

Rewarding web excellence: the good, the bad and the ugly

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Sunday, 04 June 2006
Last Updated Tuesday, 08 August 2006

In a Radio Five discussion on Friday morning, Mark Gillman put this question to his listeners: "Who are the true South African celebrities?" True celebrity, it was argued, should be much more than being a continuity person on television. A real star should be a three-dimensional person that exists beyond the flat plains of the electronic media, but in a world dominated by virtual experiences, the screen has unfortunately become our primary point of reference in recognising excellence.

The scramble to colonise technology's greatest contribution to multimedia, the internet, means having to make your presence known in a world where just about everyone can stake their claim.

I bet that even the most humble amongst us has looked up their name on the internet. It's quite easy to feel famous online. The mere mention of your name in a list of sporting results or quorum of a committee meeting can get your name published on the web. Actually, it's probably a good idea to look yourself up just to make sure that you haven't been associated with a drug ring or an assassination, as in the case of John Siegenthaler Sr. who was cited on Wikipedia as having a hand in JFK's untimely death. Needless to say, he was very upset. On the upside, the previously unfamous journalist is moderately famous now.

What might be even more important than checking on possibilities of mistaken identity or misrepresentation, is to make sure that the website that you appear on is well constructed, good-looking and easy to use. Being plonked on someone's ugly website without your knowledge is a grave insult.

If you are thinking of making your debut on the web, it is worth checking out the competition first. I recommend looking at some award-winning websites. The exercise will provide you with a very good idea of what works and what does not. The reason for this is that there are hundreds of website award sites and most of them have nothing whatsoever to do with awarding excellence. These will point you to the bad and the ugly.

I'll begin with the good.

A Webby is the definitive website award; the internet equivalent of an Oscar. The awards are presented by The International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences which, since 1996, has evaluated websites based on six criteria: content, structure and navigation, visual design, functionality, interactivity, and overall experience. Excellence is recognised in categories ranging from "activism" to "weird" by both the academy and the vote of the people.

I navigated some winning websites (lists of current and previous winners are available at webby.com) and was thoroughly entertained and informed.

The site that really grabbed me was The Fact Monster (www.factmonster.com), an educational website for kids but not really. I spent at least half an hour playing Hangman and taking quizzes in a friendly, interactive environment. theonion.com is a parody newspaper that comments on current events (both real and imagined). If you are planning a comic presence on the web, visit this iconoclastic masterpiece. It really is very funny.

The quest which eventually led me to the Webby Awards (there are other legitimate awards that are just as good) began with www.worldbestwebsites.com, a site that looks as if it hatched out of a particularly bad egg. Clearly, this ungrammatical blight of a website is all about making money from unsuspecting website owners who might be taken in by their hype. To display a World Best Website award (which you will no doubt receive if you apply) on your site you will "be required to make a small contribution towards network maintenance & transmission costs" (between R600 and R900 a year). A look at their previous winners will give you a good idea of what is sub-standard. © Debbie Smit – The Sunday Independent