

# SUPPLIER SAVVY



## Website Savvy: What you can learn from a supplier's Website

By Craig R. Taylor

Think for a minute about how many times in the past week or two you were seeking information about a company or supplier and the first thing you did was check out its Website. Based on a survey conducted by *T+D* to uncover how training purchasers go about gathering data on and selecting a supplier, the first step they take is, you guessed it, to look at the company's Website. And there's a lot of research going on.

According to a keyword traffic analysis report prepared by [more visibility.com](#) a Web marketing firm, the term *training* generates on average 802,980 inquiries per month through

major search engines. *Distance learning* generates 412,510 searches and *seminars* another 131,230. That's a lot of inquiries, and those searches serve up a long list of Websites. Surfing through those sites to decide which providers you're going to contact for more information can be a time-consuming and sometimes frustrating endeavor. Yet, a supplier's Website can be a valuable source of information and may provide considerable insight into what it might be like to work with that company. Though much has been written on how to design Websites, less has been said about how to analyze them to help determine a supplier's fit with your needs.

# Navigation speaks volumes

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but also the thinking behind it.

So, whether you find a site through a search engine, client, friend, or colleague, I suggest that you consider several factors when evaluating a supplier through its Website:

- how easy the site is to navigate
- how relevant and helpful the content is
- what the overall experience is like
- how it makes you feel.

## Getting around

Ease of use and its importance in Web design is well known, but what does it really entail? First impressions count, so consider load time. How long did you have to wait to view the page? Was it designed with your computer and connection in mind? If you're on a 56k modem, speed may be sacrificed.

Once you're there, the layout should be clear and clean. Navigation—the ability to move through the content in an intentional and logical way—speaks volumes about not only the design of the site, but also the thinking behind it. Logical sequencing of pages as you progress deeper into a site—the click-stream—should be almost intuitive as you move about. The site should always provide you with some orientation as to where you are, and it should never leave you, as someone I know says, in “some weird dead-end place.”

Savvy Web marketers know how important, yet how difficult, it is to build an online relationship with you, the potential customer. That's one of the primary reasons many sites offer down-

loadable information, such as reports, and periodic communications, such as e-newsletters. The goal is to encourage you to “opt-in”—that is, give the company permission to send you information regularly. Submitting your contact information should be easy to do, and you should know exactly what you're agreeing to receive.

## Cutting-edge content

AvenueA, a top digital marketing agency headquartered in Seattle, has developed a process called “Web-wide behavioral analysis,” which tracks and analyzes people's surfing habits. I asked Maggie Boyer, vice president of media, what matters most in keeping people on a site and giving them an overall positive experience.

First, a Website must have “a clear value proposition,” she says. “Be clear up front what the value proposition is, and be sure the site delivers on it.” And, she adds without hesitation, a site must have “cutting-edge content.” In other words, content that's relevant to your objectives and adds value to your search. Lacking that, you'll leave quickly.

Content is much improved since the days of online brochures—brochureware, as we call it—and you should expect to find complete, relevant, and helpful information on a learning or performance supplier's Website. Look for clear and thorough descriptions of the provider's solutions, programs, services, and products—and expect detail.

A supplier's **brand** is an integrated system of experiences for customers, and everything it does and every **touch-point** it has with prospects and customers speaks in some way.

E-learning suppliers tend to offer online demos. Take a demo to see how well it works. The quality of the experience and the attention a supplier places on its demos may indicate how it would perform as a learning partner.

Most business Websites include information on the company, company news, resources such as white papers and reports, a section for inquiring about employment opportunities, a calendar of events, and information for investors if it's publicly held. Look for case studies, testimonials, and further evidence of the supplier's success with other organizations. The evidence should be more than a list of clients and should include details on the solutions and outcomes achieved. News and other information on publicly held firms can also be useful, but keep in mind that a company's stock price may have little or nothing to do with its ability to provide high-quality products and services.

### The brand experience

A company's Website is an extension of its brand and is a key part of what I describe as "brand voice." In essence, a supplier's brand is an integrated system of experiences for customers, and everything it does and every touch-point it has with prospects and customers speaks in some way. That is, those experiences communicate something to you about its brand and its business. So, what is this or that supplier's Website saying to you?

- Was the site well organized and logical in its navigation, with an engaging design?
- Did you find the content helpful, plentiful, and relevant?
- Was there enough attention to detail?
- Did your experience exceed your expectations?
- Was it apparent that sound instructional design principles were used in developing the site?

Those questions can help guide you in your assessment of a provider's capability to support your business objectives.

But perhaps the most important criterion you should consider in your evaluation is this: How did your visit to the site leave you *feeling*? Boyer, from AvenueA, says succinctly, "Did it make you feel insignificant?" That's a brilliant observation. The overall online experience you have with a supplier should leave you satisfied intellectually and with a positive feeling.

In spite of the dot.com meltdown and slowed U.S. economy, the Internet continues to grow as an integral part of business communication. It must be an essential element in how companies connect with prospects and customers. As more suppliers understand that, your online searches for a fitting partner will be more successful.

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