Learning from Yesterday's Web

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THERE are two Web sites out there that are of remarkable significance regarding the history of mankind's whole-hearted leap into 'Cyberspace' and might also help marketing professionals better understand the environment in which they hope to profit.

First off, since 1996 there has been a program running around the Web capturing nearly all publicly available sites. Bet you didn't know that, eh? More than 100 terabytes of pages (one terabyte = 1,024 gigabytes or one trillion bytes of data if you can work out how much that really is) have been publicly available at http://www.archive.org via the "Internet Wayback Machine" since October. They're capturing an additional 12 terabytes each and every month, which just goes to show you how exponentially big the triple W is constantly growing. The Web is dead? Somebody tell all of those coders who are plugging away.

You can enter any URL (including a direct link to a particular HTML page) and the Wayback Machine's search engine will give you a list of how many times per year the site was archived and how many pages were captured. Then it's simply a click on a link and you're suddenly in, say, 1997. Now it's not perfect. Not all pages or images on pages were brought into the machine. Also, some technologies, such as dynamic pages that are not rendered as HTML or JavaScript code, forms and the like give it fits. But by and large you can get a very clear idea of what the site looked like and what content was present at the time of the snapshot. As a designer, it can give me fits too. How dated! How embarrassing! Well, we were experimenting. We had technical limitations. I hope the Web users of the future cut us some slack.

But how can you learn by examining the older pages? By taking a look at both popular sites and failures as they progressed (or regressed) over the years. What features were dumped? How did layout evolve? How did customer service figure into things? In other words, when it comes to planning, designing and implementing a site - how did successful ones succeed and why did others fail? This is especially useful for those industry latecomers who are sick of hearing about the "good ol' days." Now you too can carry the same memories as all those early adopters and give knowing nods at techie meetings. Best yet, you can create sites that are built upon proven concepts that evolved over time instead of eyeing big brands now and hoping by hitching your site on their coattails (imitation is flattering, sure), you'll gain from their efforts. But that's taking a lot on faith. Why not do the research yourself if you can?

The second site goes back a big further than 1996. In fact, all the way back to 1978. It's http://www.textfiles.com and it is an homage to the precursor to the vast Internet community, the Bulletin Board System (BBS). From 1978 until present (there are still some out there, though far shy of the hundreds of thousands that once existed) BBSes were the places people from all walks of life and backgrounds came to communicate with each other. It's where I learned all of the skills that have made me very successful in designing Web sites and user-driven applications. You can peruse the thousands of available text files that will show you how communication and diverse interests advanced online. Of particular relevant interest would be the "messages" category which contains actual discussions from various boards that have been stored away until now.

Armed with so much data cataloging the attraction, rise and fine-tuning of online communication between so many diverse types of people will undoubtedly allow you to become a tactical expert for crafting not only acceptable but provocative campaigns. It's very difficult marketing as an outsider. Now you have the opportunity to be a fly on the wall.