necessarily better transparency. PR practitioners understand that. It comes down to how data is used and presented. There are plenty of tools available today to make web sites more relevant to users. All it takes is a little knowledge and imagination. Don't be surprised, however, if you meet resistance from web developers and IT departments when you make suggestions

for improvement. They are worried about security and reliability of applications, and they will want to test any new approach before rolling it out. That is as it should be, but data visualization projects can also be placed at the bottom of the list of the things to do. The role of the PR practitioner is to point to examples where mashups and data aggregation work well and to suggest practical approaches for reaching the same usability for visitors. As in all things, persistence counts and persuasion.

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