

Information overload and the future of the web

By [James Campbell](#)

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Two recent separate studies have shown some interesting phenomena. Firstly, it has been estimated that the average white-collar worker receives upwards of 40 emails per day. Secondly, Jupiter Media Metrix recently reported that people spend 60% of their time online using the products and services of 14 companies (50% of time is spent with just four - AOL, Microsoft, Napster and Yahoo), whereas two years ago, it was 110 companies that shared 60% of time.

Although they may seem to be unrelated, these two studies have the effect of highlighting both an increasingly common problem and the response to that problem. The problem is information overload and the response is that people are becoming more conservative.

The conservative response

In the initial heyday of the Internet, much was made of the idea that knowledge is power – brain was the new brawn. And it ushered in an era of unprecedented sharing and publishing of knowledge. Ultimately though, it seems that what nobody counted on was how knowledge as power differs from other, more traditional, symbols or forms of power. For example, in an arms race the more you have the stronger you are. So wouldn't it stand to reason that the more knowledge you have the stronger you would be? Enter a subsequent explosion of information.

That kind of reasoning may have made sense initially, but it has led us to where the Internet is now – an unruly mass of content, unregulated, disorganised and all aimed at an increasingly beleaguered and overwhelmed audience. The result has simply been that people are more conservative in their choices. For example, when looking for information people seem to gravitate to search engines that offer a limited amount of quality content, rather than endless choice – hence the success of Yahoo.

The big question

And so the ever more pertinent, million-dollar question is, just how do you make your online presence stand out against the sea of other information out there? There have been, perhaps, hundreds of well meaning but misguided technological and design developments in an attempt to address the problem. In general they seem to have been aimed at making sites look good. The reasoning seems to be that if it's aesthetic then perhaps it will stand out more. But the competitive environment in the web design industry and complications with some of the new technologies have led to a myriad of new obstacles, ranging from download times, bandwidth availability and search engine compatibility, for sites focusing on visual appeal. In retrospect it's now becoming obvious that design matters primarily as a means of making content easily accessible, rather than nice to look at. Design needs to make a site intuitive to use (a much harder task than it seems), without becoming

intrusive.

In fact, looking at the big four sites, it appears that the foundation Internet success is built on is finely tuned, well-developed content. In an ever-expanding mass of information, the best way to stand out is to have information that's a little different, a little better and a little more suited to the sites audience's specific needs. And that means asking and answering some tough questions, and achieving some difficult balances. For example, who is the content being written for? How much information is enough? And, perhaps most importantly, does the content need to be substantiated to give it credibility?

Credibility for success

Although success currently seems to be built on content, great content won't always be enough. A survey conducted by the Markle Foundation recently showed that 70% of Americans don't trust information they find on the Internet. In the not-too-distant future the make-or-break factor in making an online presence a success will be credibility.

In the future it won't matter how user-friendly a site is, or how good it's content is – all it can do is create an opportunity for the company it represents to prove itself. Great content aside, perhaps the pivotal factor in the success of AOL, Microsoft, Napster and Yahoo is the fact that they consistently meet the needs they were designed to fill. As such, trust is formed between the people using the site and people running the site and brand equity and loyalty evolves. Consistently providing value is the key to forming and nurturing relationship with customers.

In short, where is it all going? Gone are the days of short cuts, and prosperity based on hype rather than substance. The way to success now, is through consistently providing content that has credibility, relevance and value, content that is easy to use and easy to find. It's not cheap, it's not easy and in the ever-changing world of the Internet it doesn't come with any guarantees. Are you up to it?

Source: [WebAd Internet Advertising](#)

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