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IBM's redesign results in a kinder, simpler Web site

By *Jim Battey* (April 19, 1999)

IBM's Web presence has traditionally been made up of a difficult-to-navigate labyrinth of disparate subsites, but a recent redesign has made it more cohesive and user-friendly. The redesign also marks a significant step in Big Blue's corporate strategy of making most of its products available for purchase through the Web.

IBM posted \$3.3 billion in online commerce sales in 1998, and the company is hoping to reach at least \$10 billion in online sales this year. To help meet this lofty goal, IBM embarked upon a major site redesign, which went live in February, with additional enhancements scheduled for the rest of the year.

Big Blue's Web presence is a sprawling collection of corporate divisions totaling more than 1 million pages. The redesign included making adjustments to more than 150,000 of these pages. According to IBM, the massive redesign effort is already paying dividends. The company says in the month after the February re-launch, traffic to the Shop IBM online store increased 120 percent, and sales went up a whopping 400 percent.

Cleaning up the mess

The best result of the relaunch is that the [IBM Web site](#) is much easier to navigate. The home page has been simplified, and the design has been cleaned up. Responding to research on how its customers use the Web, IBM now places icons linking to the site's most popular features on the top right-hand side of the page. This provides quick and easy access to key elements such as the Shop IBM store, the technical support section, and the software downloads area.

Also greatly improved is the overall cohesiveness of the site. Before the redesign, a visitor to IBM's Web site was forced to navigate through a confusing mish-mash of corporate subsites that often looked vastly different from one another. Now, the basic visuals are generally consistent from one corporate division to the next. In fact, one of the chief goals of IBM's redesign was to come across as one company on the Web, instead of a collection of separate entities.

Another enhancement to the site is the improved search function. A search bar appears on IBM's home page, front and center, and visitors are given the option of searching the entire site or a specific section. One nifty feature of the search function is that when you enter a general term such as "Java," the search engine delivers the appropriate page devoted to that topic, as opposed to a list of results that may or may not contain what you are looking for.

Big Blue goes direct

From a business standpoint, the most significant evolution of IBM's online presence in 1999 will be Big Blue's dramatic shift to selling products directly through the Web. This is important, because IBM has previously been reluctant to have a major direct sales operation online so as not to alienate its network of resellers.

But that is changing. Currently, some products can be purchased online from IBM, and others can only be bought through an online dealer. The company is expanding the product selection in the Shop IBM store to include tens of thousands of items, and it is expected to offer most of its PC systems directly through the site as early as next month.

In the meantime, the Shop IBM store has also undergone some major improvements. Prior to the redesign, trying to make a purchase was a fairly difficult and frustrating task. Now the presentation of product information is

much more elegant, and the purchasing process is much smoother.

For example, potential customers are now just one click away from a quick rundown of the various models available for a basic PC configuration. The key features of systems are listed in a readable manner, and customers have easy access to more detailed specifications. On the old IBM site, tracking down this information was a maddening chore.

For all of the positives, IBM still needs to improve the overall performance of the site. Although the new design cuts down on the number of graphics, some pages load slowly. This may be attributed to the increased traffic to the site, although IBM says it gets roughly 8 million page views worldwide per week, not a huge amount when you consider that Yahoo's global network of properties are pulling in 235 million page views per day.

In all, IBM's Web site redesign is definitely a change for the better. The new site provides a more satisfying user experience and the effort to beef up its online shopping presence has to be commended. In pulling out all the stops with its Web strategy, IBM may have found that making things simpler works wonders.

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