

THE WEB SITE AS PUBLIC FACE

› BY JANET KREILING



New York's Metropolitan Opera House

FIND OUT:

What it takes to create a Web site that really serves your enterprise <

Why data concurrence is vital <

How easy administration can be when it's separated from content <

Substance Matters as Much as Appearance

TAG Online creates and hosts imaginative, functional, reliable Web sites, based on its owners' years as software designers and their use of Adaptive Server Enterprise.

YOUR WEB SITE IS YOUR PUBLIC face—and it had better be more than just a pretty one. It needs to reflect your enterprise, its competence, and its responsiveness to customers' needs. If it serves as a primary order channel, it had better be a reliable processor of transactions. If it serves as a primary source of product information, it had better to be simple to navigate. And it must be easy and cost-effective to administer.

All of these requirements involve Web page design that incorporates more than just graphics. There must be pith behind the page—software that ensures a welcoming presence and impressive performance for users and, for your own staff, ease of populating the site with information and

perhaps a tool that doesn't require them to program in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML).

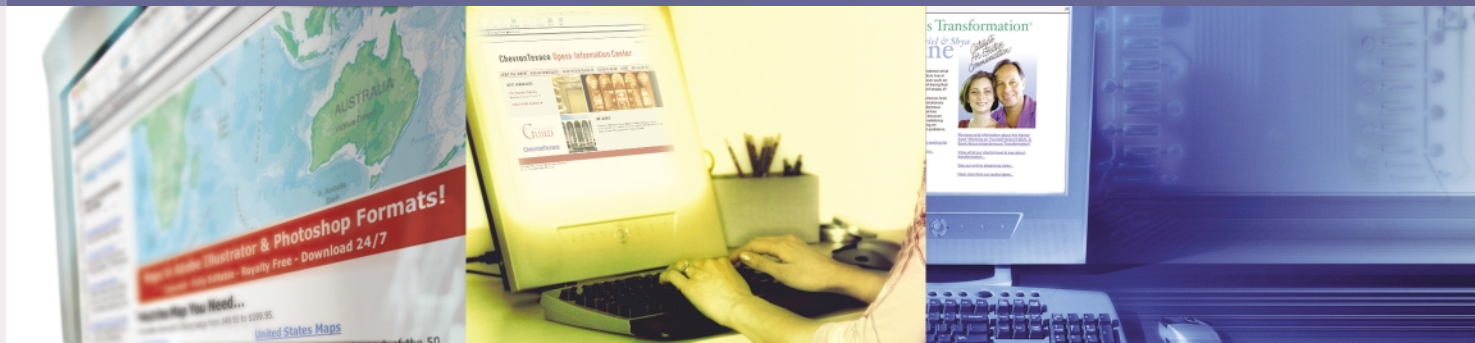
Here's a case in point: For decades Texaco supported Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts of operas from New York's Metropolitan Opera. After Texaco merged with Chevron, the Metropolitan Opera Guild and ChevronTexaco decided to update a Web site then used mostly by teachers to get information about the broadcasts. But a conventional redesign would have taken years—there were thousands of static pages of information to load into the new format—but only months were left before the new season began in December 2002.

The Guild and ChevronTexaco wanted to reach beyond teachers to the

general public all over the world. Another goal was to present, as David Dik, director of education for the Guild, says, "an integrated experience for the listener, using words and sound such as plot synopses and audio clips of musical themes, just as opera itself integrates music and words to tell a story. We wanted to entice people in and then give them some roots to hold onto as they listened to the broadcast."

But there were those thousands of pages of material.

The solution was to create page templates that could be filled with standard information about each opera—the opera's background, the cast and characters, the story synopsis, information about the composer, teaching materials, photos, and audio clips of major themes



www.mapresources.com

www.operainfo.org

www.ask-inc.org

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—Amy Gideon, president, TAG Online, Inc.

and arias—along with information relevant to each broadcast, such as on the intermission features.

All of this information is now separate and can, on command, flow into the templates. Pages can be updated or new ones created from the templates through an administrative tool that lets Guild or Met staff use plain English, not HTML. And if the site comes due for another redesign, only the templates will have to be changed. The site now holds material on some 75 operas, in three languages, as well as a station locator, a map, and other information.

This satisfactory solution was possible because the site creators, Amy and Andy Gideon, president and chief technology officer, respectively, at TAG Online, Inc., have strong experience in

software development. As a result, they approach Web site design from what’s behind the image on-screen as well as the “pretty, fancy stuff,” according to Andy Gideon.

They built their first e-Commerce site, one “with all the bells and whistles such as catalogs and search mechanisms,” in 1994. They’d been software consultants to Wall Street for years; in 1993, when the first browser, Mosaic, appeared, they saw possibilities snowballing for the Web, including distribution of software applications.

What Lies Beneath—the Database

Their approach begins with the pith—first finding out what clients want the site to accomplish. In the Opera Guild’s case, this included ease of

administration as well as attractive access to information.

The site, www.operainfo.org, visibly meets the Guild’s goals for user appeal and utility. Dik points out that it also meets the goals for ease of administration. “We thought about all the occasions when someone would send an e-mail to someone else to change this or add that to a page on the site and said, ‘If you’re going to e-mail someone, it’s just as easy to do it yourself. So TAG Online set it up so our program director can input cast changes and other staff people can update the station finder list and the map or the intermission content. We have multiple entry points available to people with administrative passwords.”

The site gets more than a million

hits a month, with a high percentage coming on Saturday afternoons from people either listening to the broadcast over the Web or reading up on what they're hearing. Not only does the organization of the site have to be robust but so does the database that supports it. Based on their experience on Wall Street, where firms handle many thousands of trades daily, the Gideons chose Sybase's Adaptive Server Enterprise (ASE) as the database to host this site, along with several hundred others. (TAG Online offers four Web site services: design, development, hosting, and collocation.)

"Customers such as the Metropolitan Opera Guild have complex Web sites, with a lot of information that needs to be available quickly," Amy Gideon says. "Sybase excels in supporting complexity and handling a high transaction rate. Based on our Wall Street experience, we knew that it would provide a good back end to the Web sites we develop, many of which carry mission-critical applications and need to be up all the time."

In their site development and hosting complex in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, the Gideons employ two separate networks. The Apache server that interfaces with the Web runs on one, ASE on the other. The two communicate through Sybase's Open Client. This isolation gives ASE a high degree of protection from intrusions, Andy Gideon points out, because it is never represented by an Internet address.

ASE's ability to manage data concurrence strictly is a factor the Gideons single out as crucial to Web site support. "It handles multiple concurrent

users very well while protecting the data," Andy Gideon says. For the Opera Guild, this capability ensures, first, that the site can handle multiple users downloading information on *Rigoletto* or *Don Giovanni* simultaneously. It also ensures the integrity of what the public sees—if a staff member is putting in a last-minute cast change, a user won't be able to access the page until the change is complete.



Andy and Amy Gideon, chief technology officer and president, respectively, of TAG Online, Inc.

Reliability—for When the Site Is the Business

Concurrence is crucial to sites that sell, to ensure that customers' addresses and credit card numbers don't get scrambled or overwritten; that inventory is debited when items are sold; and that multiple, sometimes many, sales can be handled simultaneously. Bob Dahl owns an e-Commerce site, www.mapresources.com, that relies on keeping sales data straight. Dahl's company, Map Resources, Inc., sells editable digital map files to graphic designers, governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and other entities.

"TAG Online set up the entire site so it enables people to buy single files or subscriptions, gets credit approvals, sets up the download, and keeps records so a buyer can download the same map for a seven-day window," Dahl, Map Resources' president, says. The window is in case a user accidentally deletes the file or writes a mistake over the first download. About half of sales are now online, saving overnight mail costs for users and advertising costs for Map Resources.

Because the company offers maps of just about anything with any detail a buyer wants, the site also had to be easy to navigate and provide ways of drilling down to build specific maps—for example, California with roads and rivers or the Bahamas with what little topographic detail there is.

The maps are sold in the form of Adobe Illustrator files, so buyers can make any changes desired on the purchased copy. "A graphic designer may want to eliminate some details; change colors; or change the typeface to fit the layout for, say, an annual report or an ad," Dahl says. Editability is Map Resources' specialty. The only other way to get a digitized map is to scan it in; changing it means tediously tracing or revising line by line in an application such as PaintShop Pro or by hand on paper.

Perhaps most important for Dahl is reliability. The Web site copy is the most current—in that sense, the site is the maps, so the database has to be unailing. "We archive our maps on CDs, but if anyone, even in the office, wants the latest version, that person pulls it off the Web site," Dahl says.

The Web Site as Public Face

Reliability Reflects Well

Of course, a pretty face does matter. A Web site must be appealing, and for companies such as ASK Productions, whose principals, Ariel and Shya Kane, conduct personal growth seminars and workshops around the world, it must faithfully represent their beliefs and capabilities. “Our dream,” says Ariel Kane, “was to be able to have a site that could give people a sense of our essence.” Their site, www.ask-inc.com, offers information about the Kanes and the Instantaneous Transformation process they’ve developed, articles written by them, descriptions of courses offered, quotes from clients, and other material.

“The site not only reflects us but it also reflects *on* us,” Ariel Kane points out. “This one reflects well. If I see a site that is slipshod, I think the company behind it probably is, too.” Even if image were all, reliability is also

crucial. “We’ve heard horror stories from other companies, but we’ve never had a moment’s downtime in all the years we’ve had this site, except once for 20 minutes when TAG Online was doing an upgrade. It’s very reliable and very fast, and that’s been a gift.”

But the site is not solely an introduction to the Kanes. It’s also an e-Commerce site, where they sell books and audiotapes and register people for courses. So the nuts and bolts of database management—data concurrence, the ability to handle transactions, the ability to grow in complexity—do matter.

“As we’ve grown more sophisticated about using the Web, the site has grown more sophisticated,” Shya Kane says. “First it was all written material. Now we offer audio clips and streaming video so we can present interviews with us and offer client clips. Whenever we ask TAG

Online if they can do something for us, the answer is always ‘yes.’”

TAG Online’s customers routinely cite responsiveness and reliability as crucial traits for their Web site developer and host, so the Gideons run their own data and hosting center—partly so they can manage quality control. “We’re it. We control the process,” says Andy Gideon. And they invest in systems they themselves can rely on, such as Sybase’s ASE.

Here’s one customer’s take: Says the Opera Guild’s Dik, “The beauty of the database technology is that I don’t have to be aware of it. If you see a really great singer, you don’t know how hard that person is actually working. That’s a good parallel for the database. You want to see something that appears effortless.” ■

Janet Kreiling has written about technology and business for numerous publications over the past 20 years. Based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, she can be reached at jkreiling@ameritech.net.

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