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SNAPSHOT: VIAWEB, JUNE 1998

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A few hours before the Yahoo acquisition was announced in June 1998 I took a snapshot of Viaweb's site. I thought it might be interesting to look at one day.

The first thing one notices is is how tiny the pages are. Screens were a lot smaller in 1998. If I remember correctly, our frontpage used to just fit in the size window people typically used then.

Browsers then (IE 6 was still 3 years in the future) had few fonts and they weren't antialiased. If you wanted to make pages that looked good, you had to render display text as images.

You may notice a certain similarity between the Viaweb and Y Combinator logos. We did that as an inside joke when we started YC. Considering how basic a red circle is, it seemed surprising to me when we started Viaweb how few other companies used one as their logo. A bit later I realized why.

On the Company page you'll notice a mysterious individual called John McArtyem. Robert Morris (aka Rtm) was so publicity averse after the Worm that he didn't want his name on the site. I managed to get him to agree to a compromise: we could use his bio but not his name. He has since relaxed a bit on that point.

Trevor graduated at about the same time the acquisition closed, so in the course of 4 days he went from impecunious grad student to millionaire PhD. The culmination of my career as a writer of press releases was one celebrating his graduation, illustrated with a drawing I did of him during a meeting.

(Trevor also appears as Trevino Bagwell in our directory of web designers merchants could hire to build stores for them. We inserted him as a ringer in case some competitor tried to spam our web designers. We assumed his logo would deter any actual customers, but it did not.)

Back in the 90s, to get users you had to get mentioned in magazines and newspapers. There were not the same ways to get found online that there are today. So we used to pay a PR firm $16,000 a month to get us mentioned in the press. Fortunately reporters liked us.

In our advice about getting traffic from search engines (I don't think the term SEO had been coined yet), we say there are only 7 that matter: Yahoo, AltaVista, Excite, WebCrawler, InfoSeek, Lycos, and HotBot. Notice anything missing? Google was incorporated that September.

We supported online transactions via a company called Cybercash, since if we lacked that feature we'd have gotten beaten up in product comparisons. But Cybercash was so bad and most stores' order volumes were so low that it was better if merchants processed orders like phone orders. We had a page in our site trying to talk merchants out of doing real time authorizations.

The whole site was organized like a funnel, directing people to the test drive. It was a novel thing to be able to try out software online. We put cgi-bin in our dynamic urls to fool competitors about how our software worked.

We had some well known users. Needless to say, Frederick's of Hollywood got the most traffic. We charged a flat fee of $300/month for big stores, so it was a little alarming to have users who got lots of traffic. I once calculated how much Frederick's was costing us in bandwidth, and it was about $300/month.

Since we hosted all the stores, which together were getting just over 10 million page views per month in June 1998, we consumed what at the time seemed a lot of bandwidth. We had 2 T1s (3 Mb/sec) coming into our offices. In those days there was no AWS. Even colocating servers seemed too risky, considering how often things went wrong with them. So we had our servers in our offices. Or more precisely, in Trevor's office. In return for the unique privilege of sharing his office with no other humans, he had to share it with 6 shrieking tower servers. His office was nicknamed the Hot Tub on account of the heat they generated. Most days his stack of window air conditioners could keep up.

For describing pages, we had a template language called RTML, which supposedly stood for something, but which in fact I named after Rtm. RTML was Common Lisp augmented by some macros and libraries, and concealed under a structure editor that made it look like it had syntax.

Since we did continuous releases, our software didn't actually have versions. But in those days the trade press expected versions, so we made them up. If we wanted to get lots of attention, we made the version number an integer. That "version 4.0" icon was generated by our own button generator, incidentally. The whole Viaweb site was made with our software, even though it wasn't an online store, because we wanted to experience what our users did.

At the end of 1997, we released a general purpose shopping search engine called Shopfind. It was pretty advanced for the time. It had a programmable crawler that could crawl most of the different stores online and pick out the products.