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Beware the virus that can wipe your small business off the map: dull writing: Being on the Net is not enough: Revise, rewrite, sell yourself

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CORRECTION: (From the National Post, Thursday, December 14, 2000) Communicare Inc.'s Web site is communicare.com. Incorrect information appeared in yesterday's Financial Post. *****

George Bernard Shaw once said "the biggest problem in communication is the illusion that has taken place." The best, or worst, modern-day examples of Shaw's truism appear on any casual Web search.

Don't believe me? Well go on the Net and glance at some Web sites, especially those created by smaller businesses. Most, it seems, aren't kept up to date and even those that are appear boring and dull. The problem is most small businesses still use their sites as talking brochures rather than a selling tool. The illusion created is that they just don't care what you, the client, think. They are just satisfied to have a Web presence.

This unfortunate breach of netiquette occurs because most people don't know how to write for the Net, according to Holly Humphrey, a consultant with Communicare Inc., which bills itself as the Canadian source of Information Mapping Inc.

A U.S. outfit which actually predates the Internet, Information Mapping was started 40 years ago to discover how people and organizations cope with large amounts of data. The company today operates in 40 countries. The company was founded by U.S. researcher Robert E. Horn, who has created theories based on a standard approach for communicating information based on learning theories, human factors, engineering and cognitive science.

In other words, his system helps us put the illusion of the Web in a format that consumers can understand, identify with and use. For more information check out their Web site at www.communicare.com.

As a Web-based entrepreneur, I immediately realized the value of being able to write for a medium that can attract nearly five million people daily.

According to the information Ms. Humphrey sent me, "the Information Mapping System allows Web authors the ability to break down complex information into its most basic elements and then present those elements optimally for readers. The result is a set of precisely defined information modules that are consistent from author to author and document to document." For small business this means money.

Information Mapping says this system decreases your draft development time by 83%. Imagine how many more billable hours you could log if you could write more clearly and efficiently. How many billable hours have we all lost writing and rewriting client information? How much time have we actually spent writing the information for our Web sites, and then not rewriting or revising our sites because we just didn't have the time?

Think about who your client is and how they read to judge for yourself whether you need to revise your site and take this course. Most prospective clients neither have the time nor the inclination to read every word. They just want to find information and use it. Does your site allow this? Or is your site encumbered by the tendency to list extraneous details? Don't feel bad, after reading about Information Mapping's course I've learned most sites, including my own, really need to be rewritten.

That, however, is the beauty of the Web. You can rewrite and revise. Often many of us have given little thought to what appears next on our readers' screens and how titles and links can help readers quickly understand and

navigate our Web sites. We usually have a tendency to write from our knowledge base rather than from the reader's more limited knowledge base.

The Web offers many valuable opportunities to small business, however, how many of these opportunities are lost due to dull writing? The Internet is a new business medium that we are still learning to use. It creates stiff competition for companies vying for clients. It also levels the playing field between large and small.

Many small business people I spoke with prior to writing this column were unclear on just how the Net levels the playing field and on why this was important. The most common statement was: "Who is going to look me up on the Net and what do they care? My clients are my neighbours, they don't need to find me on the Net." This is a self-sabotaging statement and ignores the millions of potential customers out there in cyberspace.