

speakerBOX

# YOUR WEBSITE IS TRYING TO KILL YOU

*Five Easy Ways to Stop the Carnage*

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## The Webman Cometh

These are dark times for the glossy paper industry.

Corporate brochures are getting slimmer, printed data sheets scarcer. The world is going paperless. The modern life is Web-centric.

If you want to learn about a company these days, you'd better go to its website. Chances are, it's an organization's chief touch point. And yet the quality of most corporate websites – particularly those in the business to business and business to government sectors – remains startlingly poor.

Website owners, ask yourself this: *Does my website accurately reflect the full value of my company?*

If you answered “no,” you're in serious trouble. If you answered “yes,” you're still in trouble. Because, you see, it was a trick question. In truth, your website should portray a vision of your company that is *vastly superior* to any objective reality.

Websites, above all, are advertisements—just like glossy corporate brochures. The only difference is: Most corporate brochures are effective.

## “It's Not that Bad” and Other Admissions of Guilt

Here's the power of perception at work: If your website isn't phenomenal, I don't ever want to see your company.

Sounds harsh, perhaps. But it takes vastly more knowledge and effort to optimize a business than it does to optimize a website. So if your company can't do the easy things right, why should anyone trust it to handle the complexity of an actual product or service delivery?

*What is it about websites, anyway?*

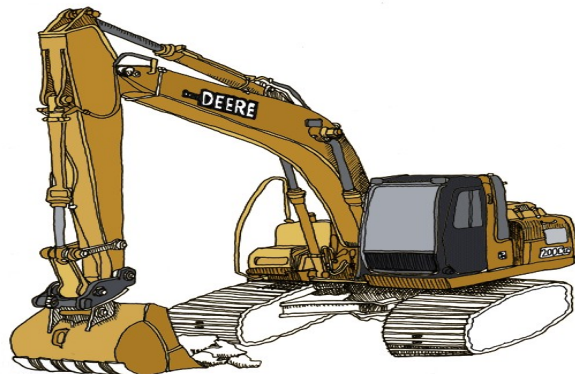
One of the reasons I suspect corporate sites are allowed to toil in mediocrity is because websites are inherently fluid. Companies view their site as perpetually “under development,” so there's never any pressure on developers, designers, or content creators to deliver a fully polished product.

But this is a severe miscalculation. The moment a corporate website goes live, it becomes an essential representation of the company it serves. An unfinished, incomplete site says all the wrong things about your business—you're unorganized, undisciplined, and perhaps a bit lazy. (Don't even *think* about adding a cartoon backhoe with the caption, “this page under construction.”)

On the bright side, this sorry state of affairs is decidedly good news for any business willing to spend real time and resources differentiating itself on the Web.

So to get you started, here are five self-defense tactics you can use to prevent your corporate website from murdering your company's identity:

**“Ah, the perfect place to bury my brand equity”**



## Self-Defense Tactic #1: Make It Professional

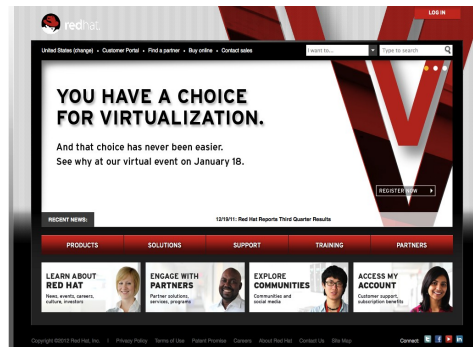
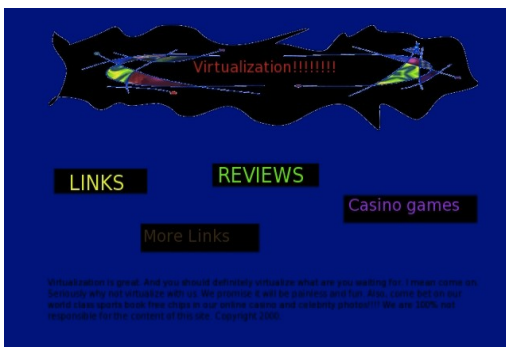
Reality check: Within 30 seconds of first viewing your corporate website, prospective customers will decide – irreversibly – whether or not they would ever do business with your company. I call this the “threshold of professionalism” test. (And this is one test you'd better not flunk.)

Unless you're selling used lawn furniture, the first priority of your website is to assert your legitimacy as an enterprise. Anyone can have a website; very few charlatans and fly-by-nights have the wherewithal to produce a truly professional site base.

And while there are indeed plenty of cheap website templates that can improve a site visually, there are (as yet) no automated methods of producing cogent, intelligent Web copy.

So make the investment in both visual *and* textual professionalism. And then...

**Which one of these websites would you trust with your credit card number?**



## Self-Defense Tactic #2: Make It Unique

Congratulations. You've crossed the threshold of professionalism. So why does your website still stink?

Most likely, it's because in your quest to look professional, you've created an online presence that's virtually indistinguishable from your competitors'.

To be clear: Websites that fail to differentiate your company have very little value. You'd never tell a customer: "We're essentially a clone of company X." So why would you say it with your website?

And yet, most online projects are governed not by the urge to succeed, but by the powerful urge not to fail. They use the same generic stock photos, the same predictable quick links, the same bland messaging. To be fair, it's hard to fail spectacularly by blindly copying industry conventions. It's a recipe for mediocrity, not failure. Copying other sites may even keep your website from becoming a liability; but it's a long way away from becoming an asset.

The smarter path is to embrace uniqueness, personality, differentiation. Your website is your identity—so let it shine. Some people won't like you. Others will *insist* on you. And that's the point.

**Clockwise from left: generic smiling business people; random ubiquitous business graphic; generic smiling business people (diversity edition)**





### Self-Defense Tactic #3: Make It Current

Does this sound familiar: Your "recent news" spotlight features a press release from 2004. Six of the twelve board members listed on your leadership page are no longer with the company. Your site says next to nothing about recent industry trends, presents no topical news or opinion whatsoever, and looks like it's stuck in the Reagan years.

What a shame. The beauty of websites is their ability to change and evolve. That's what makes them utterly superior to the glossy corporate brochures of yesteryear. And yet with great power comes great responsibility.

Websites must be updated—constantly—in real time. They should be designed to reflect immediate user interactions like flash polls, comment threads, evaluation tools like ProCons ([www.proconit.com](http://www.proconit.com)), automated news feeds, and live blogs and chats.

Your website is your company's heartbeat. Are you alive and kicking? Prove it.

### Self-Defense Tactic #4: Make It Instructive

All right, you're getting closer to the brass ring. But even a professional, unique, and dynamic site can feel aimless or worse—overwhelming.

Generally speaking, people need direction in life. Getting someone to spend their valuable time on your website is a major coup. So why waste it by leaving your users in a state of confusion?

The principle of reciprocity tells us we need to consciously promote a consumer's natural give and take response. The question is—what's the right thing to ask for? Do you want their personal information so you can follow-up later with a sales call? Do you want them to download more information and call *you* when they're ready to buy? Do you want them to subscribe to a emailing list so you can nurture the lead over time?

Experiments show that people with too many choices avoid choosing altogether. So take the initiative with your website—and get to the point, quickly.

## Self-Defense Tactic #5: Make It Relevant

This one's a real killer.

See, websites don't come in two varieties: good and bad. A great website for one company might be terrible for another—because websites need to *accurately* capture (and enhance) a specific corporate identity.

In some ways, this is a referendum on self-defense tactic #2—differentiation. Smart differentiation is relevant (and typically positive). Obviously, “American Airlines: the Crashest Airline on Earth” isn't competent differentiation. But neither is “American Airlines: Your Party in the Sky,” because a celebratory atmosphere simply isn't relevant to commercial airline passengers.

Or think about this: An irreverent, high-octane website might be perfect for a progressive design firm, but disastrous for a conservative financial services company touting simplicity and steadiness.

Worst of all, if your website says one thing and your internal corporate mission statement says another, you've got a serious issue.

So know your market, then differentiate with consistency, care, and relevance.

### Swing and a miss





## Secret Bonus Tactic: Consult a Professional

Still not sure how to turn your corporate website from liability to asset? Give us a call. We'll give you a candid assessment of your website, an overview of your primary threats and opportunities, and a hearty handshake for good measure.

Remember: a website that truly captures and enhances your corporate identity is worth more than any piece of marketing you'll ever produce.

So don't look the other way when it comes to your Web presence. Only *you* can prevent corporate Webslaughter. □