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Understanding Value on the World Wide Web

By Thad McIlroy

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Of all the new media challenges facing the printing industry, I think that the Internet and World Wide Web are causing the most confusion. Most printers I speak to don't really have a clue about what to do with the Web (although many are doing things anyway, cluelessly, as it were). They're not sure if they should have their own site, and if so, what should be on the site. They're not sure if they should be offering Web design services to their existing clientele, or perhaps "partnering" (whatever that vague term means) with an existing Web design firm to make the offer. A few brave printers imagine offering site hosting and networking services. A few particularly cautious ones plan to offer nothing at all, now or in the future. Most, as I say, aren't sure what to do, but are pretty sure they're supposed to be doing something.

Some of the more ambitious printers already have Web sites up and running. These range from small mom and pop quick printers (for example, lots of Sir Speedy, PIP and AlphaGraphics franchisees have Web sites), to the largest firms, such as R.R. Donnelley and Banta. I've been dissecting these sites for six months now to try and discover what is it that constitutes value for a printing company in appearing on the Web. I'm convinced that for most of these companies their Webs sites are a complete waste of time and money. I've found only one printer's Web site that impresses me. The best I can say about most of them is, "I hope you're learning a lot that will help you post a better site in the future." Although based on the two sites I've seen that have been extensively renovated, though not much improved, there's not much evidence of that either.

I'll start off here by describing the company that's got it right. After I explain why I think they've got it right (or largely so), it will make sense when I describe the sites from those firms who are missing the mark.

(A little warning here. To get real value out of this column you're going to have to spend a few minutes actual surfing over the Web to the sites I describe. I'll do my best with words here, but the experience of these sites is truly a visceral one. Words don't quite do them justice.)

If you're reading this column there's a good chance you've read in the pages of *Printing Impressions* about the Web site of A & a Printers in Menlo Park, CA (http://www.aaprint.com). It's not only *Printing Impressions* that has featured the site. I've seen it profiled in three other trade magazines as well, and have heard company president Robert Hu present the site at several industry events, including the recent Seybold Seminars in Boston. Based on what I heard, I decided last month to go to Hu's plant in Menlo Park and get a first hand view of what he was trying to achieve with his Web site.

Robert Hu describes A&a's Web site as "private banking applied to printing," suggesting that through his site he's able to offer the kind of one-to-one services that private banks offer only to their most profitable customers. He's described the site before in terms of allowing A&a become a "virtual" printing company, where the Web site becomes a digitally-linked extension of the customer's site, rather than a standalone facility.

In our interview, Hu explained it another way. "Communications and process control are the major impediments to print productivity — not manufacturing, per se," Hu claims. "Therefor our Web site is directed towards improving communications and process control."

The home page (first page) of A & a's Web site is visually very ordinary. The graphic look is muted and pleasant, rather than flashy or glitzy, and you realize immediately that there's nothing superficially razzle dazzle here. The company logo appears, and then three buttons, labeled "Client Services," "Virtual Teams," and "Tools on Demand." Beneath those are some other buttons, but the way they are positioned visually it's clear they don't have the same importance as the first three. (One of them is labeled "Panic Button!," and surtitled, "Crisis Control and After Hours Help.")

These three key buttons would be better categorized as:

Button 1 (Client Services): Our customers, working with us;
A & a, working with our customers.
Button 2 (Virtual Teams): Our customers and our suppliers,
working with each other.
Button 3 (Tools on Demand): Something for everyone: if
we're willing to offer this for free, think of what we do
for the customers we love!

The Client Services area of the A&a web site is the most
profound. On this page you'll find buttons for
"scheduling," "job tracking" and "estimates." Click on
"Scheduling" and you'll find yourself in a window labeled
"Project Planning" and subtitled, "A real time view of
A&a's production schedule."

Three different colored blocks reveal whether the prepress
and press departments are "open," "moderate" or "tight" for
the following three weeks. Hu explains that while the
implication of this area is that it is somehow tied in
dynamically to plant operations, it's actually set daily by
his sales and marketing department. The point of this
service is a kind of Pavlovian conditioning. If, prior to
placing an order, a customer sees that the press area is
busy through Friday, they will already be conditioned not
to expect a miracle same-week delivery.

The next button to push is called "job tracking." This
takes you into a secure area (password-protected) of the
Web site where you can see the actual status of your jobs
as they move through the plant. More importantly, A&a's
production staff use this section to alert customers to any
status change or unexpected problems that arise as a job
moves through the plant.

The "estimates" section is still in development. Currently
customers can fill in a request for estimate, the details
of which are sent by email to A&a, which responds in turn
with a phone call and/or a fax. Over time Hu hopes to have
a true interactive estimating facility on the site,
although he acknowledges that there are major issues to be
resolved before this takes place.

In the interest of space, I'll interrupt my rhapsody here,
and encourage you to take a first-hand look at the A&a
site. You'll see that this site is not just a few pages of
public relations chatter, but a real attempt to redefine
the relationship between a company and its customers. It's

not 100% effective — even Hu admits that only 20% of his customer are taking advantage of what the site offers — but it's an original and provocative idea, well executed.

To confirm your impression of the A&a site, you need only go over to visit the sites of industry giants R.R. Donnelley (http://www.donnelley.com) and Banta (http://www.banta.com).

On an Internet crammed full of mediocrity it might seem unfair to single out these two firms for criticism. But I think it's fair because both of these companies are enormous and hugely profitable, and because they claim to be particularly plugged into new media and the future direction of the industry. If Banta's and Donnelley's Web sites are indicative of the future, I'll stick with the past, thanks very much. Both of these sites have been redesigned since the fall of 1995. Where before each site was both ugly and boring, they are now each just boring. There is no interactivity, no ability to link to individual divisions, no useful tools, just page after page of nicely designed and completely self-serving and unengaging text. Click for information on Banta's digital service, and receive yet another page of chatter. The overall impression is of big, fat companies paying lip service to the revolution, while firmly ensconced in the past.

Now shoot back to A&a's site. After seeing how not to design a Web site, the A&a experience will be twice as profound.

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