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**The In-credible Web
By Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.**

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<http://www.webcredibility.org/>

People are conditioned to trust written words, not to mention images. "I read it in the paper" or "As seen on TV" are worn out but still effective clichés. The Internet combines both the written and the seen. It is both a textual and a visual (and audio) medium. Do people trust Internet content? Is the incredible Internet - credible?

In the "brick and mortar" world, credibility is associated with brands. A brand, in effect, guarantees the quality and specifications of a product (think McDonald's hamburgers), its performance (think Palm), level of service and commitment to customer care (Amazon), variety, or price (Wal-Mart). Brands are sustained and enhanced by advertising campaigns. The content or sales pitch of specific ads are often less important than the message conveyed by the very existence of a campaign: "This company is rich enough (read: stable, reliable, trustworthy, here to stay) to spend millions on advertising".

The Internet has very few brands (Yahoo!, Amazon) - and some of them are tarnished. Some "old media" brands have entered the fray (Barnes and Noble, The Wall Street Journal, the Britannica) - hitherto without much success. The overwhelming bulk of Web content is created or disseminated by small time entrepreneurs and monomaniacs.

So, how does one establish or acquire credibility in such a diffuse and anarchic medium?

Enter Stanford University's "Web Credibility Project".

They define themselves thus:

"Our goal is to understand what leads people to believe what they find on the Web. We hope this knowledge will enhance Web site design and promote future research on Web credibility. As part of this ongoing project we are:

Performing quantitative research on Web credibility.

Collecting all public information on Web credibility.

Acting as a clearinghouse for this information.

Facilitating research and discussion about Web credibility.

Helping designers create credible Web sites."

Examples of current projects: Timeliness: How does having out-of-date content affect the credibility of a Web site? Interaction: How does having a personalized interaction with a Web site affect its credibility? Negative Content: How does displaying negative content associated with a branded web site affect the credibility of the brand?

It is useful to confine ourselves to this definition of trust:

"The subjective belief, perception, or conviction that information provided is true, factual, and objective, and that commitments undertaken, explicitly, or implicitly, will be honored fully and in a timely manner".

Such perception, belief, or conviction are based on:

Past experience in general (with spam, with merchants, or providers, with a similar product category, with the same type of content, etc.) and personal proclivity to trust or to distrust

Experience with the specific merchant or provider (whether personal or gleaned from other people's feedback - reviews, complaints, and opinions)

There is little that a merchant can do about the former. The latter is, expectedly, influenced

Professionalism (as evident in Web site design, e-commerce facilities, user-friendliness, navigability, links to other relevant Web pages, links from other Web sites, ease and speed of download, updated content, proofreading, domain name which matches the company's name, availability, multilingualism, etc.)

Trustworthiness (lack of bias, good intentions, truthfulness, thoroughness, objectivity, expertise and author credentials, knowledgeable sources and treatment, citations and bibliography), and what the authors of the research call "Real World Feel" (physical address, phone/fax numbers, non-Web e-mail address, photos of facilities and staff, audio recording, ownership by a not for profit organization, URL ending with ORG).

Commercial Web sites are less trusted. Cluttered ads, paid subscriptions, e-commerce enabled forms - all reduce the site's credibility! This is especially true if the entire site is a one, big ad and when it is hard to distinguish ads from content.

Track record (how veteran is the merchant, past financial performance, credit history, brand name recognition, lists of customers, etc.)

Selection (how many products are carried, how often is inventory refreshed, etc.)

Advertising (is the company's business sufficiently lucrative to support a campaign?)

Service (good service indicates a reassuring readiness to sacrifice the bottom line to cater to the customer's legitimate concerns, feedback forms, live support, etc.)

Full disclosure of rates, prices, privacy policy, security issues, etc.

Feedback from other users (opinions, reviews, comments, FAQs, support groups, etc.)

Site rating and certification by trustworthy agencies (like the Better Business Bureau - BBB, VeriSign, TRUSTe) - or awards won (from credible and reputable organizations). Links from other, well-known and believable Web sites.

The Credibility Web discovered that trust in e-commerce is also influenced by idiosyncratic factors. Certain domain names (.org) are more trusted than others (.com). Too many ads, broken links, typos, outdated or old content - all diminish trust. In the absence of proven markers and behavioral guidelines, people seem to resort to extrapolation ("if they can't maintain their own Web site ...") and stereotypes (e.g., NGO's are more trustworthy than corporations).

As Web sites proliferate (Google indexes well over 3 billion now) and Web authoring becomes a routine task - the noise to signal ratio of garbage to useful information is bound to deteriorate. Search engines already incorporate crude measures of credibility in their rankings (e.g., the number of links from external Web sites). But, to remain useful, search engines (and Web directories) would do well to rate Web content more comprehensively and thoroughly. They should rank Web sites by authoritativeness, reliability, and objectivity, for instance.

Research shows that 75% of all respondents resort to the Internet as a primary information provider. The inundation of irrelevant material caused most surfers to confine their surfing to 10 Web sites (the equivalent of "anchors" in shopping malls) which they deem reliable, timely, accurate, objective, authoritative, and credible. The rest of the Internet gets the leftovers. This worrying trend can be reversed only through the emergence of independent and commercially-viable rating agencies. Web sites (at least the business ones) should be willing to pay for credible rating to enhance their stickiness and attract monetizable "eyeballs". In the absence of such third party accreditation, the Internet risks both irrelevance and disrepute.

Sam Vaknin is the author of "Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited" and "After the Rain - How the West Lost the East". He is a columnist in "Central Europe Review", United Press International (UPI) and ebookweb.org and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory, Suite101 and searcheurope.com. Until recently, he served as the Economic Advisor to the Government of Macedonia.

His web site: <http://samvak.tripod.com>

Credibility: A crucial component of Web success

By Marc McDonald

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The vast majority of Web site owners on the Net focus all their time and attention on two things: building their revenue and increasing their traffic.

However, as important as traffic and money are, many site owners don't pay sufficient attention to another fundamental, but crucial, challenge: building credibility for their sites.

Why is credibility important?

Because it ties in directly to the other "big two" goals: money and traffic. If your site builds credibility, you're already well on your way to success on the Web.

Credibility, of course, is important for any type of business. But, more so than in the "brick and mortar" world, credibility is even more crucial on the Web.

Consider the nature of the Web. Literally anyone can set up a basic Web site, with a minimum amount of effort. Truly worthwhile and compelling sites are far and few between. Therefore, if you have a site that has credibility, it tends to stand out from the crowd.

So-called expert Web marketing gurus are always rattling on about the importance of "stickiness" for sites. Every month, it seems someone has a new theory on how to increase stickiness (or the amount of time that your visitors hang around your site). The fact is, if you want a "sticky" site, (as well as a devoted and loyal audience), you've got to build credibility.

Increasingly, Web users are becoming more and more wary and skeptical about the information they get on the Net. This wariness is entirely understandable. For all the information that the Net offers, very little of it is actually quality, accurate information.

In this atmosphere, the relatively few sites that are deemed trustworthy and credible have an automatic major advantage over the vast majority of sites. If your site is credible, then you're not really competing with tens of millions of sites...in effect, you're only competing with the mere thousands of sites out there that have a credible reputation.

Credibility is not easy to achieve on the Web. But it's still a goal that any Webmaster can accomplish, particularly if you follow a few basic

steps:

1. Be honest and straightforward. It doesn't matter if your site is about fishing or if you're an online merchant. Honesty pays---especially on the Web. It is vital that the information that you present on your site is accurate. Doublecheck your sources. The fact is, if you have inaccurate information, even on a minor issue, your credibility will suffer. If visitors find even one inaccuracy on your site, they'll wonder if any other information you're presenting is false, as well. Honesty and accuracy are particularly important for online merchants. The fact is, the Web has been a bonanza for dishonest merchants and scam artists who love to operate in the anonymity of cyberspace. In this atmosphere, people are (understandably) likely to trust only Web merchants who've earned a measure of credibility.

2. Learn to write (or pay for the services of someone who does know how to write). The fact that anyone can set up a Web site by definition means that the overall state of writing on the Web is pretty atrocious these days. Even if you have a well-designed site and your information is accurate and honest, your credibility will suffer unless your writing is well-done. Sites that are full of misspellings and typos are much less likely to be taken seriously. You don't have to be a Hemingway to run a successful site. Indeed, you don't even necessarily need to know all the proper rules of English grammar. But you do need to know how to write clearly and be able to communicate your information in any easy-to-understand manner. The very fact that so few sites out there accomplish this means that the few sites that do are going to be rewarded over the long run. Remember, the vast majority of people on the Web want one thing: information. The fact is: a well-written site can succeed without a flashy design, Flash animations, cutting-edge technology and multimedia content. But on the other hand, even the most cutting-edge, high-tech sites can't succeed without well-written content.

3. Strive for media attention. Accomplish the two goals above and you'll be on your way to succeeding in achieving media attention for your site. If your site presents accurate information (and it's well-written), your odds of gaining media attention are greatly enhanced. A media feature, whether it's in a newspaper or a magazine, or a broadcast, can do wonders for cementing your reputation as a credible site (as well as drive loads of traffic your way).

Media attention also has a way of snowballing. Once you get a couple of major media mentions under your belt, you'll often find that others are forthcoming. As far as getting the attention of the media, there's really no shortcut. Most Webmasters I'm aware of that have gotten a media feature have pointed out that they never submitted their sites for the feature or article in question. Of course, it can't hurt to contact journalists, computer and Web columnists and other writers and ask them for a feature. But, by and large, you'll find that journalists come to you; not the other way around.

If you're worked hard, paid your dues and built a credible site, it's really only a matter of time before you'll find your site featured in the media.

Despite

the vastness of the Web (and the millions of sites competing for attention), the sites that've worked hard to achieve credibility are invariably rewarded in the course of time.

Gaining credibility is the toughest challenge you'll face as a Webmaster. But it's a goal that any Webmaster can achieve, with enough dedication and hard work.

Marc McDonaldFreebieDirectory.com<http://www.freebiedirectory.com>

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