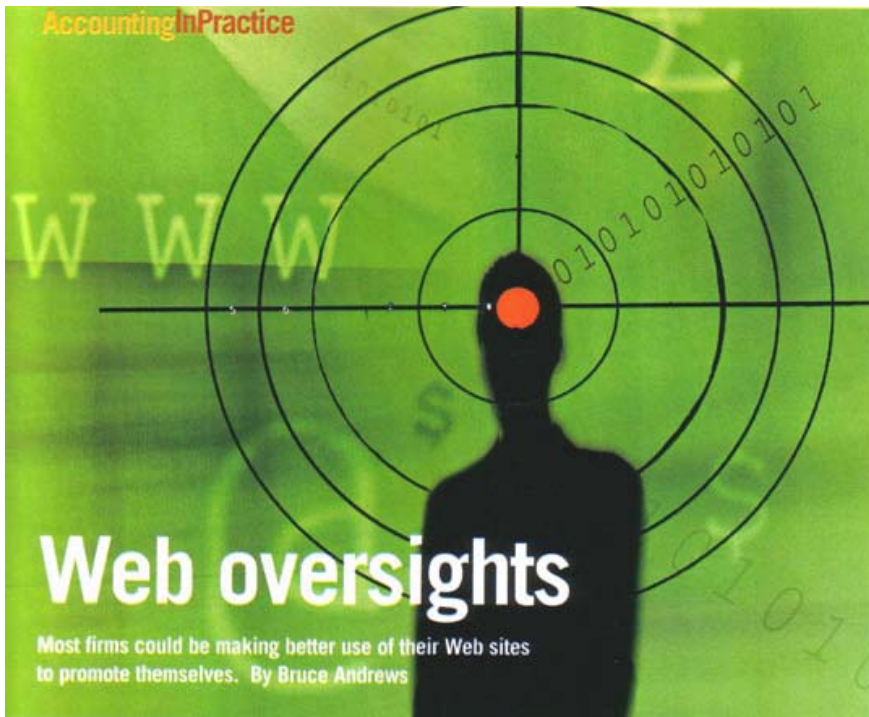


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Web oversights

Most firms could be making better use of their Web sites to promote themselves. By Bruce Andrews

SIMPLE FIXES

Seven cheap ways to improve a Web site

- 1 Halve the number of words in the site and update the contents regularly.
- 2 Remove any flashing signs or banners and use only two or three colors.
- 3 Organise the contents so that they make sense to the user.
- 4 Produce an e-newsletter and find ways to get subscribers to it.
- 5 Register your Web site with search engines.
- 6 Provide fact sheets or discussion papers on the site, which can be downloaded free.
- 7 Set aside time every month to review the Web site and plan improvements.

SOURCE: UNITED FOCUS

Accounting firms are missing opportunities to promote their services because of poorly designed Web sites, according to consultants. And even those firms that do have well-designed sites are often too slow to offer sophisticated features, such as allowing clients to view their accounts with the firm. However, there is no doubt that the internet is popular with accountants.

The latest *BRW Top 100 Accountancy Firms* survey found 89 firms had Web sites, up from 42 three years earlier. Their sites range from simple "e-brochures" of small firms, which replicate printed material, to the sophistication of the Big Four sites, which include password-protected areas that allow clients to see documents and advice specific to them.

Steven Smith, the director of the Web site consultancy United Focus, says many accounting firms do not even have the simple e-brochure-style site right, and that their sites could be greatly improved without much expense. He says accounting firms' Web sites typically fail to catch their audience's attention by not organising or writing the content according to their users' needs.

For example, the H&R Block Web site (www.hrblock.com.au) is appealing to the eye, but at "the very centre of the screen — the prime real estate — we read the Mission Statement", Smith says. He suggests this area could be made more useful with, say, a link that would enable the viewer to send an e-mail to the firm or download a fact sheet on tax.

Phillip Hunt, the managing director of H&R Block, says "we started with the Mission Statement and built the Web site around it" and that it was modelled on the US parent's Web site. The site was down at the time of writing, something that happens "about once every three months", Hunt says.

Adir Shiffman, director of Web site benchmarking consultancy

Global Reviews, warns accounting firms that they will suffer if their Web sites are mere "e-brochures". "The danger with this type of approach is that it is very much seen as being dated," he says. "It does their brand no favors and what we know from our research is that purchasing professional services is as much about having confidence in the brand as it is about the price point."

Smith and Shiffman both say accounting firms must take the next step in developing their Web sites, to offer features such as what Smith calls a "live account". This would enable clients to enter a password-protected area to see the fees the accounting firm is charging them. Accounting firms say their clients are not asking for this service and that the security measures it would require are too expensive.

Steve Meyn, a director of the accounting and information technology consulting firm Lawler Partners, says he is planning to add a password-protected area to the firm's Web site in September. He says the Web site costs \$3000–4000 a year to maintain, and he expects this to rise to \$7500–10,000 after it is relaunched.

Clients will be able to access newsletters and business tips as well as copies of their trust deeds and wills, but they will not be able to view their own accounts, even though Lawler Partners has enabled some of its clients' own sites to do this.

Meyn says clients have not asked for such a service and, in any case, it would be difficult to ensure adequate security. "We try in our service delivery to engage people on an annual basis [rather] than break down the costs into a per month basis," he says.

Angelo Piantadosi, a director of the accounting and information technology consulting firm Edwards Marshall, says it is yet to offer a "live account", but it is inevitable that accounting firms will do so. He says accountants have been slow to adopt this billing method because "we are just a more conservative crowd". ●