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Home | News | Products | Services | About Us

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Home > News > ANM > May 2000 > **WebDesign 2000**

News

Latest News
New Products
Case Studies
Events
Press Releases
Newsletters
Comment and
Opinion
Employment
Media Login

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News

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Web Developer's Paradise at WebDesign 2000

An interview with Alan K'necht, Director of Engineering, BrandEra.com
Reprinted from the May 2000 edition of Authoring New Media

Conference Delegates and speakers alike have hailed as a great success the WebDesign 2000 Conference hosted by FirmwareDesign in March. As a taste of what was covered at the conference, following is an interview with visiting speaker, Alan K'necht, (Director of Engineering, BrandEra.com and Managing Director of Canada-based internet consulting company K'nectology Inc).

ANM: One of the views heard at WebDesign 2000, is that Australia is around two years behind when it comes to what's happening on the internet. Whether this is the case or not, you mention that it is a good place to be, why is that?

Alan: Because you get to learn by the pioneers' mistakes. For example, the first auction sites were flops. Companies spent millions on educating the public and developing their products, yet they failed. Why? Who knows, perhaps the world just wasn't ready for them. Then along comes eBay, which develops a better product and becomes the big success.

Also, in the early days of the internet the technology hadn't matured. Many of us built sites with leading (bleeding) edge technology. Some of us guessed right and others guessed wrong as many vendors disappeared. So there are a lot of legacy systems out there that have to be converted to something more robust.

Ultimately, it's not who is first in the marketplace, but rather who does it RIGHT first that will succeed.

ANM: Given that the internet is a global marketplace and there is already a wealth of information provided on US sites, how should Australian companies address the needs
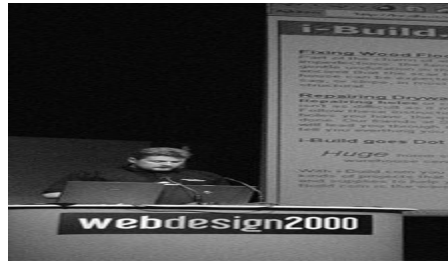
of local customers without duplicating information or alternatively lose overseas opportunities by focussing too locally?

Alan: The key to this is to remember that the first two W's in WWW stands for World Wide. So if your site is only focused on Australia, then make that limitation known on the first page. A phrase like "Serving Australia Only with the…" goes a long way in not alienating your Web site visitor. Also when building a site which is focused only on Australian information, think about the users who came in from search engines etc from outside Australia. Information is good, and may be of interest to others around the world, so don't exclude them.

A green grocer who wants a Web site shouldn't think about shipping produce around the world, yet a company that makes/distributes garments or candy must think about the global market.

With the internet the goal of a Web site should be Think Global, Act Global, and don't ignore Local.

ANM: While thinking and acting globally, eCommerce sites have potential customers in many countries. What sort of technical/legal/usability problems do you find this creates?

Alan: There are many things one needs to address. The first, must be is this product legal in that country?

After that, things to think about include: What taxes are applicable? How much does it cost to ship? How will the service agreement work? What are the consumer protection laws like in that country and what are the implications on company policy? What happens if the item is confiscated at the border?

There are many more, but these basic ones need to addressed first. Always have a good lawyer (solicitor) review corporate policy etc that appear on the Web site. And be sure to have the appropriate disclaimers.

As to usability, this topic is worth at least several hundred words of copy. If designing for a specific global market, then issues such as price conversion, site translation and even graphics

need to be reviewed and changed if necessary. Always be sure to clearly define where the site (company) is located and what currency is being quoted. The "$" doesn't mean much and most international users don't know that ".com.au" means Australia.

ANM: The BrandEra.com project, which you're involved in, leverages the Web to bring internet and marketing professionals together from around the world to work on joint projects. How successful is it given different time zones, cultures, languages etc?

Alan: I believe you are referring to our MediaLot.com product. Right now the product helps deal with time zone issues as the various team members have all their assignments in one spot which is accessible 24 hours a day 7 days a week from anywhere in the world. Also, by providing standard date stamping of uploaded files and comments, everyone knows what was done in what order.

Also, the ability to share files is a big issue with collaborative teams around the world and this product makes it possible.

ANM: Given your economics and business background, your WebDesign 2000 topic of "Measuring a Site's Financial Value" really hit home to both site developers and those who hold company purse strings. What would you say is the most overlooked aspect of preparing a site proposal for management approval?

Alan: That's easy, it's the dollars and cents. Whenever preparing a proposal, one must always do a cost benefit analysis. This basic step, while time consuming, can save millions of dollars and help guarantee successful projects.

ANM: As Web professionals we're always being bombarded with conferences. You've attended Web conferences around the world. What do you think makes the success of an internet conference, and how did WebDesign 2000 perform against that criteria?

Alan: Everyone has their own criteria for this. Mine is simple: Does the conference offer valuable information from a variety of sources that it would cost me more to obtain through other means? (Buying books, time reading the books, attending small lectures, etc.) Also, are the speakers there to share information or to sell product for their companies?

Many conferences now require their speakers to sign agreements that prevent them from even mentioning their companies or marketing their services during the presentations. I wish that these conferences would put that in their brochures so I could stop spending good money to hear a sales pitch.

WebDesign 2000 did have the non-marketing stipulation in the speaker agreements and I believe that is why this conference was as valuable to its delegates as it was. Also, I judge a conference by the information exchange between the delegates in the hallways between sessions. Just one look in the hallway between sessions proves that WebDesign 2000 was a success.

ANM: Gazing into your crystal ball, what does the next year hold for Web designers, developers and Web site managers? What skills, information should they equip themselves with to deal with the next 'big thing'?

Alan: If I could do this, I would be rich, so I'll throw away the crystal ball and use my common sense and best guess. I see internet technology advancements slowing down. They won't slow down to that reasonable a pace, but enough for many of us to catch our breath. The reason: no one has the time to keep changing things to keep up with all the latest and greatest bits of technology.

I also see Java becoming a stronger option with the expansion of Java Servlets and Java Server Pages (JSPs). This will play nicely into the expansion of Palm computing and other internet intelligent devices. Web sites are going to have to be more flexible and adaptable because the way people are going to be accessing them is changing.

Finally, we are going to see the explosion of internet access from second and third world countries as the cost of technology continues to drop. This will have a big implication on issues of globalisation and multi-lingual and multi-cultural Web sites. So Web designers and managers better start educating themselves on these issues.

Back to the top.

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