PART 1  BLOOPERS IN THE CONTENT AND FUNCTIONALITY OF THE WEBSITE
The Web is about content, first and foremost. Web analyst Jakob Nielsen writes:

*Ultimately, users visit your website for its content. Everything else is just the backdrop. The design is there to allow people to access the content.* (Nielsen, 1999)

It doesn’t matter whether a website is easy or difficult to use if it provides nothing useful, entertaining, up-to-date, or trustworthy. Few people will go there, and the few that do won’t return.

To reflect the primacy of content on the Web, I begin with a chapter about bloopers in Web content. These are bloopers in the information a site provides—about products, services, or the organization itself. They are therefore more concerned with information design or information architecture (Rosenfeld and Morville 2002) than they are with Web design *per se*. Nevertheless, content is so important on the Web that any book about Web design mistakes must discuss problems of content.
Blooper 1: Home Page Identity Crisis

Home pages should allow website visitors to determine the site’s purpose in a quick scan of the page. People want to quickly determine whether the site has something of interest to them. Home pages that don’t let users easily do this commit not only a content blooper, but also a navigation blooper.

Look at the home page of PriceWaterhouseCoopers’ website (Figure 1.1) and try to figure out what the company does. The home page offers few clues, so if you don’t already know, looking at the home page probably won’t help.

The navigation links and menus around the margins of the page could be for any business. The list of headlines in the middle suggests that it might be a business news service. The main thing suggesting the company’s identity is the Who We Are section at the bottom middle of the page. What it suggests is that PriceWaterhouseCoopers is a foundation sponsoring international events.

In fact, PriceWaterhouseCoopers is a large accounting, auditing, and management consulting company. Where does it say that on its home page? On the bottom right, buried under a golf logo in hard-to-read white text, are the words . . . Official Professional Services Firm of the PGA Tour. Not very helpful. First, professional services is an insider industry term that to outsiders means anything from lawyers to prostitutes. Second, even if you know what professional services means in this context, this tiny clue on the home page gives you no reason to believe that PriceWaterhouseCoopers provides services for anyone besides sports organizations.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers’ vague home page is made worse by another problem not entirely its fault: The Web address most people would try in attempting to reach the site, PWC.com, is owned by a different company and takes you to that other company’s website. PriceWaterhouseCoopers’ site is at the much harder-to-guess address PWCGlobal.com (although PriceWaterhouseCoopers.com also works). Worse, the home page at PWC.com is even less well identified than PriceWaterhouseCoopers’ home page (Figure 1.2). One can’t even tell what the full name of that company is, much less its business. It looks as if it could be an e-commerce company (see later discussion), but that’s not clear.

The combination of these two poorly identified websites puts PriceWaterhouseCoopers in a very bad situation. People who look for the company under PWC.com can’t immediately tell that they are in the wrong place. And if people seeking an accounting or auditing firm happen to find PWCGlobal.com, they might not realize that they are in the right place.

Next, see the home page of Acer Corporation (Figure 1.3). What business is it in? It makes and sells computer equipment, but you couldn’t tell that from its home page. To figure out what this website (and the company) is about, you have to go a few pages into the site.

Acer’s home page asks, “Which word best describes Acer?” I’ll guess that many visitors leave it set to Don’t know.
Figure 1.1. www.PWCGlobal.com (Jan. 2002)—Home page is vague about what this company does.
Figure 1.2. www.PWC.com (Jan. 2002)—Home page doesn't fully identify the company, much less its business. Also has a Web address that many would expect to point to PriceWaterhouseCoopers.

Figure 1.3. www.Acer.com (Feb. 2002)—Home page provides few clues about what Acer does.
AVOIDING THE BLOOPER

As an example of a website that explains its identity and purpose very well, check out the home page of Earthwatch (Figure 1.4). I don’t have to explain what Earthwatch is; you can tell from its home page.

Before and After: A Company Improves Its Home Page

37 Signals is a Web design firm. In early 2002, its website was clearly meant to show how unconventional and “bleeding edge” the firm was. The problem was, the home page was so unconventional that it provided no clues about what the company does (Figure 1.5). To find out what it does, visitors had to follow the link to the Start page. Not a good quality for the website of a Web design firm to have.

Predictably, the company soon realized this home page wasn’t working and radically redesigned it; which is to say, the company redesigned it to be less radical. By June 2002, 37 Signals had a new home page (Figure 1.6).

Some people might say the new home page is too conventional. Okay, maybe an image or two might jazz it up a bit, but the purpose of this site is not to entertain; it is to inform. The main question to ask is, therefore, can people tell where they are, and can they find what they are looking for? Without a doubt, the answer is yes.

Essential Ingredients of a Home Page

What makes Earthwatch’s home page and 37 Signals’ revised home page so successful at summarizing the purpose of their respective organizations and the content of the site? These sites have most or all of the following characteristics:

> Organization name is placed prominently.
> Organization name is fairly self-explanatory.

Figure 1.4. www.Earthwatch.org (Jan. 2002)—Home page clearly and succinctly describes what Earthwatch does.
Figure 1.5. www.37Signals.com (Jan. 2002)—Home page was purposely unconventional but in doing so provided no clue what the company does. Hint: It designs websites. The company’s revised home page is shown in Figure 1.6 in Avoiding the Blooper.

Figure 1.6. www.37Signals.com (June 2002)—Revised home page clearly describes what 37 Signals does.
Brief textual summary of the organization’s purpose is presented.
> Picture(s) illustrate the organization’s product or service.
> Labels of links to other pages provide good overview of site contents.

Although all of these features act in concert to clarify the site’s purpose, the most important one is the brief textual summary; it is mainly this that the sites shown as blooper examples lack.

Both the textual summary and the pictures need to make sense to organizational outsiders (assuming the site is intended for outsiders). In particular, the textual summary should not rely on industry jargon or company organization names or abbreviations.

**Blooper 2: Confusing Classifications**

One of the most important aspects of Web content is how it is organized. The schemes used to categorize and classify products, services, and information on a website can make or break the site, because they affect how difficult it is for site visitors to find what they are looking for. Thus content organization strongly affects navigation.

**Mermaids, Suckling Pigs, Stray Dogs, and Others**

The novelist and essayist Jorge Luis Borges wrote of an ancient Chinese encyclopedia containing a system for classifying animals (Borges 1966). The encyclopedia, probably fictional, was supposedly entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. According to Borges, it divided all animals into the following categories:

> Belong to the Emperor
> Embalmed
> Trained
> Suckling pigs
> Mermaids
> Fabulous
> Stray dogs
> Included in this classification
> Tremble as if they were mad
> Innumerable
> Drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush
> Others
> Have just broken a flower vase
> From a great distance, resemble flies

It is not a classification scheme that today would be considered very logical. The categories are arbitrary, overlapping, nonexhaustive, and subjective—skewed by the perceptions of the scheme’s supposed author. It is these characteristics that make the scheme seem humorous to us.

Many Web designers seem to be trying to amuse us by mimicking, in their own way, Borges’ “ancient Chinese” classification scheme. The problem is, Web users aren’t laughing. Well, maybe you will laugh when you see some of the examples I’ve found of weird categorization schemes from websites, but Web users who are trying to find something aren’t laughing. They’re wasting time. They’re getting frustrated. They’re cursing at their computers. And they’re hitting the Back button.

For example, check out the categories on the Binoculars page of ZBuyer.com, an e-commerce site (Figure 1.7[A]).

The categories include Camera and Photo, Products, See more Education & How-To software, Really Cool Stuff, and Michael Lewis, among others. I’ll discuss the inconsistent wording and capitalization later (see Chapter 6, Blooper 46: Inconsistent Style). For now, I am concerned about a
deeper, more important problem: The arbitrariness and subjectiveness of the categories. It is almost as if zBuyer's Web designers had Borges' “ancient Chinese” classification scheme in mind.

What’s in Really Cool Stuff? Products to help you lead a lifestyle somewhere between Zen and extravagant (Figure 1.7[B]). That’s a pretty broad category: almost anything could be in it. The subcategories of Really Cool Stuff are almost as arbitrary. The category Michael Lewis isn’t a product category at all; it’s about the people—two people, not just Michael Lewis—who edit this section of the site. People who really want to use this site have to browse through a lot of categories to find where things are.

The U.S. Postal Service’s website employs a category scheme that is only a little more sensible than that of ZBuyer.com. The categories overlap considerably and it seems, at least to a postal service outsider, that what is in them is arbitrary (Figure 1.8). Here is a brief analysis of the major categories listed on the left side of the page:

> **Online Services.** Everything on the site is in some sense an online service and so could be in this category. However, only some of the site’s functions are in this category. Are the other services—such as Business Rate Calculator—supposed to be offline?

> **Mailing.** Again, nearly everything you do at a postal service website could be considered to be about mailing. As long as the categories overlap so much, why aren’t buying stamps and looking up postage rates considered to be about mailing?

> **Shipping.** To the postal layperson, mailing and shipping are the same, but to the postal service, shipping seems to refer only to mailing by businesses. However, notice that in the gray horizontal navigation bar near the top of the page, Mail/Ship is treated as one functional category.
There is a separate category for small businesses, so maybe the Shipping category is only for large businesses.

> **Buy Stamps and More.** This might at first seem to be the category for buying things, but it isn’t the only one containing functions involving purchasing from the postal service. In fact, it seems to be a miscellaneous category, not unlike Jorge Luis Borges’ Other category.

> **Postage Rates and Fees.** This is one of the more sensible categories in the set. However, the categories overlap. Rates also appears in the Shipping category.

> **Small Business Tools.** This is more of a collection of functions—from all around the site—that are useful to small businesses than it is a true category. That may be why it is set apart from the foregoing items in the list.

Because computer-based systems make it easy and fairly natural for items to be in several categories simultaneously, it is common for categories in computer information systems—including websites—to overlap. Unfortunately, this gives site designers an excuse for haphazard design. Ideally, Web designers should carefully analyze, design, test, and revise a category scheme until it makes sense to prospective users. In practice, many Web designers concoct their site’s categories quickly, then try to cover inadequacies by putting items in all the categories where they think people might look for them. Taken to an extreme, this approach leads to “categories” that each contain everything, which is not very useful. This is the primary problem with the postal service’s categories.

A secondary problem is that the content of each category seems to depend on the page-designer’s subjective whim.

**Why Is This Here?**

At some websites, the categories initially seem reasonable, until you look at what is in them. At Northwest Airlines’ website, NWA.com, a More Specials category supposedly offers special airfares (Figure 1.9). However, someone at NWA.com thought More Specials would be a convenient place to put two announcements about new airplanes the airline is using. Hey, it had to go somewhere!

Walmart.com, the website of a retail chain, makes the opposite mistake: items that should be in a category are not. On its home page is a Digital Cameras category linking to a Digital Camera Collection page. Visitors to this site probably assume that the 11 cameras listed on the Digital Camera Collection page (Figure 1.10[A]) are all the digital cameras Wal-Mart sells. Bad assumption! Clicking “See similar items” under most of the cameras displays a page showing a few similar cameras, but clicking that link under the S300 Digital Elph camera displays an All Digital Cameras page that lists 17 cameras (Figure 1.10[B]). It is unclear why the Digital Camera Collection page doesn’t list all the cameras. Customers could easily not happen across those extra six cameras.

**AVOIDING THE BLOOPER**

The eighteenth century Swedish botanist Karl von Linne—better known by his Latin name Carolus Linnaeus—devised a logical and objective biological taxonomic system. The categories in it are organized hierarchically and are independent, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive. Most competing biological classification systems of that day were almost as subjective and arbitrary as Borges’ “ancient Chinese” animal taxonomy and thus had little scientific utility. The linnaean system—as it came to be called—soon replaced all the others and today remains the basis for all biological classification (anthro.palomar.edu/animal/animal_1.htm).

**Classifying Goods and Services**

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we had a linnaean system for classifying goods and services? Assuming it became widely accepted and used in e-commerce websites, imagine how
Figure 1.8. **www.usps.gov** (June 2002)—A: On the USPS home page, the top-level categories seem arbitrary. B: The pages for each category show that the categories overlap.
Two items on this list are not travel specials; they are announcements about new planes.

A: Digital Cameras category page lists 11 cameras.
B: All Digital Cameras page lists 17 cameras.

Most “similar items” links go to sub-category pages, but this camera’s goes to All Digital Cameras.

Relatively inaccessible All Digital Cameras page lists more.
much it would improve Web surfers’ ability to find what they are looking for.

Until then, Web designers need to design their site’s categories carefully. In so doing, they should try to avoid the arbitrariness and subjectivity that make Borges’ “ancient Chinese” animal categories humorous and useless. Detailed guidelines and best practices for information architecture are beyond the scope of this book, but entire books have been devoted to the subject (Rosenfeld and Morville 2002). I’ll simply suggest a few methods that can help designers organize a site’s content usefully for its users:

> Literature search. Do your homework. Someone has probably thought and written about your site’s topic before. Don’t be afraid of research literature; it could save you reinventing the wheel.

> Competitive analysis. Examine sites of competitor businesses or similar organizations. What categories do they use? What’s in them? How is their site structured? What did they do well? If they are a weak competitor, look for obvious flaws in how they’ve organized their content, and avoid those.

> Testing. After devising a category scheme for a site, Web designers should test it on typical users. This can be done long before the website is implemented, using paper and pencil or rough static on-screen prototypes. This allows designers to improve and reevaluate the category scheme several times before the site architecture and the development team become too resistant to changes.

Though innovative, unique categorization schemes may pay off for particular websites, experience shows that it is hard to go wrong if your content categories are

> Organized hierarchically
> Independent
> Mutually exclusive
> Exhaustive
> Nonarbitrary.

A Site With Well-Organized Content

An example of a website with an excellent set of categories is Yale.edu, the site of Yale University. The top-level categories and the subcategories under them are clear, nonarbitrary, exhaustive, and sensible (Figure 1.11). This is not surprising, for two reasons. First, Yale is not an Internet startup. It had no need to rush its site to market on “Internet time.” Its designers could carefully design the site. And so they did. Second, Yale’s Web designers have demonstrated their commitment to good Web design by writing the authoritative and widely-used Yale style guide (Lynch and Horton 2002), and then actually following their own guidelines.

Maybe more Internet startups should follow Yale’s example. By rushing to put sites on the Web, often with little or no usability testing before release, perhaps they are inadvertently dooming themselves to arbitrary, subjective, “ancient Chinese” schemes for categorizing whatever it is they offer.

Blooper 3: Unhelpful Descriptions

Websites often display a choice of products or services, each one with a name, a brief description, and (for products) perhaps a picture. Two things to keep in mind:

> The information about the items should allow people to determine whether any are what they want.
> In case multiple items seem relevant, the information should help choose between them.
These guidelines apply not only to descriptions of products and services, but also to descriptions of sections of the site itself.

At many websites, item names and descriptions do not help site visitors with either of these two decisions. Often, it seems as if they were written at different times, by different people, with no coordination, no consideration of how the items might best be contrasted, and no thought to how item descriptions will be interpreted in the context of the array in which they appear.

A good example comes from the website of Pitsco-LEGO Dacta, a maker of construction toys. The company has two catalogs customers can order. Unfortunately, the names and descriptions of two product catalogs appear to have been written without regard for each other (Figure 1.12). Both the catalog names and the descriptions are just noise words carrying no information in this context: “new, bigger, better,” “brand-new, full-color.” There is nothing here to help site visitors choose between the two catalogs. I’ll bet many people simply order both and decide when they get them which one is relevant to them.

For an example of a poorly written set of product descriptions, let’s look at a software download page from Netscape.com. The descriptions on the page aren’t just unhelpful for distinguishing the items, they are actually misleading (Figure 1.13).

Assume that you want Netscape Communicator—the whole works: Web browser, email reader, instant messenger, calendar, and other tools. Which item would you click? The header “Netscape Communicator” naturally grabs your attention; it exactly matches what you want. However, a closer look reveals that this item is for Communicator 4.79, which at this point is almost two major releases old. What you actually want is the first item. Why is it labeled “Netscape 6” instead of “Netscape Communicator 6?”
Because that’s what the person who added it to the page called it.

Now assume you don’t want the whole Communicator package. You just want the latest browser, in this case Netscape Navigator 6. Which item would you click? The third one, perhaps? Sorry, that’s an old link for downloading Netscape Navigator 4.76. To get the latest browser, you must choose the first item and perform a custom, rather than a normal, installation.

It seems that Netscape never updates a link name or description once it goes up, even if that name or description no longer is current. In fact, the list of items is not really a catalog of choices at all, but an archive of past downloads. Interesting for Netscape’s developers, perhaps, but useless to Netscape customers.

**AVOIDING THE BLOOPER**

When a website or Web-based application displays a set of items, information about the items must help users answer two questions:

1. Do *any* of these items match what I want?
2. *Which* of these matching items best suits my purpose?

To do that, the item names and descriptions should not consist of marketing noise words, such as new, bigger, awesome, and fully functioned! They should consist of honest descriptions of what the item does and does not do, perhaps with reference to other items that have something a given item lacks.

Also, item descriptions cannot each be written in isolation, each by its own product manager. You can’t list 10 products all claiming “Does everything you need!” You also don’t want items to inadvertently detract from other items. Item descriptions must be written *together*, with consideration for how they will be interpreted in context and how they contrast with each other.

The electronic products page of SharperImage.com provide an example of excellent descriptions of stereo systems (Figure 1.14). Visitors to this page will have no trouble understanding how products differ.

Similarly, the home page of Macromedia, a software company known for its Director and Flash products, provides good descriptions of the various sections of the site. The labels and brief descriptions of the sections of the website allow a clear choice between them (Figure 1.15).

When new items are added, old items, if they are retained, should be revisited and possibly revised to ensure that they contrast properly. Alternatively, old items can be deleted or removed to an Archive category.
Figure 1.14. *www.SharperImage.com* (Sept. 2002)—Products in a family are easy to distinguish from their pictures and descriptions.

Figure 1.15. *www.Macromedia.com* (June 2002)—Site sections are well described and easy to distinguish.
Finally, a website’s category names should be tested on representative users, to see whether they actually mean to users what the site designers intended them to mean. If users misinterpret the category names, the users aren’t wrong, the designers are, and the names need to be changed.

**Blooper 4: Conflicting Content**

If information about something—a product, service, coming event, news story, person, policy—appears on your website in more than one place, you’d better make sure it is consistent. Otherwise, your site will give visitors a very strong impression that your organization is not very organized.

But conflicting information on a website does far more damage than just conveying an impression of disorganization. It creates uncertainty in the minds of site visitors. How much does that product really cost? When is that event really occurring? What actually happened? What is this company’s privacy policy?

When people are uncertain what the outcome of an online transaction will be, they are extremely unlikely to proceed with the transaction. This includes purchases, registrations, downloads, or anything else involving providing information to a website. When Web users feel the least bit unsure about the information they are receiving over the Web, they hit that Back button in a New York microsecond. Then, they either give up on that organization and go to another site or call the company to talk to a live person to try to clear up their uncertainty. The latter possibility means that conflicting information on a website greatly increases the volume of telephone calls to the company or organization. Management often hopes that their website will decrease the volume of telephone calls to sales, support, and information lines, but they can kiss that hope goodbye if the site contains contradictory information.

**How Much?**

In early 2002, United Airline’s website had a clear example of conflicting information. The discrepancy was between its home page and another page. The home page offered vacation flights to London and Paris. Flights to London supposedly started at $499, and those to Paris supposedly started at $594 (Figure 1.16[A]). However, if a customer followed the link to learn more about these fares, the fares shown on the resulting page differed from those shown on the home page: London fares started at $369, and fares to Paris started at $429—in both cases more than $100 less (Figure 1.16[B]). Differences in this direction are less bothersome than ones in which the price goes up when one checks the details, but the discrepancy still raises uncertainty in customers’ minds about what the fares really are.

**Conflicting Privacy Policy**

Many websites encourage visitors to register to receive certain benefits: discounts, news, announcements, customized service, or even simply access to the site. Registration con-
sists of providing contact information and sometimes also preference and demographic information.

Wary of opening themselves to consumer fraud, identity theft, or unwanted commercial email, Web users are becoming more concerned with how, exactly, their data will be used. Companies and organizations, aware of this growing sensitivity among consumers, often provide links to their privacy policy. Many also state on their registration form how the data will and will not be used. Some provide ways for registrants to opt in or out of (1) receiving announcements or (2) having their information shared with other organizations.

When an organization’s website contains statements about how it will treat registrant or customer data, it is important that the statements be consistent with each other. When privacy statements in different places on a website contradict each other or even can be interpreted as doing so, site visitors will be wary of submitting personal information to the site.

That is precisely the problem on the Guestbook page at Earthwatch.org (Figure 1.17). Creating doubt in visitors’ minds about how their data will be used certainly will not encourage them to register.

A more serious case of conflicting content was at the website of computer equipment company Acer Inc. Potential customers trying to learn whether Acer sells Macintosh-compatible film scanners would find conflicting information in different parts of the site.

First, product pages at Acer.com disagree about which film scanners Acer sells. The main product catalog lists one, the ScanWit 2720S (Figure 1.18[A]). In contrast, the Acer

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Figure 1.17. www.Earthwatch.org (Jan. 2002)—Registration page is ambiguous about whether registrants’ data will be shared with other organizations.

Figures 1.18 and 1.19 illustrate how information can differ in two places on a site. For example, the main catalog lists one film scanner: ScanWit 2720S (Figure 1.18[A]). Second, the main catalog’s spec sheet for the 2720S doesn’t mention Macintosh (Figure 1.19[A]), but Acer America’s 2720S product page lists “Mac” as one of the drivers available for it (Figure 1.19[B]). Finally, Acer America’s spec sheet for the second scanner, the 2740S, lists “Macintosh” as a supported platform but then gives operating system requirements that exclude Macs (Figure 1.20).

With all this conflicting information, people with Macintoshes might hesitate to order an Acer scanner.

**AVOIDING THE BLOOPER**

If Information Isn’t Copied, Copies Can’t Differ

The best way to make sure information about an item—product, service, or topic—doesn’t differ from one place to another on a website or family of sites is simply not to have it in more than one place. That isn’t as limiting as it sounds. Instead of duplicating information in different places, link from different places to a single presentation of the information. After all, the Web is mainly about linking.

For example,

> All pictures of a particular item should be image links to a single image file.
> All listings of an item in an online catalog should be links to a single item page.
> All descriptions and other attributes of the item should come from a single source.

This "single source" approach need not be restricted to simple static HTML links. Many websites and Web applications extract information dynamically from databases and...

**Main catalog’s spec-sheet doesn’t mention Mac.**

Acer America’s spec sheet for the 2720S includes a section titled “Platform” which mentions Macintosh compatibility. However, under the “Operating System” section, Mac is not listed as an available operating system. This discrepancy indicates a content blooper where the spec sheet inaccurately states that the scanner is compatible with Macintosh systems.

Figure 1.20.  *www.Acer.com* (Dec. 2001)–Acer America’s 2740S spec sheet disagrees with itself about the scanner’s Macintosh compatibility.

**Mentions mac under Platform but not under Operating System.**
“content management” systems. Duplication is avoided if wherever a particular item is mentioned, the data has come from a single source for that item. When information is not duplicated, updating and maintaining it is simplified and divergent copies are impossible.

If Information Must be Copied, Do Whatever It Takes to Keep it Consistent

If duplication of information in different places on a website or family of sites cannot be avoided, the organization that owns the site must “bite the bullet,” budgeting the resources required to ensure that there are no contradictions. Otherwise, the organization will be disappointed in the success of its website.

Blooper 5: Outdated Content

Almost as bad as contradictory information on a website is information that is clearly out-of-date. Sites that have outdated information are basically telling the world, “We are disorganized and unreliable.” Although out-of-date information on someone’s personal website is perhaps not surprising, it is amazing how common it is on websites of large corporations and organizations.

Russell Stover, a candy company, felt it needed a Web presence to keep up with competitors like See’s Candy, which has for several years had a website that allows customers to order candy online—even customized selections of candy. So Russell Stover created RussellStover.com.

Or at least, it announced plans to create the site. In the late 1990s, the company put up a placeholder site promising that the real site would be up in “Fall 2000.” Unfortunately, the company then failed to meet its own deadline. Until recently, people who visited Russell Stover’s Web address saw what appeared to be a home page but was really just a picture of the company’s planned home page, which supposedly was “Coming Soon . . . Fall 2000.” The entire placeholder page was a single image, with almost no actual working links (Figure 1.21). A friend told me he tried to use the site to buy candy in December 2000, well after the stated “Fall 2000” deadline. He wasted several minutes clicking on parts of the image before he noticed the Coming Soon sign and realized that the only way to order candy was to call the 800 number at the bottom of the page.

After my friend told me about RussellStover.com, I checked it every few months. As of January 2002, the new site was still “Coming Soon . . . Fall 2000.” In February 2002—a year and a half after the promised deadline—Russell Stover’s promised new site finally went online.

A more recent example comes from the California Shakespeare Festival website. Its home page lists the season’s plays and marks the one currently playing. Or at least, that’s the plan; the execution sometimes lags a little. On September 16, 2002, the home page still marked The Seagull as “now playing,” even though that play ended on September 1 and The Winter’s Tale started on September 11 (Figure 1.22).
A website in severe need of updating is that of Enron Corporation, an energy company that in late 2001 declared bankruptcy. Although Enron’s corporate website was partially updated to reflect its new circumstances (see the next section, Avoiding the Bloopers), much out-of-date information remained. In March 2002—several months after its stock had crashed to zero and it had laid off most of its employees, Enron Energy Services’ home page continued to describe Enron as “one of the world’s leading electricity, natural gas, and communications companies . . .” (Figure 1.23). Leading in what? one might ask.

A somewhat specialized example of outdated content comes from the publisher of this book, Morgan Kaufmann Publishers. Its website, MKP.com, provides secure e-commerce functions to allow people to buy books using a credit card number. Providers of secure
transactions are supposed to provide a user’s browser with a digital certificate—issued by a trusted authority such as VeriSign—to ensure the customer that the transaction is secure. Unfortunately, Morgan Kaufmann allowed its certificate to expire. Anyone trying to buy a book from MKP.com in late April 2002 received a warning that the certificate had expired, implying that the transaction might not be secure (Figure 1.24). Needless to say, the company quickly renewed its certificate when told of the problem.

AVOIDING THE BLOOPER

Many organizations want a Web presence. Too often however management has no idea how much of a commitment that requires. Websites have to be kept up-to-date. That takes time, effort, staffing, and money.

Stuff Happens: There Is No Such Thing as Permanent Content

Even websites that are only brochures for a company or organization have to be updated. People mentioned in the site leave or change roles. Companies move to new offices. Contact information changes. Organizations change their names and logos. Company circumstances change.

Consider Enron. Although, as described earlier, it overlooked items on its site that it would have been wise to update or remove, it at least did a good job of updating its home page (Figure 1.25).

Variable Content Requires Extraordinary Effort

If a site includes content that is supposed to change over time—product availability and prices, special offers and sales, press releases, articles, event calendars, facts and figures, sports scores, weather, and downloads—the commitment required to keep it up-to-date skyrockets.
Meet Your Own Stated Deadlines, or Don’t State Them
Don’t embarrass your organization by posting dates for revisions and additions to your website and then failing to meet those dates. If you post an announcement of an update and the announcement promises the update by a certain date, you should meet that deadline. If, for unforeseen reasons, you miss the deadline, at least yank the announcement down so it doesn’t serve as a giant indicator of your company’s unreliability.

Websites Must Be Maintained!
The bottom line: If company managers think they want a Web presence for the organization but plan their budget and staffing only for the initial site development, ignoring maintenance, they should think again.

Blooper 6: Missing or Useless Content
I talked about poorly described content, conflicting content, and out-of-date content—what’s left? How about content that is missing or useless? Since content is primary on the Web, pages or sites that are missing important content are just using up space and domain names.

You Just Have to Know
In late 2001, Slims, a nightclub in San Francisco, hosted a bluegrass music festival in Golden Gate Park. Its website, Slims-SF.com, publicized the event (Figure 1.26[A]). It announced that the festival would take place in “Speedway Meadows.” For people who know where Speedway Meadows is, that’s sufficient, but for people who don’t, it isn’t. I didn’t know. I browsed around the site trying to find out where in the park the festival would be. I eventually found a link to Shuttle Details (Figure 1.26[B]). After clicking there, I was transported to a generic shuttle bus page provided by the Golden Gate Park Concourse Authority (Figure 1.26[C]). It had almost no information, but it did have a link to a map of Golden Gate Park (Figure 1.26[D]). Unfortunately, the map did not mark where Speedway Meadows is. So much for the power of the Web.

Hey, Buddy! Want to Buy An LGW40?
The previous examples were strictly informational websites. For an example of missing important content at an e-commerce site, take a look at a catalog page at online electronics store ValcoElectronics.com. The excerpt shown lists two products (Figure 1.27[A]). The first one has a product code and a name, but the second has only a product code. If you don’t know what an LGW40 is, you can just click on the link to go to the detailed product page, right? Right, but you won’t find much more information there.
Figure 1.26. www.Slims-SF.com (Oct. 2001)—Festival site doesn’t indicate the festival’s location in Golden Gate park.

Festival home page doesn’t say where in GG Park Speedway Meadows is.

Subsequent pages, including a park map, don’t either.

Speedway Meadows is here, but the map doesn’t mark it.
Figure 1.27. www.ValcoElectronics.com (Jan. 2002)—Product detail page has no more information about LGW40 than catalog page.

(Figure 1.27[B]). Sure, whatever an LGW40 is, I’ll take a dozen! At least they don’t weigh much.

If the LGW40 were the only product on ValcoElectronics’ site that exhibited this lack of information, it could be dismissed as an isolated slipup. However, other products for sale on the site also exhibit the problem. Therefore, it is either a systematic data-extraction bug or a design flaw.

**Thank You So Much for Such Useful Information!**

My final example of useless content comes from United.com. While customers are trying to book a flight, the site distracts them with enticing links to useless marketing statements. Two examples are shown in Figure 1.28.

**AVOIDING THE BLOOPER**

To avoid building sites that lack important content or supply useless content, Web designers should follow these guidelines:

> **Learn what site visitors will need and then include it.**
> During site design, conduct interviews and focus groups with people who are like your intended users to determine what people will use the site for (Brinck, Gergle, and Wood 2001), and then design in the content they need to accomplish their goals.

> **Don’t distract users from their goals.** Help people do what they came to your site to do. In particular, once customers have started down the path of making a purchase, you are harming your own sales if you distract them from completing the transaction (van Duyne, Landay, and Hong 2001). Enticing links that lead to nothing useful not only annoy users and waste their time but also increase the transaction dropout rate.

> **Test to find what’s missing.** Test the site for usability before it goes live to make sure nothing important is missing, and if it is, add it. After the site is released, continue observing and interviewing users to discover if anything is still missing.

Obviously, following these guidelines takes time, effort, and money.

**Blooper 7: Unfinished Content**

An important special case of websites missing content is sites with pages that obviously have not been finished. In some cases, sites were knowingly put online while still...
While you are trying to book a flight, the site distracts you with enticing links to useless marketing statements.

Distracting links to pop-up windows that have no useful information.
under construction. In other cases, content is missing because of an oversight: Developers failed to check all the pages before taking the site live. Sites that are obviously incomplete make a poor impression on prospective customers.

**Lorem Ipsum Dolor Sit Amet**

Call up any Web search engine and search for “Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet” (including the quotation marks). Depending on the search engine, the search will return at least hundreds of hits, if not thousands. For example, conducting this search on Google.com yielded more than 10 pages of hits.

What does this mean? Many website designers initially mock up their sites with pseudo-Latin text so they can determine and evaluate the layout before the actual content is written. Some Web development tools help by providing the Latin filler. The most common Latin filler begins “Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit…” When this text appears in a live website, it means that the designer neglected to replace the filler text with real content text before putting the site on the Web.

Vincent Flanders first called attention to this common problem in 1998 in his website WebPagesThatSuck.com. Following the links returned by such a search reveals a surprising fact: Most of the sites with leftover filler Latin are commercial and organizational sites presumably created by professional Web designers. If, instead, most were personal sites created by individuals, the commonness of leftover filler Latin text would not be so surprising.

For example, International Wafer Service, a supplier of silicon wafers, has a What’s New page on its website that includes an announcement of improved chip-lithography methods (Figure 1.29). The announcement begins normally but degenerates into filler text, including fake Latin.

An example of filler text with potential legal implications comes from ThePattySite.com, a website offering resources for Dreamweaver Web developers. The site’s Legal Disclaimer consists entirely of fake Latin filler (Figure 1.30). This could be either a joke or a political statement, but it more likely is an oversight. Some people consider legal language to be gibberish. At this site, it is gibberish. The irony is that the site’s home page states, “Featuring original content not available anywhere else.”

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**Figure 1.29.** www.siwafer.com (Mar. 2002)—Announcement contains filler text.

**BETTER LITHOGRAPHY** -CD Lithography-0.25/0.35 micron CD Lithography and etch oxides and metal films now available. Stand line/space and VIA patterns available pages. Resize, move, add or delete this and other page elements to accommodate your information needs. Lorem ipsum, dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed diam nonummy nibh euismod tincidunt ut laoreet dolore magna aliquam erat volutpat. Ut wisi enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat.
Face to Face with the Void

Finding oneself staring at pseudo-Latin is not the only clue that a website is unfinished. Sometimes the clue is more of a Zen experience: pages of nothing.

An excellent example of nothing is provided by the website of the New Hampshire Association of School Principles (NHASP). On its home page, NHASP.org has a link to Administrative Job Vacancies (Figure 1.31[A]). Clicked on in early 2002, it displayed a blank page (Figure 1.31[B]). A notice that “no jobs are available at this time” would be nicer. The blank page’s title—shown in the title bar of the browser—may be familiar.

Web surfers can also encounter The Void elsewhere on the Web, such as the site map at siwafer.com (Figure 1.32[A]) and the About Continuing Studies page at Stanford.edu (Figure 1.32[B]).

Heed my words, grasshopper: Blank Web pages do not bring us closer to oneness with the universe. They bring us closer to “zeroness.”
Figure 1.31.  **www.NHASP.org** (Jan. 2002)—Job Vacancies link yields blank page.

Figure 1.32.  **A: siwafer.com** (Mar. 2002);  **B: Stanford.edu** About Continuing Studies Program page (Sep. 2001)—Pages of nothing.
AVOIDING THE BLOOPER

It’s a bad idea to put a site online with clearly unfinished content. It makes your organization look amateurish and disorganized. Instead, do the following:

> Don’t go live until ready. If you currently have no Web presence, don’t rush it. Wait until your site is complete before exposing it to the world. Reserve your desired domain name as soon as you know what it will be, but you can do that without putting up a website. If absolutely necessary, put up a placeholder page providing contact information, a brief description of the site’s or your organization’s mission, and the information that the new site is coming.

> Don’t miss your own deadline. If you publicly post a completion date, you really have committed yourself to making that date. If you posted a date and aren’t going to make it, yank it down as soon as possible. Leaving a date for a new site posted after the date is passed really makes your organization look bad (see Blooper 5: Outdated Content in this chapter).

> Keep the old site up. If a previous—presumably complete—version of your site is already on the Web, leave it up a little longer, until you have the new one ready.

> Omit unfinished pages. If you anticipate adding content to your site later, after it is up, don’t leave blank pages or filler content where it will be. Leave the unfinished pages, sections, or paragraphs completely out of the site, with no links or references to them.

> Check it! Review your site thoroughly before putting it online. Check it on your intranet before putting it on the Internet. It is good to begin this checking by having members of the design and development organization systematically walk through the site. However, before taking the site live, it is also important—for various reasons, not only checking completeness—to test the site on people from outside the organization or even outside the company.