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## "Web Design with the Small Business in Mind"

# "About Us" -- Presenting Information About an Organization on Its Website

*By Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, October 27, 2003:*

**Summary:**
Study participants searched websites for background information ranging from company history to management biographies and contact details.  Their success rate was 70%, leaving much room for usability improvements in the "About Us" designs.

Representing a company or organization on the Internet is one of a website's most important jobs.  Explaining the company's purpose and what it stands for provides essential support for any of the site's other goals.  Unfortunately, most websites do a poor job on this explanation.

It is fairly common for sites to have an About Us section, and in fact I recommend having a **homepage link** that's explicitly called either About <name-of-company> or About Us.  This link need not be the most prominent on the homepage, but it should be present and easily visible.  In our study, users had trouble locating company information when the link had a nonstandard name, like Info Center, or when it was placed near graphical elements that looked like advertisements and thus were ignored.

## *User Research*

To find out how users find and interpret information about companies on websites, we conducted a usability study of sites run by fifteen organizations in five general categories:

- **Large** companies (Allstate, Lexmark, Bristol-Myers Squibb, and Sempra Energy)
- **Medium**-sized companies (Constellation Brands, Titan, and Pier 1 Imports)
- **Smaller** companies (GiftTree, OneCall, and Team Industrial Services)
- **Government** agencies (the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of the Interior, and the Small Business Administration)
- **Non-profits** (National Multiple Sclerosis Society and the United Nations Children's Fund)

On each site, we gave users one **open-ended task**: evaluate the organization.  We also gave them several **directed tasks**, such as to find out who runs the organization and when the organization was founded.

Most test participants were mainstream Web users with at least two years' Internet experience.  We included a few teenagers in this study because the goals of placing corporate information on the Web often include supporting student projects, building long-term loyalty, and attracting interns.

## Success Rate: Reasonable

On average across the directed tasks, users found the requested information 70% of the time.  This is a fairly high success rate compared to most of our other Web usability studies, where the success rate usually ranges from 55 to 65%.

On the other hand, compared to most other things users attempt on the Web, investigating basic company facts is relatively easy. Our tasks didn't involve transactions, filling out forms, complex searches, or complex navigation. Because the tasks were easy, getting a relatively high success rate indicates adequate usability rather than great usability.

Users had particular **difficulty finding the most basic company facts**, such as:

- The organization's top executive or official: 59% success
- Correct contact information: 62% success
- The organization's philosophy: 59% success
- Historical timeline and milestones: 58% success

The poor score for **contact information** is deplorable for two reasons.  First, it is information that people frequently request, and not having it readily available frustrates users.  Second, it's one of the leading markers that people use to judge a company's trustworthiness: Is it a fly-by-night operation, or does it have an actual address and a phone number that it's willing to disclose?

## What the Company Does

Users were fairly successful at answering the most basic question of all: What does the company do? This task scored a success rate of 90%, but this favorable outcome does not necessarily vindicate the Web designs.

While users eventually discovered a company's purpose after scurrying around the website, most sites failed to offer clear and visible explanations on their homepage and at the start of their *About Us* section.

In a separate project evaluating corporate homepage usability, the average site scored only 36% on the usability guideline that recommends explicitly summarizing the company's purpose on the homepage.  Tag lines also proved to be content-free blather.  Sites scored only 27% on usability

for these statements, which should clearly describe the value proposition from a customer perspective and distinguish the company from its primary competitors.

Having a short homepage description is essential for usability because it offers a **context** that helps users interpret all of the site information.  Similarly, a slightly longer explanation at the top of the About Us page helps users understand that section's information in more depth.

## Helping Outsiders

People outside the organization are the ones who need help understanding what it does, yet descriptions of an organization's purpose are often written in ways that make sense mainly to insiders.

**Government agencies are often the worst offenders,** and in this study, many users were baffled at the profuse bureaucratese and impenetrable abbreviations on the government sites we tested.  When asked to find an agency's head, several users were stumped by the job titles traditionally used in many federal agencies.  Looking through organization charts and lists of agency managers, users said that they were not interested in the "secretary," they wanted to find a person with an executive-sounding title like "chief."

Nobody in Washington, D.C., would ever imagine that it might be difficult to identify a big cheese like the Secretary of the Interior as that department's leader.  That is exactly why organizations need to run usability studies: to **find out what people outside their niche know**.  Often, it is less than they think.  Websites must be written to help mainstream users, not people who already know everything; they would not go to the *About Us* section anyway.

## Transaction Sites and Online Services

Rather than simply serving as a corporate mouthpiece, the main goal of many Web sites is to provide independent services.  This is particularly true for e-commerce sites: selling is what they are there for.  That people might also want to use the site to research the company is typically a lesser consideration.

Still, such sites should have a strong About Us section, because users often **wonder who is behind** a Web-based service, how it is funded, and whether it is credible.  If you order from an e-commerce site, can you trust the company to ship the package?  Will they take it back if it arrives in poor condition?  If you register on a site, are they going to sell your personal information to anyone who can pay, and thus expose you to endless spam about everything from transaction-related products to offensive porn?

**Trust and credibility** are major issues on the Web, where even the biggest company exists only as a few words and pictures inside a browser window.  The most deceitful and unethical company can look as good as a company with a long history of community involvement and honest customer relationships.  Explaining who you are and where you come from does matter, as do simple things like providing management biographies and photos.

It is easy to resolve the tension between transactions and corporate information. By all means, dedicate most of your homepage to sales, current offers, and navigation to products or services. Just remember to include a simple link to the *About Us* section. The link does not have to be the first or most prominent. If you are using a standard left-hand navigation column, you can place this link at the very bottom of the list. Just do not hide it.

## Connecting to Users

Saying who you are and what you do is basic politeness in any conversation. In business, it is also good to establish credibility and respect by explaining your company's origins, how you view your business, and how you relate to the community.

The Web is very depersonalized, but from our earliest usability studies, we've seen that users like getting a sense of the company behind the website. Who is there behind the screen?

Having a good *About Us* section facilitates this understanding. Clearly stating what you do helps customers understand the site as a whole. Of course, the overall site is what ultimately represents you to users. People look at product pages and read the site's content when they're evaluating an organization as a possible vendor, business partner, employer, investment, or (in the case of charities) donation recipient. Communication is not restricted to *About Us*, but dedicating an area to providing users with facts about your organization and its history and values helps pull the site's content together.