

Applying the Five Ws to Your Online Research

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Utilizing the journalism maxim commonly known as the “Five Ws” (with an unnamed H) - Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How - is a great way to perform a pragmatic analysis of any information you find online. Websites that pass the Five Ws are usually trustworthy and credible. Here’s how to apply the Five Ws to any website:

Who: Does the website name the people or person in charge and provide their bios, with photos and an overview, as well as links to downloadable files and/or web pages of past working experiences, credentials and/or client samples? Is it easy for visitors to discover who runs the business or organization and be able to contact that person or a representative? There are many websites that don’t clearly reveal management, or these sites have a anonymous “contact-us” form that does not clearly identify who the form is actually being delivered to. This is one of the biggest credibility failures of many websites. If a website does not provide such information, it can easily be

construed that its owners might not be credible. Who criteria should also include some kind of reliable information – be it a listing of academic credentials or special certifications - that supports the notion that the people in charge have the authority to present information that is credible and trustworthy.

What: A credible and trustworthy website should describe the nature of its business in easy-to-understand terms. The other part of “what” concerns quality of content and design. Is the content well written? Is the website graphically consistent and easy to navigate through? The Internet industry term for this is “usability.” In September 2005, the man known as “the king of usability” by Internet Magazine and “the guru of web page usability” by the New York Times, Jakob Nielsen, explained the irony of the web, saying that, while the primary purpose of the web is to provide information, it is also loaded with “bad content and a lack of information people need - either because it is not provided at all or because it is written in a poor, impenetrable style.”¹ All you need is

one search engine response to a query to realize that this still holds true today.



Where: Something is definitely amiss if there are not working e-mail addresses, a real physical address of where the business is located, and working telephone numbers listed in a easy-to-find spot on a website. Is the business located in Silicon Valley, Silicon Alley (the Manhattan version) or Bath, England? Are directions provided?

When: Today, especially when it comes to information about the Internet, World Wide Web, and communications and information technology, in general, timeliness is vital, as everything changes so quickly. At the same time, we web surfers often fall into the trap of depending too much on the very latest information out there, when, in fact, there’s plenty of valid and important, but older, information available online about any given topic, dating back as far as the web will take you. The important thing is

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that anything posted on a website should have some kind of time-stamp on it, so the reader understands the currency of the information being displayed and can then discern its applicability or non applicability to the task at hand.

Why: What are the motives behind the website owner's content? Is it clearly spelled out that the purpose of the content is to sell you something? Is the cost clearly noted, or is that information buried someplace at the end of a shopping-cart function? Is the content geared toward providing information to its visitors in the spirit of sharing, or is there some other, not-so-evident, ulterior motive.

How: How was the information presented on the website discovered or created, and is it consistent with other information from other reliable sources?

Finding the Hard to Find

There are numerous websites that fail to meet some of the Five Ws but are still credible and packed with trustworthy research-based information. Many are in the academic realm,

created by educators who typically post their curriculum vitas, along with links to their scholarly writings, on very unattractive and poorly designed web pages that do not have decent metadata.

Metadata, for those who are not familiar with this word, is really not as technical as it sounds. Simply put, it is the identifying words and tags that are put inside a website's background code. Metadata is utilized by search engines to index and ultimately reveal search results when users conduct queries online. Metadata is not discernible on the web pages we see on our web browsers unless we go to the source view.

Unfortunately, not all credible and trustworthy websites have good metadata, meaning that they become rather difficult to find. So, without going into extraordinarily technical details, the basic message is that there's plenty of intelligent life on the web that is not so easy to discover through the major search engines (e.g., Google, Yahoo and Bing) because of the lack of good metadata. In a future post, we

will discuss where and how to find the hard to find online. For now, try using

the Five Ws as a guide for conducting sound research that you can cite in the information that you ultimately provide to your current and prospective customers.

Endnote

1. Business Week Online, Best of the Web "Online Extra: Jakob Nielsen on the Unwieldy Web," Business Week, September 26, 2005, www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_39/b3952418.htm

