

## Analyzing Corporate Brochure Websites

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## **Introduction**

Websites have changed the way many people function daily. Whether one is buying products from ecommerce sites or discussing political ideas in a blog, websites have become an integral part of most societies. They have also become a primary facet of businesses. Corporate brochure websites—or corporate websites—provide information and support services for a business's customers, clients, and potential clients. These sites are not, however, ecommerce sites that focus on online sales.

The following report will discuss corporate websites in more detail and provide analysis criteria from experts. Then, corporate websites will be analyzed according to the advice from experts and our group's criteria, which expands on our knowledge of the corporate website genre.

## **Understanding Corporate Websites**

Corporate websites have existed for over ten years (MacManus, 2004). Their purposes vary but can be to provide information or obtain clients. However, research shows that increasing brand awareness is the most important goal for corporate websites (Bruemmer, 2005). According to Passion Computing, a professional web development company, there are necessary steps to creating successful corporate websites. Some of their guidelines are:

- Identify the purpose and audience of the website
- Write with concision and accuracy
- Ensure important information is on the homepage
- Conduct usability and accessibility tests

These recommendations were made because, according to Passion Computing (n.d.), 90 percent of corporate websites fail. They also said:

- Corporations do not provide detailed information
- Layouts are poorly designed
- Websites lack search capabilities

Suggestions have also been made by experts about what sections corporate websites should have. Sepeck (2005) commented in a general discussion forum on the Drupal software website that corporate sites should have sections or pages for:

- About us information
- Contacts
- Services or products
- News
- Press releases
- Activities or events

The author also recommended that homepages have a few brief paragraphs about the organization, links to news articles, and contact information (Sepeck, 2005).

## Public Relations on Corporate Websites

Having the latest news and events on corporate websites can help organizations inform their audiences. News, press releases, and basic company information can also help journalists access information and publish stories accurately and timely. Because of the importance for businesses to maintain mutually beneficial relationships with journalists, it is vital that information be easily accessible.

According to Jakob Nielsen (2001), journalists were only able to find answers to 68 percent of their questions. This not only suggests that the public relations and news areas are poorly done but also suggests that organizations are not putting vital information, such as financial reports, on their sites (Nielsen, 2001).

Nielsen suggests having fast access to facts and figures. He also recommends:

- Listing a public relations contact
- Offering financial information
- Providing pertinent images

## Corporate Blogging

Blogs are becoming increasingly popular tools on corporate websites and, thus, deserve further discussion. Grant Buckler (2006) said in an article published in *Computing Canada* that blogs are a successful way to reach investors, but they are also able to build communities and attract visitors to websites. Buckler suggests that blogs have to be genuine. They should not imitate a brochure, and they should not be a place to post marketing messages disguised as a message from an outsider. Blogs should give useful information a personal voice.

Topics that could be on blogs are plentiful. For example, a food company could post recipes and have places for visitors to respond, or a hardware organization could give home improvement tips. However, Buckler does warn to use caution. Financial information cannot be released before it has been distributed following proper Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) guidelines. Libel and slander are also issues to be aware of (Buckler, 2006).

## Website Analysis

By understanding corporate websites more thoroughly and learning experts' opinions and criteria for successful sites, an analysis of a variety of corporate websites can occur. Knowledge from experts will be combined with the group's understanding of corporate websites to formulate an overall analysis. This examination will further reveal the purpose of corporate websites.

The corporate websites which will be analyzed are:

- Bell & Ross Watches: <http://www.bellross.com/#>
- Alticor: <http://www.alticor.com/>

- Ketchum Public Relations:  
<http://www.ketchum.com/DisplayWebPage/0,1003,28,00.html>
- Steelcase: <http://www.steelcase.com/na/>
- Mack Trucks: <http://www.macktrucks.com/default.aspx>
- Alcan: <http://www.alcan.com/web/publishing.nsf/content/About+Alcan+Home>

## **Audience**

The websites being analyzed vary greatly in terms of the type of company they are from. Thus, creating one profile of a typical site user would be impossible. However, corporate websites in general have similar audiences. Typically, primary audiences include:

- Clients
- Potential clients
- Investors
- Journalists

Steelcase's website, for example, focuses on their clientele. They offer visuals and three-dimensional models of their products along with brochures, features, and maintenance information.

Investors are another major audience and are catered to on Alcan's website with a direct link from the homepage. They provide stock information and financial quick facts. Journalists are also a primary audience, which is evident because of the media link on the homepage. Alcan offers news releases, speeches, facts, and contact information primarily for journalists.

Corporate websites are also used to attract potential employees, which can be considered a secondary audience. People searching for careers on the Alticor and Mack Truck websites can follow a link on the homepage. They offer a list of job openings, and they have a search feature which allows users to select openings in certain departments or locations.

All of the audiences have distinct primary purposes for visiting corporate sites. For most, the purpose is to obtain more information—including financial and media related knowledge. Secondary purposes for visiting corporate websites would be to become part of a community (Buckler, 2006). Those who have interests related to corporations can read and write blogs on corporate sites, like the Bell & Ross blog. This has information about repairs, new models, and accessories.

## **Content**

There are several common content elements on corporate websites. For example, all of the analyzed websites have links on their homepages for:

- Contacts
- Company information
- Media

- Careers

According to Sepeck, these are the essential sections for corporate websites. Steelcase, however, had these sections under a separate link, which may be difficult to find and detract clients from continuing their search or returning to the site.

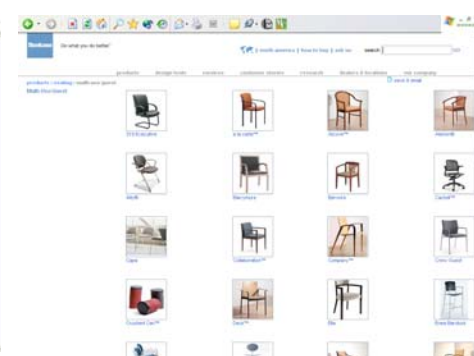
This content is primarily organized by links on the homepage. Links in rows along the top of the page are the most common occurrence, but Mack Trucks and Bell & Ross centered their links on the page and used columns. A brief company description or news piece is centered on the webpage, and they have navigation bars on one or both sides with links to other information. Also, the website's title should usually have the company's name or catch phrase for easy recollection.

The writing style of a corporate website is one of the most crucial elements. They must be a more thorough and instrumental version of a printed brochure while being easily to navigate and applicable for all audiences. If the Bell & Ross website were cluttered with rambling copy, it would not be as appealing to the audience as its sleek design is now. However, the Mack Truck website must have plenty of copy on each page because its audience is willing to read through it to make an informed purchase decision. Overall, each page of the website must have a writing style that achieves the page's objectives while maintaining the website's consistency and taking into account primary and secondary audiences.

## Layout and Design

Visuals are prominent on every webpage. Steelcase, Bell & Ross, and Mack Trucks have product photos. Alticor and Ketchum have images behind their links that relate to the information that can be found. For example, Alticor's "Vision and Values" link has a background photograph of the founders. Alcan is the only site that does not have images or graphics. They only have one small picture on the homepage.

A primary shape on every website is the square or rectangle. Steelcase's site has lines that divide sections into rectangles. Their product photographs are square, and their links are highlighted with a rectangular box. Alcan, Ketchum, and Alticor divide up their links in sets of rectangular boxes. Alcan's entire website has different sections divided by colored areas with the rectangular shape. Squares and rectangles are psychologically associated with power and foundation. They also suggest order and logic. The companies want to be portrayed as powerful in their product or service category, so squares are a useful way to allude to this. Also, by using squares, audiences may feel that the websites are logical and ordered, which may result in more comfort in searching for information.



There are no color schemes that represent the whole genre. Colors typically relate to the brand identity of the company and its products or services. For example, Bell & Ross has a black background and Mack Trucks uses some black on their homepages. According to Dave Shea and Molly E. Holzschlag (2005) in their text *The Zen of CSS Design*, black represents power and sophistication (Shea & Holzschlag, 2005, p. 62). Mack Trucks use of black brands their large trucks as powerful. Black on the Bell & Ross website insinuates that their watches are worn by sophisticated and powerful people. Thus, color helps the companies extend their brand, which is a primary purpose of corporate websites.



Interestingly, every site we analyzed used a sans serif font, which is a font without a serif. Serifs are “little barbs and hooks at the ends of various letter strokes” (Shea & Holzschlag, 2005, p.71). Serif is a more modern font style and is considered more difficult to read. The tone that sans serif fonts allude to in the sites is one of modernity.

## Authors

In the mid 1990’s, corporations increased their confidence in the possibilities of the web. In addition to ecommerce, corporations began viewing the web as a way to disseminate their message without the limitations of the media (MacManus).

Once this confidence took hold, corporate website creators soared in popularity. Now, search engines lead directly to commercial developers when “corporate website” is searched. In addition to corporate development and usability testing, these commercial vendors provide services, such as web maintenances, intranet applications, and search engine marketing.

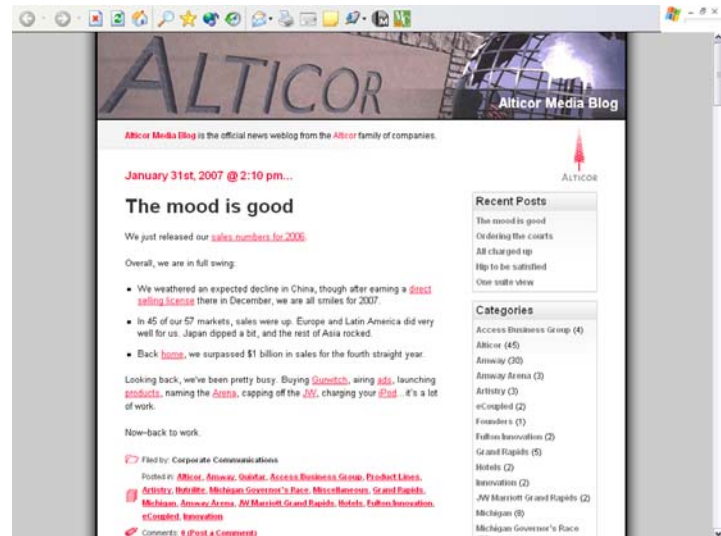
It should also be mentioned that many corporations have the ability to develop and maintain their own corporate websites.

## Technology and Evolution

According to Richard MacManus (2004), in the last ten years, advancements in hardware and software, browser technology, content management systems, and global economics have changed the way the web is used. These have also affected corporate website evolution.

Prior to 1995, few corporations developed substantial websites. The sites that existed were text driven pages geared toward presenting financial data to stockholders and contact information to potential clients (MacManus).

In 1996 and 1997, corporate websites became more popular, and because of rapidly advancing technology, these sites developed better visual effects. The advancement came after Netscape 2.0 and Internet Explorer 3.0, which supported several different plug-ins and JavaScript to offer more robust graphic material, were released (MacManus).



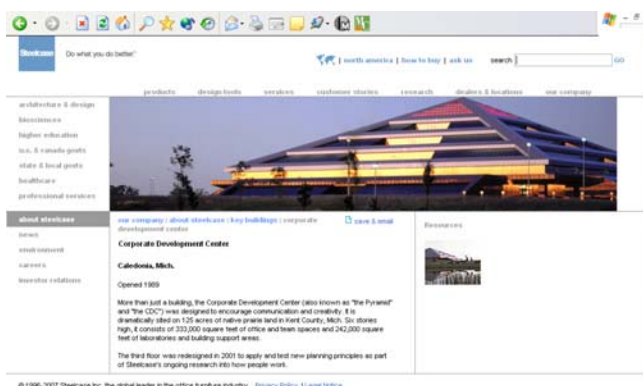
The early problems in corporate web design centered around the browser wars. Since Netscape and Internet Explorer (IE) branched off in different directions, it was often necessary to ‘optimize’ sites for different browsers (MacManus).

In upcoming years, standardization began to take place on the web. The W3C gained a stronger influence over computer developers and many of their recommendations began taking root. This standardized the way sites would appear over different browsers.

MacManus said in his article “The Evolution of Corporate Websites” that corporate websites tend to revamp themselves every one to two years. Initially, corporate websites were magazine-style brochureware, but they have recently become two-way Web interfaces. In the late 1990s, MacManus said that the trend was to make websites reminiscent of the real world. Also emphasized was the feeling of the home to draw people in. These tactics were used because websites were unfamiliar still to most people.

MacManus says the evolution is now moving toward two-way dialogue. Sites are using more multimedia, and they are more interactive and standardized.

From our analysis, it seems like sites are evolving with podcasts and blogs. A blog is shown on the Alticor screenshot above. Podcasts let audiences listen to information at any place and time whereas blogs allow for human connections to be made through communication. The genre will continue to evolve as new technology arises.



## Public Relations

All of the sites that were reviewed had an area for the media. Most offered a relevant contact and posted news releases. Facts were also available, but

they were not always located in the same area as the other media material. The Steelcase screenshot above shows where basic company information is located. One element that was recommended by Nielsen was relevant images. Steelcase offered product images and Alticor had a photo of its headquarters, but none of the images were formatted for easy download and use in a media venue.

### **Analysis Overview**

The six websites we analyzed included the primary facets recommended by experts in the “Understanding Corporate Websites” section. They also considered their audiences’ needs, which was evident by the information they offered. So, corporate website experts would most likely consider the six sites to be successful.

Our analysis also revealed that the websites were successful. Colors were used to enhance the brand image; emphasizing brand images was a primary purpose of these sites. Squares emphasized the tone and order they wanted to portray. They were also easy to navigate and visually appealing.

### **Conclusion**

Corporate websites are vital to businesses. They offer primary and secondary audiences—investors, clients, journalists, and potential clients and employees—the information they need. The websites also enhance their brands through their design and font choices.

As technology advances, these websites evolve. Currently, they are focused on two-way communication through blogs and through offering contacts. This communication assists the purpose of corporate websites by providing more detailed information that is based on a personal need or desire. This also makes a company’s brand seem more technologically savvy.



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