Extreme Makeover

If your Web site has a 2001 style, it's time for a new look. Here's what five companies are doing to improve their sites.

By Tony Kontzer, InformationWeek
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Clunky search engines, cluttered home pages, a lack of helpful customer tools, apologetic messages about sites being "temporarily unavailable." Take your pick. It's been more than seven years since E-commerce emerged as a significant business strategy, yet many Web sites remain difficult to use and still don't produce the hoped-for revenue.

During the most recent recession, companies justified postponing Web-site upgrades amid shrinking tech-spending budgets. But a renewed focus on E-commerce in the past year--largely fueled by increasingly innovative companies and Web content--has increased the online competition. Many businesses are taking a critical look at their sites and deciding a complete overhaul is in order. Call it Extreme Makeover: Web-Site Edition.

Here's a look at five Web sites--Staples.com, Budget.com, Newegg.com, Delta.com, and AETV.com--and how they went about their Web-site makeovers. The state of their sites, which range from the transformed to the still in disrepair, should inject any inert E-commerce organization with a healthy combination of motivation and fear.

Staples: Bringing Life To An Order
What sets the latest Staples.com site apart from most Web-site makeovers is the customer research that went into it. Staples wants to convert its on-and-off shoppers into loyal customers and is looking to its improved Web site to strengthen those relationships.

The first step for Staples' Web-site overhaul team was to interview fleet drivers, customer-service reps, and company executives to gather information on perceived problems with Staples' E-commerce business. The office-supply retailer then embarked on a research initiative that combined usability testing in its labs with a field study it dubbed "The Life Of An Order." Staples mined its database and identified small businesses that had made online purchases within the previous six months but didn't consider Staples their primary supplier. It picked 23 of those companies for its study.

Staples created teams to focus on the usability of its Web site and sent them off to customer sites to watch people buy supplies (individuals who agreed to being studied were offered $150 stipends). Team members followed customers around their offices, watching how they accumulated information on what supplies were needed. They took pictures of supply rooms, file cabinets, and other areas where office supplies were stored, and even videotaped customers as they placed orders.

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And they tried to be on-site when Staples deliveries arrived so they could learn how orders were processed once they were received. "When you call a project 'The Life Of An Order,' it has to be pretty ambitious," director of usability Colin Hynes says.

One of Staples' key discoveries was that companies lacked a standard process for inventorying and ordering office supplies. Customers' methods often were clunky and time consuming, sometimes involving spreadsheets or typed-up lists of supplies. "They were in great need of an easy way to access previous orders and organize their purchases," Hynes says. So Staples created a feature called Easy Reorder that aggregates information on customers' previous online, phone, and fax orders, providing them with a comprehensive, pre-assembled list that's updated with each order. That helps them develop an ordering cycle based on patterns--by knowing, for example, how many reams of paper they go through in a month--and avoid the busy work of keeping track of office-supply inventories. Staples put a prominent tab for Easy Reorder on the home page of its overhauled site, and the tool is proving popular among customers, Hynes says.

The teams also found that customers hate rebates: When comparison shopping, they often opted to pay more for a competitor's product if saving money with Staples meant mailing in a rebate. The result was a feature called Easy Rebate that lets customers submit rebates online, with all supporting receipts and product codes automatically forwarded by Staples.

Studying its customers so closely also yielded some benefits for Staples unrelated to Web-site usability. In one videotaped sequence, a customer dials Staples' toll-free number to solve a problem with an order. The customer's name doesn't bring up the order, so she's asked for an order number, at which point she fumbles around her office for minutes, looking for the number. When the customer tells the Staples rep that she can't find it, she's asked for her phone number, which brings up the order right away. Staples applied two lessons from that exchange: It adjusted its call-center script to prevent customers from having to search needlessly for information they don't have, and it cleaned up its database to ensure more-accurate records.

Staples' Hynes deployed teams to study how customers made purchases to better design the site.
Photo by Mark Ostow

Budget Rent A Car: One Crash Too Many

When Cendant Corp. purchased Budget Rent A Car System Inc. in 2002, it inherited a Web site built to support 3,000 online rental-car reservations a day that was struggling to handle triple that volume. Frequent downtime was costing Cendant $2 million a year in lost reservation revenue, estimates John Peebles, VP of online marketing for Cendant Car Rental Group.

Cendant earlier this year established a single Web architecture to support both its Budget and Avis sites, as well as the company's direct connections into travel agencies. It standardized on common databases and BEA Systems Inc.'s WebLogic app servers. The car-rental sites and partner connections are collectively managed out of a data center run by IBM in Boulder, Colo.

The infrastructure improvements are paying off for Budget.com. Site crashes no longer stop customers in their tracks. The new site hasn't had any unscheduled outages since it launched in April, translating into at least $1 million in business that Peebles estimates Budget wouldn't have gotten if the site still had that problem with downtime.

But the work wasn't complete in April. In the weeks after the new Budget.com launched, inadequacies popped up with the site's search engine: Customers had difficulty finding an airport rental location if they didn't know the airport's three-letter code, and if they didn't have the correct spelling of a city or street, forget it--the site couldn't handle misspellings. That led to what Cendant says will be a huge improvement to Budget.com: deployment of natural-language search technology from InQuira Inc. that generates results based on common English

(click image for larger view)   questions rather than keywords.

But it's requiring considerable work to make the site compatible with that approach. Much of the content, Peebles says, has to be rewritten to provide answers to hypothetical questions, such as, "What time does your location at Logan International Airport close?" Still, it's impossible to anticipate every question, so Budget plans to have an employee monitor the search queries and responses and create additional questions that will be recognized by the software. The new feature is set to go live next February.

Cendant sees an opportunity for the software to help generate sales. For instance, after providing hours for the Logan location, the site might follow up with a message asking what time the customer's flight arrives and then lead her into the online-reservation process. "Search can reduce phone calls to customer service and cut costs, but our long-range goal is to drive revenue," Peebles says.

Meanwhile, Cendant anticipates that consolidating its Web infrastructure will help when it integrates Budget.com and Avis.com into a service-oriented architecture project it calls Omega, or One Merged Enterprise Global Architecture. The goal is to build services based on application tasks, making it easy for Web-site developers to sew new customer services selected from a central repository into the Budget and Avis sites, instead of developing each site separately. "We will leverage the services available in the repository and, I suspect, create new services as well," says John Turato, the car-rental group's VP of technology.

Newegg: Feeding Customers Prices
In reaching its level of E-commerce success, Newegg.com has built a reputation for aggressive price competition. The site is expected to have revenue of $1.3 billion this year, after just four years in business as an online computer retailer. But the latest site redesign brought in a level of price transparency that's daring, even for Newegg.

With the relaunch of Newegg.com earlier this year, the company took a number of steps--such as beefing up its personalization capabilities and simplifying site navigation--with the goal of capturing a larger share of customers' computer-equipment spending. It also has taken a particularly unusual step in E-retailing by introducing Really Simple Syndication feeds for customers who want to be updated constantly on pricing changes, an important feature for a site that has built a reputation for aggressive discount pricing. "Buyers for corporations can benefit from not having to browse for updated pricing," VP of marketing Howard Tong says. "On the negative side, it also makes it easier for the competition to stay on top of what we're doing. But we were willing to make that sacrifice."

Newegg delivers pricing feeds to four RSS readers: FeedDemon, NewsGator (which in May acquired Bradbury Software, maker of FeedDemon), FeedReader, and Pluck. The company hasn't measured the impact of the feeds; it doesn't know how many people have added its feed to their readers or whether the feeds are leading directly to additional sales. But Newegg has gotten dozens of E-mails from pleased customers since the feeds were introduced, Tong says.

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The biggest challenges are determining products for which it's worth setting up RSS updates (there were 46 updated feeds on a recent afternoon) and educating customers on how to use RSS, Tong says. Newegg's instructions are limited to a paragraph in a help section of the site.

Delta: Keep It Simple
Delta Air Lines hadn't refreshed its site since 2000, and that might as well be a century in Web years. With clunky navigation, poorly organized content, and too many nonessential features highlighted on the Delta.com home page, the failings of the site were having a bottom-line impact. The airline struggled to keep up with the competition in its attempts to shift bookings to the site, by far its least-costly distribution channel.

As it began the redesign process nearly two years ago, Delta's Web-site logs indicated that almost all visitors wanted to do one of the following: manage their frequent-flier accounts, make reservations, check itineraries and

print boarding passes, or check flight status. The new site, launched in July, was built with those functions in mind, removing much of the clutter by using roll-over drop-down menus that hide nonessential links behind a more general tab. Upon arriving at Delta.com, customers now find a simpler page, with clearly marked fields for performing the four basic tasks.

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And to separate itself from the other carriers, the backdrop of Delta.com's home page features a high-resolution image of an exotic locale to get those travel juices flowing. The whole package spurred JupiterResearch analyst Diane Clarkson to call it "one of the most stylish and inviting" airline Web sites she's seen.

But simply redesigning the site around those primary tasks wasn't enough. The airline wanted to make sure it would remain on top of the site's content going forward, so it made it simpler for internal business users to manage content--such as posting an airfare promotion--without getting IT involved. It's using the open-source SiteMesh Web framework to separate content from site presentation and has adopted Cascading Style Sheets, a style language that allows business users to more easily control things such as color, font, and layout by simply checking off boxes from a list of options, and lets them see how their changes affect a site before deployment. The result is a lot more autonomy for the business managers who often need to change content on the fly. "Before, we'd have had to engage our partners in Delta Technology," says Carolyn Rak, managing director of online sales and services. Content changes that used to take months now can be handled the same day, Rak says.

A&E: Tying Content To Commerce

A&E Television Networks' Web site is a work in progress. It faces a different kind of E-commerce challenge: Unlike sites designed to sell products, A&E fans come to AETV.com for content first and purchases second. Surrounded by windows promoting its newest shows, an interactive schedule tool, and other programming-related features is a small box labeled "store." Behind that unassuming piece of home-page real estate is where A&E's E-commerce efforts lie.

When visitors click that link, what jumps out at them right away--and what has the attention of A&E's E-commerce team--is that the store section appears unrelated to the rest of the site. That perception isn't too far from the truth: The store is managed by a separate group, has a completely different design, and runs on different technology (Art Technology Group Inc.'s E-commerce platform as opposed to Interwoven Inc.'s content-management software, which is used for the main site). "You should never show your organizational structure on your Web site, and we do," says So Young Park, director of E-commerce and direct marketing. "That gap is what we're trying to close."

Park's team is focusing on combining programming and E-commerce content more effectively. That means providing visitors watching clips of their favorite shows with more opportunities to buy related DVDs, which make up the lion's share of the company's online sales, and providing shoppers with links to clips from the DVDs they're considering purchasing.

The network also is looking to build self-contained "mini-stores," as Park calls them, that combine content and commerce around a specific show. The company had some success in the late 1990s doing that with syndicated programs such as The Avengers and Monty Python's Flying Circus, but it proved resource intensive

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and was put on hold. Now, Park says, the time has come to reconsider that decision. "We don't want to have resources be an excuse for not providing a good user experience," Park says

And that's where these five very different makeovers share a common goal: creating a good user experience. Because without that in today's competitive E-commerce environment, there's little chance for success.

Illustration by John Weber

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