

Small is Beautiful

by

Marc Millon

How often have you heard it said — how often have you said it yourself — "the World Wide Web can connect you to a 'potential audience' or a 'potential market' of 50 million Internet users". Or is it 55 million. Or 60 million at last count. I don't know. Frankly, I've stopped trying to keep up.

Why? Perhaps it's because I have, deep down, some subliminal fear of "high flying", an atavistic phobia for figures with very large numbers with noughts on the end of them. That is why, I suppose, I never — or only very rarely — play the Lottery.

No matter, above all I consider myself a pragmatist, a realist, and quite plainly this oft-quoted figure is of little use to any of us. Or of no more use than, say, the knowledge that the global public telephone network has the potential ability to put us in contact with, what, how many billion individuals worldwide? The problem, of course, is that so many of them are ex-directory. So for that matter, am I.

And herein lies the problem: knowing how to get the "phone numbers" — and in the case of web sites the URL addresses — of whichever of those millions of sites that we wish to visit or make contact with. More importantly, too, for us web site creators, the problem of getting our URLs to those for whom we have created our sites.

Yes, of course, search engines — like telephone books only far more powerful — can help in this process, as can registration and web promotion services. And the sheer power and beauty of electronic publishing on the web is precisely this: its ability to deliver — at minimal cost especially compared to traditional print

publishing — to that potential global audience, wherever and whoever they are. We know and appreciate this. But as for trying to reach those 55 million out there, forget it. Not only is it unrealistic, thinking in this way can be downright unhelpful and counterproductive. Instead, I urge you, consider that "small is beautiful".

The earlier comparison with telephone communications is not entirely irrelevant. How many telephone numbers do you keep on your personal and business database? 100? 200? 500? Turning to print, how many company brochures do you produce and distribute? 500? 2000? 5000? Or if you were to publish a magazine on your chosen web site topic, how many readers would you be happy to reach? 300? 5000? 20,000? I know that I'd be more than chuffed myself with some of these figures, and they are certainly far more approachable and easier to contemplate than numbers which trail off into the millions.

But hang on, I hear your strangled cry, the web is different than traditional publishing; we shouldn't be limiting ourselves to traditional publishing goals in terms of audience that we can reach, should we? The sky's the limit, after all.

I grant you that through the web we can indeed reach audiences that are both potentially larger and, perhaps more importantly, more globally disparate than would be possible in traditional publishing due to the web's remarkable power of delivery and distribution. Yet in web publishing, as in any form of publishing, it is essential always to know your audience, to be able to conceptualise and humanise it in order to reach and satisfy its particular needs and concerns, and to speak to it in its own language. This can only be achieved by giving long and hard thought to the purpose of a web site and above all to whom it hopes to attract. Who are those people out there who you want to come to your site, and — more importantly — return to your site? What is their broad age range, their likes and dislikes, the common bond — no matter how broad that lowest common denominator — that they all might share? No matter that the portrait of your ideal web site visitor may seem an amalgam creation that bears little reality to any true person. This exercise in visualising and humanising

the audience you are trying to reach is of utmost importance and value. It should become a central element in the professional craft of any web site creation.

For this precise aim of reaching a tightly focused audience, however large or tiny, should be the primary goal of all serious web sites, i.e. those which exist for a purpose rather than merely to massage the egos of their creators (which, I fear, so many sadly do). And in this regard, the web is probably the best medium in the world for specialised or boutique publishing. You can write and publish on the web on the most bizarre or esoteric topic imaginable — and there will be someone out there who shares your concerns and interests precisely. Indeed, the smaller that audience, the more precisely can a web site tailor itself to reflect its audience's particular needs and concerns. There is certainly no shame, I maintain, in a web site which attracts its "hits" in hundreds not thousands, provided those hundreds return because the site is vital and providing them with information or entertainment that they need and want to have. Some of the most successful and dynamic sites serve just such a purpose for relatively tiny but loyal bands of devotees.

Know thyself, it is inscribed over the Oracle's pad at Delphi. Know thy audience, we maintain. Yet sometimes the World Wide Web demands too that we look beyond our own navel or that of our audience's — no matter how intriguing or fascinating (please don't get the idea that I have a belly button fetish). So after you've created in your mind a clear and focused image of your ideal visitor, then broaden this out to consider others who may be attracted to the site from different or interrelated or even on the face of it unrelated points of view or direction or interest. Again, approach this from the point of view of your audience. Think "links" and spread your web laterally. What are those subjects that would be of interest to them? Visit such sites which reflect these common interests and try to negotiate reciprocal links. For if these sites may be of interest to your audience, then it's a fair bet that yours will be of interest to theirs.

Above all, remember: on the World Wide Web, small can indeed be beautiful. Publishing on the web need not be some macho exercise in notching up the greatest number of "hits"; rather, the best sites are those which focus tightly and precisely on the needs and concerns of their chosen audience, no matter how large or even how tiny. By contrast, the site which simply publishes with no thought to its audience then sits back and waits for that mythical 55 million to come rushing to its doors is one that is probably of little use or interest to any besides the creator's mother.

Whew. In a way, it's a relief, isn't it? Now that we've knocked that 55 million red herring into touch; now that we realise that all the hype about the WWW need not drive us into a frenzy if we don't register 20,000 hits a day, we can actually sit back and think rationally about the content of a web site itself, rather than become slaves to the medium that delivers it. And to do that, remember, we need to go back again and again to those two basics, purpose and audience. If we get them right, then we can be satisfied that we've done our job, that our audience — all 20 of you, or 2000 or 200,000 — are being served.

© Marc Millon 1997