



Just give us the facts

Multimedia effects on the net are OK — until they prevent you from finding information. Nigel Whitfield campaigns against multimedia froth.

Readers of a certain age might remember Darlene Love, the Ronettes and other bands produced by Phil Spector. In which case, you might also remember his trademark production technique — the “Amazing wall of sound”. True aficionados of the era may even recall badges proclaiming “Back to mono”. With pressure mounting on us to switch to digital broadcasting, perhaps it’s only a matter of time before we start to sport badges labelled “Back to analogue” or “Keep your hands off my wireless”.

Switching off

There is a serious point to all this. On one hand, stereo, digital broadcasting and similar advances are all things we will have to get used to. On the other hand, sometimes we think it’s harder than it really is to do without them. Try switching off the stereo on your radio or listening to an AM radio station, and it’s not really so bad after all. The same cannot necessarily be said of the internet; while there’s a certain ring to “Back to V.32” it would be accompanied by a fourfold increase in your phone bill, too. And that wouldn’t be progress of any kind.

It’s not, of course, the users of the internet who need to be donning Spector-esque badges. With the slow connections most people have, the problems arise at the other end when a server tries to send you a huge file for an obscure plug-in and you end up spending ages just finding a contact number from a company web site.

There’s a place for features and goodies on web sites. But there’s a place for information, too

There’s a lot to be said for simplification. I’m not recommending badges that read “Back to Mosaic” for web browsers, but it would make life so much easier if designers thought about other things besides how many graphics they can bill their client for. How many times have you visited a site, only to be greeted by a page that reads “Click here for fast version... here for slow version” or something similar? Do we really need it?

Something has gone slightly wrong when people are designing web sites that begin with an apology and a link to a different version, so that the majority of home users will be able to access it at a

reasonable speed. Of course, there’s a place for features and goodies on web sites. But there’s a place for information, too. Try visiting the Symantec web site [Fig 1] at www.symantec.com and see if you can track down information about Norton Utilities for Macintosh. You might almost imagine they no longer make the product. And, if you think the problem is bad for casual users wanting to find information, think about those who have to rely on other technologies to help them navigate (for instance, people with poor sight). Try turning off the images on a web

site or firing up a copy of Lynx, and see how easy it is to find your way through a page that just reads “image image image”. Some of these problems are being addressed. There are new standards being set for HTML all the time and the latest revisions make it mandatory to include ALT tags to specify information about an image. There will still be old and badly coded pages out there, but it’s a start, as is the initiative by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) to make the web more accessible to people with disabilities.

Time for action

Initiatives from the likes of W3C are not enough, though. When you visit a web site and cannot quickly find what you want, don’t just sigh and carry on clicking. Click the link for the webmaster and tell them. When you’re bombarded with multimedia just because you want to find out how to complain about something you bought, or you choose the “Text only” version of a site and find it’s three months out of date, then it’s time to make a fuss. Multimedia and all those other great features can make a difference to the internet. Just like multi-channel digital television. The two have something else in common: many people are telling us that they are good for their own sake. Anyone for a “Back to Information” badge?



► Fig 1
SYMANTEC'S
WEB SITE:
LET'S GET BACK TO
INFORMATION

Questions & answers

Q I want to contact people who work for certain companies but I don't know their phone numbers, postal or email addresses. Is it possible to search a company web site for a specific person's email address? These people are not listed on Bigfoot and the like, and Email Ferret is no help.

a *There's no simple way to search through someone's web site, although some web editors will let you load a whole site which you can then search. But that's no use at all for a site which generates pages on-the-fly, and besides, many people won't take kindly to you doing that sort of thing.*

There are two solutions. The first is for companies to make web pages with useful information on it. The second is to see if they run an LDAP

(Lightweight Directory Access Protocol) server. This is an online directory that can be queried for

addresses by programs like Eudora Pro, Outlook and Netscape Messenger. You'll need to know on what machine the server is running so you can tell your email program to check it. Try obvious names such as mail.company.com, ldap.company.com and www.company.com. Internet standards recommend an address of postmaster be valid for all mail systems, too; so, postmaster@company.com should be valid. Whether or not it's read by anyone who'll be able to help you is impossible to

say. It certainly should be, but in practice that may not happen. Brute force is not recommended, but many company email systems use a straightforward way of allocating internet addresses. For example, my name might be nigel_whitfield, nigel.whitfield, nwhitfield, or nigelw. It's not foolproof, but it's worth trying. Just don't send anything embarrassing until you know you have the right address!

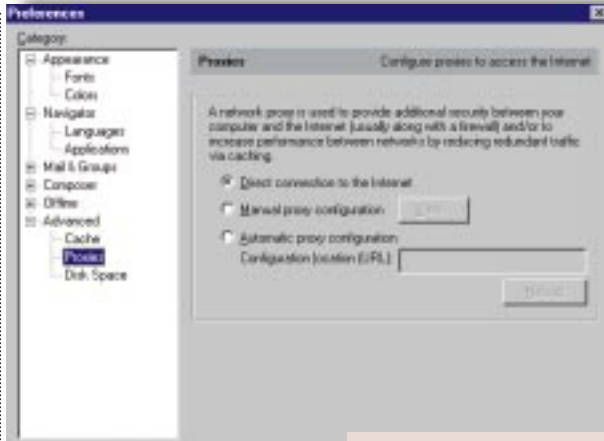
Q I've deleted Internet Explorer 4 from my system and installed Netscape Navigator. But now, when I try to access web pages, I get a message stating that I'm forbidden to access anything via proxy. What's happening? Do I have to re-install Explorer?

a *It sounds as though there are some proxy settings configured in Netscape that are preventing you from*

accessing the pages you want. From the Preferences screen, click on the little arrow next to

"Advanced" to expand it, and then click on "Proxies" [Fig 2]. Make sure it's set to "Direct connection to the Internet". If you do want to use a proxy, use the manual configuration screen and check that the settings are correct.

Q I am considering buying a PDA from the US. Aside from the obvious difference such as power adaptors and spelling, I wonder if the built-in modems in PDAs, such as the Philips Velo 500, work in



▲ FIG 2 IF YOU'RE HAVING PROBLEMS ACCESSING WEB PAGES, CHECK THAT THE PROXY SETTINGS UNDER 'ADVANCED' ARE CORRECT

the UK and Ireland? I know that the manufacturers must have the modems certified for use on each country's phone network, but if the modem is sold in an American model, does this mean it won't work on other phone networks? If the modems do work, is there any legal problem about using them in another country?

a *In general, there are only so many ways a modem can do its job and phone systems are pretty similar the world over. But there are some differences. For example, the UK phone-wiring system uses a separate wire for the bell. As a result, when you use foreign modems, other phones may tinkle during dialling, or the modem may not reliably detect incoming calls. Usually, you should have no problems making the modem communicate. Legally, however, you're not allowed to connect an unapproved modem to the phone line. Your phone could be cut off or you might be fined if someone finds out. That said, many modern modems have approval in different countries, often by means of software that can configure them to meet the relevant standards.*

It's worth checking this before parting with your money.

Q How do I get a form's Submit button to use a CGI script? I've written it in Perl Builder and linked it to the HTML file, but clicking Submit just resets the form.

a *You need to specify the action at the top of the form, not with the Submit button. The CGI script should be loaded on to your web server (PerlBuilder will simulate this for you, for testing). Define the action for a form with a line like*

<form method="POST" action="myscript.cgi">
[all one line]. Your script may need a different name, to accord with the server on which it will be running. Some will want scripts to end with .cgi, or .pl, and others won't mind as long as it's in a particular directory and referred to as, say, /cgi-bin/myscript.

PCW CONTACTS

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