

Web Writing & Web Trends Affecting Proposal Management

By R. DENNIS GREEN AND CARL DICKSON



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USING THE WRITE BRAIN

Writing for the Web *is* different than writing for traditional print media. But, as *Fast Company's* Katherine Mieszkowski pointed out in a recent issue of that magazine, the Web is not just about consuming what other people have created. It is also about sharing what you know with co-workers, partners, customers, and the rest of the world. To that end, the Web itself provides us with some of the best sources of instruction and insight about Web writing, and much of it applies to proposal management practitioners working in this domain. We preview a few of these write-brained sites for you here.

- **Writing for the Web.** (www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/) In addition to understanding the importance of Web design and its unique and amorphous technologies, this site understands that effective online communication still includes writing. Sponsored by useit.com, the site is an excellent place to begin your education about how authors should write Web pages.

One insight it offers is the finding that few people (only 16 percent) read Web pages word by word; the rest of us scan, picking out individual words and sentences. So writers have to make their Web writing scannable by highlighting keywords, using meaningful sub-headings (not clever ones), putting information into bulleted lists, limiting themselves to one idea per paragraph, and starting with the conclusion (called the inverted pyramid style).

Another important insight found here is that: "Users detested 'marketese,' the promotional writing style with boastful subjective claims ('hottest ever') that currently is prevalent on the Web. Web users are busy; they want to get the straight facts. Also, credibility suffers when users clearly see that the site exaggerates."

To convey credibility, the web site recommends the use of high-quality graphics, good writing, and the use of outbound hypertext links. "Links to other sites show that the authors have done their homework and are not afraid to let readers visit other sites." It was just such a link that led us to the following:

- **Contentious.** A monthly 'Web-zine' (www.contentious.com) for online writers and editors. You will love its focus, fea-

tures and awards related to "cutting the fluff." And its own links, such as this one to a reference tool:

- **The Webmaster's Reference Library** (<http://webreference.com/>). The day we visited this dynamic site, it had articles on open publishing, graphics, photo treatments, and many more.

The fourth writing resource we want to share is a wonderfully sassy site discovered, again, with Katharine Mieszkowski's help.

- **The Cluetrain Manifesto** (www.cluetrain.com). Cluetrain serves up a reality check on the stale, boring, bombastic, arrogant, and non-human tone of many corporate communications. It objects to the tendency of many corporations to communicate "in the soothing, humorless monotone of the mission statement, marketing brochure, and your-call-is-important-to-us busy signal." No wonder, say authors Christopher Locke, Rick Levine, Doc Searls, and David Weinberger, that networked markets have no respect for such companies or the tone. Cluetrain encourages us to speak in a human voice instead of cranking out sterile happytalk that insults the customer's intelligence. Cluetrain's style is irreverent and in your face, but its message is a sober one. The site features articles, commentary, clues (recommendations), a book excerpt, and 95 Theses, à la Martin Luther, including this sampling, which may strike some people as charmingly utopian:

- Markets are conversations.
- Conversations among human beings sound human. They are conducted in a human voice.
- Whether delivering information, opinions, perspectives, dissenting arguments, or humorous asides, the human voice is typically open, natural, uncontrived.
- People recognize each other from the sound of their voices.
- The Internet is enabling conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in an earlier era of mass media.
- Hyperlinks subvert hierarchy.

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Editor's Note: *Commerce* replaces and expands upon the *Proposal Products* column seen previously in the journal. By broadening this column's scope, we can help you keep an eye on Web developments as well as those in proposal-related communications, products, technologies, and their applications.

- People in networked markets have figured out that they get far better information and support from one another than from vendors.
- There are no secrets. The networked market knows more than companies do about their own products. And whether the news is good or bad, the market tells everyone.
- In just a few more years, the current homogenized "voice" of business—the sound of mission statements and brochures—will seem as contrived and artificial as the language of the 18th century French court.
- Already, companies that speak in the language of the pitch, the dog-and-pony show, are no longer speaking to anyone.
- Bombastic boasts—We are positioned to become the preeminent provider of XYZ—do not constitute a position.
- Companies need to come down from their Ivory Towers and talk to the people with whom they hope to create relationships.
- By speaking in language that is distant, uninviting, and arrogant, companies build walls to keep markets at bay.
- Intranets naturally tend to route around boredom. The best are built bottom-up by engaged individuals cooperating to construct something far more valuable: an intranetworked corporate conversation.
- Today, the org chart is hyperlinked, not hierarchical. Respect for hands-on knowledge wins over respect for abstract authority.
- If you want us to talk to you, tell us something. Make it something interesting for a change.

WEB TECHNOLOGY — TRENDS TO WATCH

We finish this issue with the insights, predictions, and prognostications of our resident proposal technologist, Carl Dickson, who peers into the future and ponders the world of To Be or Not To Be.

Lead, follow, or get out of the way

The billion dollar music industry is being shaken up by a simple little file format called MP3. As soon as bandwidth permits, the same will happen to the TV/movie industries. Amazon.com totally upset the retail book selling trade and may have ended the trend towards retail superstores. Manufacturing companies in all

industries are integrating their supplier pipelines via Web-based ordering systems, and saving billions of dollars in the process. This is typified by General Motors and Ford which are bringing their parts suppliers online, streamlining the ordering process, eliminating paper, eliminating paper handlers, and lowering parts inventories. Single year Returns on Investment (ROIs) are being reported.

Entire industries that took decades to establish are being changed from top to bottom in months. Some of these moves are resulting in the middlemen being squeezed. The Web enables manufacturers to deal directly with customers and not go through dealers. Whether the middlemen will remain viable will depend on their ability to provide value-added services.

The point is that billion dollar industries are being rebuilt overnight. Nobody is safe. You cannot hide from the technology. If you are not paying attention to its impact on you, it may pass right by you. And do not think the federal proposal market niche is safe. The federal government threw itself at the Web faster than industry did. Changes that people thought would take decades happened in just a couple of years. And the pace of change is increasing.

You do not have to run. You do not have to hide. You do not even have to worry. If you understand the trends driving the change, you can be ready. And you do not have to become a technologist in the process. Ultimately all this technology has to find a place in the physical world to make business more efficient and people's lives more productive. What technology will not do is to figure out what the message should be, coordinate efforts and structure processes to deliver it, and to provide the initiative to get things done.

Trends to watch

Television, telephone, and Internet converge. As television goes digital, and telephone companies route their data using the same communications protocols that drive the Internet, look for them all to converge. Television, telephone, and Internet will all come over the same cable, from the same provider, and the technologies will be able to interact with each other. MTV and the Discovery channel already provide interaction between their programming and their Web sites. The Bells and cable companies are merging in anticipation. Call centers that enable telephone operators to interact with Web site users have already been deployed. Look for the technologies to blend so seamlessly that they become essentially one thing. The Web conquers all.

Computers become pervasive. PC makers can almost fit an entire PC on a single chip. PCs have become so cheap that companies are experimenting with giving them away in order to get other business. Look for computers to be built into everything, from kitchen appliances to cars, and for everything to be connected to the Internet. The term they use is "pervasive computing." IBM has gone so far as to say that the PC is dead — that

instead of being separate, stand alone devices, computing will be everywhere and transparent.

Bandwidth grows but the need grows faster. DSL and cable connections are quickly making modems obsolete, with installations going far faster than anyone predicted. However, they are not available everywhere, and by the time they are available to the most remote locations, we will probably be on to the next level of faster service. Remember ISDN? It took 15 years to develop. In just a couple of years, DSL killed ISDN before it even was fully deployed. Bandwidth will be the biggest hold up for convergence and pervasive computing.

Wireless connections become available. The wireless connections available today are slow. What cellular providers are advertising today as Internet-ready phones, will not impress anybody expecting a desktop-like experience. However, the difficulty of wiring millions of homes and businesses in combination with the lack of portability of a wired connection create a strong demand for wireless solutions.

Access your data from anywhere. A big trend today is towards Application Service Providers (ASPs), which host Web-based applications and provide remotely accessible data repositories. Whether these are outsourced to ASPs or built internally, look for organizations to be able to remotely interact with remote offices, teaming partners, and customers so seamlessly that it won't matter where you're physically located.

More people become self-employed. If it does not matter where you are physically located, look for more people to work from home. Companies looking to lower costs and people who want convenience will find ways to solve the problems associated with telecommuting. And if you are working from home, it is easier to support more than one company. As the rapid pace of technology forces businesses to be able to change faster and faster, having a flexible workforce becomes more attractive. Full-time dedicated employees will always be critical to achieving an organization's mission, but expect continuing changes in the composition of the workforce and employer/employee relations.

Security issues and privacy issues never go away. The Internet can be made far more secure than it is today. One problem is that the U.S. Government has been impeding the widespread use of strong encryption. Other problems are related to weaknesses in communication protocols and applications were not designed with security in mind and/or have numerous bugs. These are solvable problems, but it takes time to get everyone on the same page. But even if you had perfect software, people and procedures are not perfect. Security issues will always be with us. Look for more secure protocols and more use of encryption. Also look for changes in the legal code, such as supporting digital signatures and criminalizing electronic identity fraud.

Data becomes more interchangeable. New formats will enable data to be passed from one application to another seamlessly, by separating the data from the codes that determine how it is formatted or handled by any particular application. Each application will be able to display and edit the data according to its capabilities. To the end user, the appearance will be seamless — as if there was only one file format used by everything. The biggest problem in implementing this concept is getting different software vendors to cooperate. XML is an example of this technology. It is used by Microsoft® Office 2000 to enable documents to be passed between office applications and the Web. However, fighting between developers with competing interests is impeding deployment of XML.

Technology continues to drive acquisition reform. Incredible efficiencies become possible when you treat proposal data as an annotation to the RFP with the proposal being just one view of the data. When you combine this with telecommunications convergence and distributed data access, you get an environment where the document better reflects how the information is developed and used. Expect Request for Proposal publishers to be early adopters of XML and data interchange technologies.

Operating systems and software give way to applications. On the Web, it does not matter what kind of computer you have, or what kind of computer is acting as the server. The operating systems are less important because the interface is standardized. There are more important questions. Does it do what you need, is it efficient and easy to use, and is it compatible with anybody else you need to interact with? When your home is on the Internet instead of on your desktop, applications become far more important than the operating system or software you have installed.

How long will it take?

Because of where I live, I can order an Internet connection more than four times faster than a T-1 and more than 100 times faster than a 58kbps modem. The problem is not the technology. The problem is deploying it in the physical, non-virtual world. Inexpensive fast connections are only available in a small percentage of locations. The only thing stopping this technology from being available everywhere is that equipment and cabling has to be installed in literally every home and office, and that is what takes time. It will be years before it is fully deployed. And inevitably, it will be obsolete by the time it gets there, with even faster connections being possible. The physical deployment may take so long that high-speed wireless may get here first.

The same goes for other technologies. Cars have been built

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that drive themselves. They require special sensors to be installed in the roads in order to work. How long will it take to rebuild every road in existence? How long does it take to add a single lane to most congested road near where you live?

Look for Web technology to arrive faster than you believe is possible and for the deployment to take longer than you believe it should. Technologies that require physical deployment will roll out at different speeds in different regions. Just remember that it does not take full deployment for the impact to be felt.

Key Technologies

Just in case you looked away for a moment, you might have missed one or more of these new, evolving technologies. All affect your life and business. Ignore them at your own risk.

DSL and Cable Modems. Fast Internet connections. A phone-line modem provides 56 kbps. Depending on the provider, DSL can provide more than 6,000 kbps. Cable modems can be even faster. Find out if they are available in your neighborhood, and if so, place your order and throw that clunky old modem away!

RealSlideshow Plus. Software produced by Real Networks. It enables you to easily overlay audio, video, and animation over a slide show for posting on the Web. If you want a glimpse at what a virtual oral presentation could be like, point a browser at www.realnworks.com/products/slideshowplus/.

Digital Camcorders. First came digital cameras, which made it easy to put photos on the Web. Now there are digital camcorders that shoot video in formats that you can put on the Web.

Office 2000. The latest version of Microsoft Office incorporates XML, and if you have a Microsoft Exchange e-mail server you can build a virtual collaboration platform. You may need a network engineer and a Visual Basic programmer to make it all work, but you can get a glimpse of Microsoft's vision of the future.

XML. It is an important data interchange technology. You don't need to know how to code it, but if you want to know how data will be handled in the future it is worth studying.

DHTML. The latest versions of HTML enable Web pages to be built with windowed interfaces like you have on your desktop. Again, you do not have to know how to code it, but it might be worth checking out some demos to see where Web-based interfaces are heading.

Palm Devices & WinCE. Palm-sized computers have become fashionable for the tech-exec to carry. You may not need or want one, but they are a sign of the "pervasive computing" that is to come. Imagine how much more useful they would be with a wireless Web connection to a Web-based virtual proposal center.

Diamond RIO. A small, portable device similar to a Sony Walkman, only you can download free music off of the Web into

one. It is another sign of pervasive computing and is causing the entire recording industry to sit up and take notice.

TIVO. A VCR with a computer and hard disk instead of tapes. It can store hours of video internally. You can "pause" a live broadcast and it will immediately store what you would otherwise miss and will let you pick up where you left off. It can even learn the programs you watch regularly and record them automatically just in case you miss an episode. They are on sale now.

Recordable DVD. DVD will eventually replace VHS tapes. But it will really take off when you can write to them, providing a removable media to store video and massive quantities of data.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software. The retail and manufacturing industries are automating their sales forces, and using CRM to track customer inquiries through all sources (Web, phone, e-mail, in-person, etc.) through the pipeline. The idea is to automatically provide the customer with information and assistance that is tailored to the (potential) client's interests. As this software grows in capability, look for it to move beyond product sales and into the proposal territory.

Voice Over IP (VOIP). These products use the same protocol that is used on the Internet to handle telephone/voice data. There are already products available that link offices via VOIP without incurring long distance charges. VOIP PBX units are available for corporate telephone systems. Some companies are already using it to avoid long distance charges. The Bells are working furiously in this area to make the voice quality comparable to regular telephones and to eliminate the need for separate voice/data networks.

Application Service Providers (ASPs). ASPs host Web-based applications. Rather than build internal infrastructure, you can outsource to the ASP and make use of software as needed. There is so much interest in this area that Microsoft is experimenting with providing Microsoft Office as a "rented application" over the Web as an alternative to selling discs. Even if you are not inclined to outsource your applications or data storage, the technology being developed for Web-based applications will revolutionize how you use computers.

We are part of a society that is anything but stagnant. Web technology is dramatically changing the way government agencies, companies, and proposal professionals do business together.

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(Effective through September 15, 2000).

Rates Per Issue - Premium Placement Locations (when available): Back Cover \$1800 (4 Color); Inside Front or Back Cover \$1500 (4 Color). Other Placement Locations: Full Page \$1200 (B&W); Half Page \$800 (B&W); Quarter Page \$400 (B&W). Rates subject to change after effective date above.

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