

BENCHMARKING MARKET RESEARCH WEB SITES

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are a variety of web site design and technical issues that can be benchmarked, including: site creation, quality control, traffic monitoring, bandwidth management, and security. The focus in this review is market research web site design, specifically: the creation and assessment of web sites based on evolving best practices. The central research question is: what presently constitutes the scorecard of features for assessing market research web sites. The basis for this paper is the author's own experience developing two market research sites, as well as a complete review of web sites associated with the "top 100 companies by U.S. market research revenues" (*Advertising Age*, May 1998). Almost 90% of the top 100 firms maintain at least one web site.

Market research firms specialize in syndicated and custom work, in overall public opinion as well as niches, with various field, product, and analytic offerings; thus, the bases for web site evaluation vary. A key benchmarking guidepost in assessing a market research web site, much like other web sites, should be identification of basic relationship management principles. Central questions include: who is the site for and will the site provide enough unique material to facilitate ongoing visits?

An overall strategy needs to be created that enhances a corporate brand through appropriate: content, visual quality, and value-added service. The range of current offerings is summarized in the following sections, and then examples of how these principles were applied by the author are provided. (Refer to Figure 1 for an illustration of scorecard design issues overall.)

II. CONTENT

Content is the raw material of a web site. Market research web sites may include:

1. Welcome Statement. This can range from offering the company's mission or philosophy, to a letter from the CEO, to investment information for public companies.
2. Core Competencies. Research sites should identify their primary constituents, products and practices, and industries or niches.
3. Career and Employment Information. A corporate web site can serve as a tool for recruiting staff, and providing instructions to gather resumes online.
4. Last Update Indicator. Web sites should give visitors an indication of the content's currency by featuring a date reference.
5. Guest Book Registration. Offering a voluntary guest sign-in procedure is one way to maintain an online community. Registration may allow access to secure e-business features, such as syndicated data. Regular clients can directly log in.
6. Affiliations. In the market research industry, firms sometimes indicate affiliations with AAPOR and CASRO, among other professional associations.
7. Contact and Help Information. The names, addresses, and phone numbers of key staff should be available to users. This information can be on one page, or part of a header, footer, or sidebar.
8. Y2K and 1999 Compliance. Policies posted inform users about strategies in place to migrate from two-to four-digit year indicators, as well as procedures to handle "(19)99 codes," which can be used for both non-response and year identification.
9. Privacy Statement/Legal Issues. As the online privacy of general and explicitly confidential material is debated publicly, it has become increasingly important for research web sites to instill trust. Any use of "cookie" tracing of visitors should be stated.

III. VISUAL QUALITY

Visual criteria often drive a site's overall appeal. Relevant issues include:

1. Consistent Production. A meaningful and unique appearance throughout the site is a key identification factor. Consistency helps visitors know when they enter and leave a site, particularly if click-through promotions are being utilized. Home pages can benefit from metaphorical images that encapsulate what sites are about.
2. Ease of Navigation. A site map, index, and search function are all means to facilitate understanding and movement, as well as locating what is being sought. It is also important that the name of the web site be memorable, and that users be able to find the site through search engines.
3. Load Time. It is better to reduce the time spent waiting, than to create a web design that is too intricate to load quickly. "Splash screens" that offer dramatic visuals, but little else, may discourage repeat visitors. Use of video, sound, or animation must not detract substantially from waiting time.
4. Efficient Use of Space. The web site should remain uncluttered and make it easy for visitors to

recognize icons, read text labels, and locate key directions.

5. Icon Clarity. It is beneficial to use buttons or other graphic symbols to identify site landmarks accurately and quickly. Visitors rely on these landmarks in moving through a complex web site.
6. Internal and External Advertising. Most market research web sites do not include commercial advertising, which can distract attention and create impartiality concerns. Promotion has generally taken the form of branded links to partner sites.
7. Counters/Log Files. It is becoming less common to see ongoing counts of visitors on a web page. Monitoring logs of visitors based on a stated privacy policy can be both useful and transparent.

IV. VALUE-ADDED SERVICE

A variety of products increase the benefits both in-house staff and clients derive from regular use of a web site. This category can drive repeat visitation, increase loyalty, and build a market research web site as a brand.

1. On-line Surveys and Polls. This has become one of the most popular, and sometimes controversial, services linked with web site development. Although a few firms are hosting surveys through their home pages, most are developing additional secure web sites and partnerships for this service.
2. Continuous Recruitment, Tracking, and Access. The web offers research companies the opportunity to conduct ongoing recruitment (often with panels) and continuous tracking studies (versus quarterly waves of analysis). Clients like having the ability to enter a secure web site to view top-line results as data is collected.
3. Research Tools. Branded online data mining and analysis products are common. Other tools help users determine sample sizes, confidence levels, statistically significant differences, and the like.
4. Press Releases and News Updates. At larger market research houses, it is common to place news on the front page regularly. Smaller houses can maintain an online press release archives, which doubles as a company history file.
5. Discussion Groups. These are online communities, unstructured or moderated, built around both general and specific interests. Although many participants may desire neutral hosts, it is possible for individual firms to create discussion niches.
6. Ask a Question/Submit a Request for Proposal. The most common application of this service is through a thin HTML document that the user completes and forwards back to the research firm. These files allow participants to seek advice, as well as quotations, on specific job orders.
7. References and Links. Several market research firms are building libraries of resource information. Links can be grouped into reference

sections such as: government, social policy, demographics, etc.

8. Case Studies. Although relatively few research firms offer extended client lists, some do include discussion of work engagements in specific industries. This allows potential clients to get a feel for a given firm's project management, sampling, field, and analytic capabilities.
9. Global Applications. It is becoming increasingly valuable for research firms to demonstrate multilingual ability and global applications of solutions. Research web sites sometimes offer translations of core text, as well as key contacts or partners around the world.
10. Security. Both the real and perceived presence of secure servers and applications are paramount. Most areas of commercial market research web sites are publicly available; password protection is most common when entering client-specific areas or accessing syndicated data online.

V. APPLICATION

Figure 2 illustrates the first-generation prototype for the web site of a market research firm (SRBI). A perceptual map is used as the central visual image, with the map's quadrants holding categories of information. These categories form the header on secondary pages. The company logo, a globe, and translation links suggest world-wide reach. A brief summary of the firm and "hot news" are the key front matter. Service offerings are indicated in a footer.

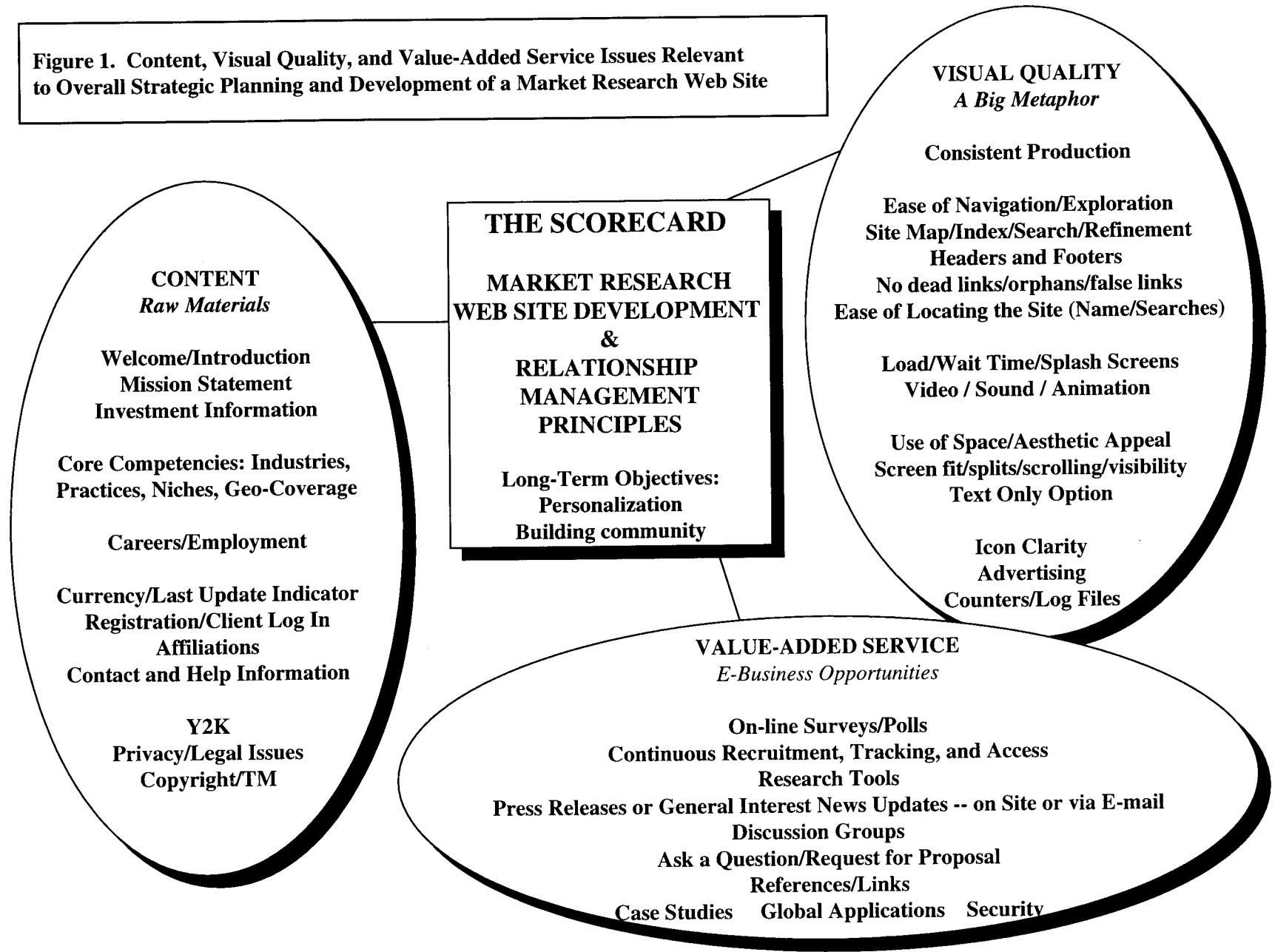
Figure 3 presents the same firm's initial online survey offering. An icon draws in participants, and information boxes highlight the current poll (with real-time reporting), introductory material, client information, discussion groups, prototypes, and news. This site was designed to look clean and simple, like an organized filing system.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper highlights key content, visual quality, and value-added service categories currently offered by U.S. market research firms. Web site design and use is a rapidly developing application in market research and it is likely to change dramatically over the next few years. Availability of increasing bandwidth and personalized custom solutions to address the rising time demands and complexity of web use will alter the situation further.

The use of online surveys and polls, and the precision of these offerings compared to other data collection methods, will also impact the direction of market research web site development. For the present, market research web site developers can utilize the scorecard summarized herein to assess their online presence.

Figure 1. Content, Visual Quality, and Value-Added Service Issues Relevant to Overall Strategic Planning and Development of a Market Research Web Site



CONTENT
Raw Materials

Welcome/Introduction
Mission Statement
Investment Information

Core Competencies: Industries,
Practices, Niches, Geo-Coverage

Careers/Employment

Currency/Last Update Indicator
Registration/Client Log In
Affiliations
Contact and Help Information

Y2K
Privacy/Legal Issues
Copyright/TM

THE SCORECARD
MARKET RESEARCH
WEB SITE DEVELOPMENT
&
RELATIONSHIP
MANAGEMENT
PRINCIPLES

Long-Term Objectives:
Personalization
Building community

VISUAL QUALITY
A Big Metaphor

Consistent Production

Ease of Navigation/Exploration
Site Map/Index/Search/Refinement
Headers and Footers
No dead links/orphans/false links
Ease of Locating the Site (Name/Searches)

Load/Wait Time/Splash Screens
Video / Sound / Animation

Use of Space/Aesthetic Appeal
Screen fit/splits/scrolling/visibility
Text Only Option

Icon Clarity
Advertising
Counters/Log Files

VALUE-ADDED SERVICE
E-Business Opportunities

On-line Surveys/Polls
Continuous Recruitment, Tracking, and Access
Research Tools
Press Releases or General Interest News Updates -- on Site or via E-mail
Discussion Groups
Ask a Question/Request for Proposal
References/Links
Case Studies Global Applications Security

Figure 2. Corporate Web Site (www.srbi.com)

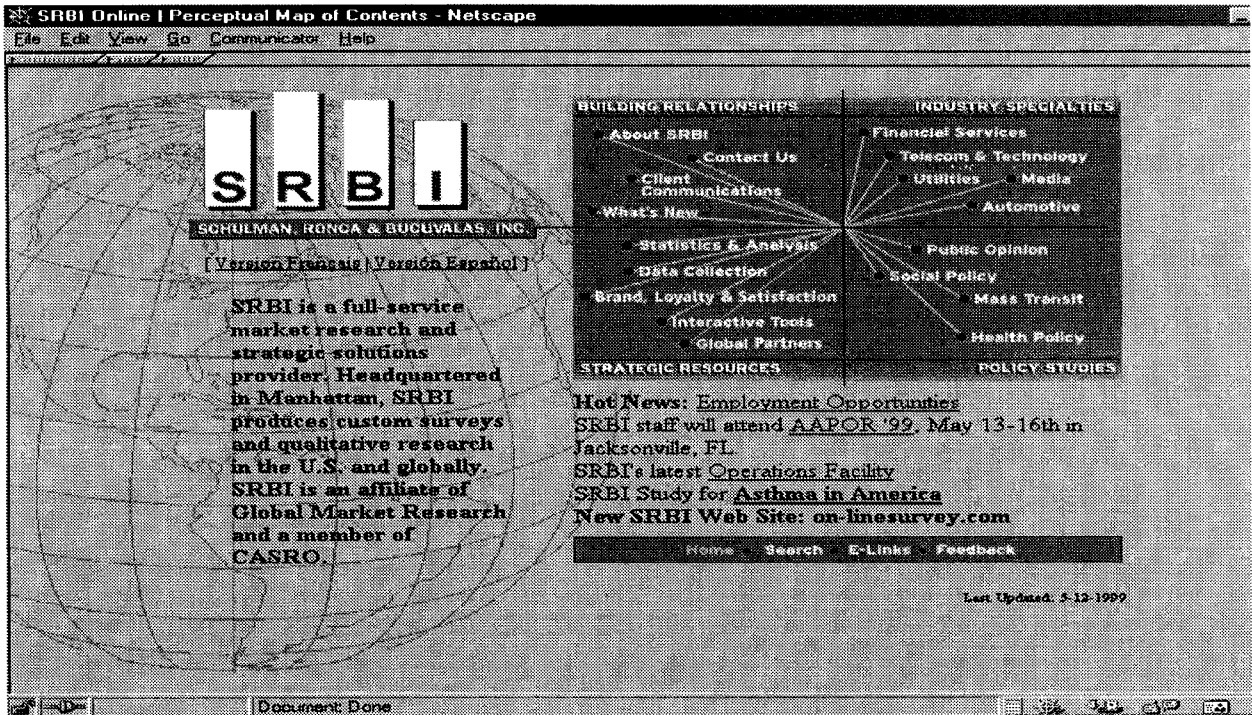


Figure 3. on-linesurvey.com Web Site

