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**SMALL BUSINESS CONFORMITY  
WITH QUALITY WEBSITE DESIGN CRITERIA  
IN A MARKETING COMMUNICATION CONTEXT**

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**ABSTRACT**

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Aim/Purpose                       | Professional companies selling persuasive-communication services via the World Wide Web need to be exemplars of effective informing practices. Their credibility is at risk if their websites do not excel in marketing message and use of medium. Their unique brands need to be expressed through web-site technology and content, or they cannot compete successfully. |
| Background                        | Compares marketing communication consultants' websites with expert criteria.  |
| Methodology                       | Content analysis of 40 advertising agency websites.   |
| Contribution                      | Links an evaluation of advertising agency compliance with expert website criteria to established branding constructs.   |
| Findings                          | Most small advertising agencies could improve their brand reputations through better compliance with experts' recommended website design and content criteria.  |
| Recommendations for Practitioners | A hierarchy of recommendations for practitioners is offered, addressing ease and importance.  |
| Impact on Society                 | Clarity and credibility of message and medium improve our ability to practice effective informing.  |
| Future Research                   | Explore online communications of specialized populations such as digital marketing experts.   |
| Keywords                          | brand reputation, identity differentiation, message clarity, expertise and credibility  |

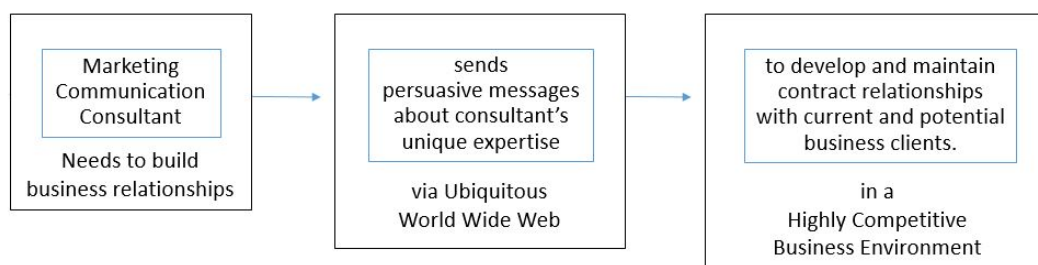
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## INTRODUCTION

Companies have long sought to inform and persuade potential customers, partners and other publics. For the past two decades much of their communication has been conducted through the virtually ubiquitous World Wide Web, where a major goal is “to create an attractive presence that meets the objectives of their businesses” (Udo & Marquis, 2002, p. 13), and those objectives include creating and reinforcing positive impressions consistent with the organization’s sought-after reputation or image (Schneider & Perry, 2000, p. 246). Some business categories focus on content relevant to their industry and might be forgiven if their websites are slightly outdated or imperfect (though we assume nearly all would benefit from an appearance of professionalism). Other types of businesses carry an extra burden to use the medium itself well or risk obscuring or contradicting their intended message. Companies that are professional communicators selling persuasive-communication services via the Internet fall into this category. Advertising agencies provide an especially relevant example for study. Because they profess to be experts at developing persuasive communications, their credibility and profitability are at risk if their websites are not exemplary in marketing message and use of medium. If the task is to provide clients with information according to a form, format and schedule that “maximize its effectiveness” (Cohen, 1999, 2009), it stands to reason that advertising agencies need to engage in effective informing practices at the technological as well as content level. At a minimum, they need to host sites that function well. Figure 1 depicts Cohen’s informing science communication model as adapted for the current study.



**Figure 1. Cohen’s informing science model adapted for this study**

Many observations have been made about persuasive messaging via a range of media. Academic and professional work has been done on the desirability and effectiveness of certain traits of informational World Wide Web sites. The literature is sparse, however, at the intersection: in the space where message creators, whose business it is (literally) to publish persuasive materials, get evaluated for crafting message environments for their own organizations from the perspective of established website-quality criteria. For marketing communication professionals representing themselves on the World Wide Web, the medium is part of the message. Website technology and function affect message credibility. Cohen (2009) calls for further research into “how informer/client characteristics impact the process and its evolution.” This paper contributes to that agenda by linking an examination of marketing communication consultants’ online presence with known branding criteria. It addresses how well these informers demonstrate to potential clients the expertise they claim to have.

Part of a larger research agenda concerning branding practices of professional communicators, this study evaluates small advertising firms’ Internet communications in three key aspects of brand-reputation building: clarity, credibility, and differentiation. While a brand is a trademarked “name, term, design, symbol” that distinguishes one seller’s services from another’s (American Marketing Association [AMA], 2016), *branding* is less tangible but arguably more important. It is a seller’s promise to create and deliver to buyers a specific set of products, features, benefits, or services consistently at a certain level of performance. It is “the road that a company must travel to define what it wants to be excellent at” (Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders & Wong, 2001, p. 188; see also Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). Branding differentiates a particular service provider from its

competitors and makes its offerings unique (Kotler, 1997; Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2010). It provides “external stakeholders with information about the identity of the organisation” (Maxwell & Knox, 2009, p. 894; see also Hulberg 2006). Argenti and Druckenmiller (2004) stated that a brand “conveys expectations of what the company will deliver in terms of... customer experience” and defined the related term, reputation, as multiple constituencies’ perceptions of a company’s performance and behavior. Brands, they explained, refer to how a corporation sees itself whereas reputation refers to what others think of the corporation.

Factors that affect brand reputation include perceptions of “the clarity, credibility, and consistency of the... brand signals” (Wilden et al., 2010, p.56; see also App, Merk, & Buttgen, 2012) and the “product or service brand portfolio” (Wilden et al., 2010, pp. 56, 68). Because accurate data are important in high-involvement decisions (McMillan, Hwang, & Lee, 2003), information seekers rely on signals such as brands to formulate quality judgments (Wilden et al., 2010, p. 59; see also Dawar & Parker, 1994 and Koku, 1995). Branding at its core is an informing process that works through transmitting multiple messages in a range of media. This study examines whether or not advertising agencies effectively use websites to convey brand signals or reputation.

### **Clarity**

“Message clarity refers to the extent to which messages are communicated without ambiguity or noise” (Chen, Shen & Chiu, 2007). Clarity reduces uncertainty and increases effectiveness of message. It strengthens the effects of messages, whether informational or relational. Clear, unequivocal, specific messages offer receivers a single, straightforward interpretation (Chen et al., 2007), which makes them more persuasive (Aaker, 2012, Gatignon & Robertson, 1991; Heil & Robertson, 1991) and can increase sales (Chen et al., 2007). Greater brand clarity leads to increased credibility (Wilden et al., 2010). This study examines whether or not advertising agencies communicate clearly via their websites.

### **Credibility**

The believability of a source is important because it lowers the risk perceived by a message receiver. Credible signals from a trustworthy source lead to expectations of higher quality and fulfilled promises (Wilden et al, 2010; see also Miles & Mangold, 2004 and Erdem & Swait, 2004). What makes messages credible? Demonstrations of capability and experience support claims of expertise: i.e., they enhance credibility. This study examines whether or not advertising agencies convincingly communicate images of expertise and trustworthiness.

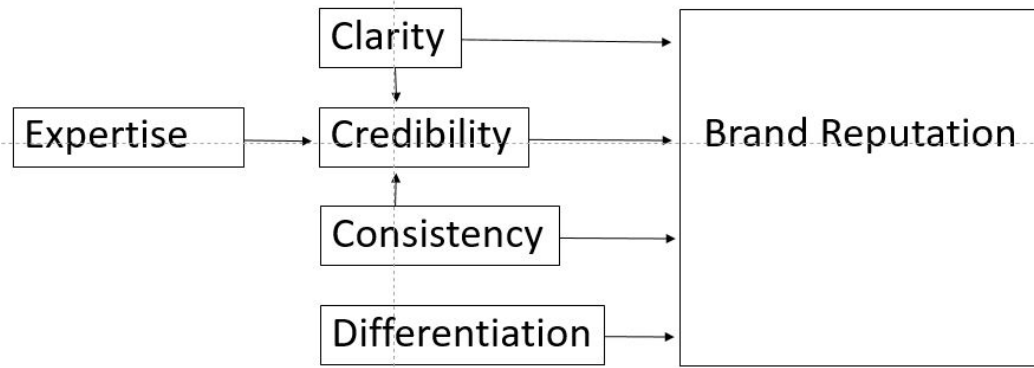
### **Consistency**

Being consistent also can lead to credibility in the eyes of stakeholders (Aaker, 2012; Hankinson, 2009). However, consistency of signals communicated by a brand may not be assessable by examination of a single information medium (e.g., webpages). Thus, we leave that concept for another study.

### **Differentiation**

“Having a brand differentiating message influenced persuasion and recall” in a 1989 study by Stewart and Koslow (in Ashley & Tuten, 2015). More specific to Internet communication, “a website with a distinct identity will appeal to web-weary surfers, differentiate the company and make the site more memorable” (Rosen & Purinton, 2004). This study examines whether or not advertising agencies effectively send distinctive brand-reputation signals to website visitors.

In summary, clarity, credibility (as evidenced by demonstrations of expertise), and differentiation (as evidenced by unique or distinct personality signals) are rated based on site visitors’ perceptions. Thus, through an analysis of publicly available media, this inquiry describes the signals some advertising agencies send about their brands. Figure 2 depicts relationships between the concepts discussed in the preceding section as described in the relevant literature.



**Figure 2. Relationships between factors affecting brand reputation**

The content analyzed came from advertising agencies' sites on the World Wide Web. Websites represent a major part of an ad agency's public communication. They are more static than social media and tend to continually express a similar message to a broad audience over time, thereby conveying a certain reputation. (Note that "agency" is used here to refer to a marketing communication consulting firm, traditionally known in the United States as an advertising company or "ad agency." It means a privately owned business that sells its consulting advice and expertise to other organizations.)

We focused on the smallest advertising agencies, those with 10 or fewer employees (C. Meyst, email messages, Jan. 29, 2016; Quesenberry, Moore, McKee, & Kilmer, 2012), for several reasons. Small companies typically do not have resources to devote to self-promotion or enough money to hire outside expertise. Their employees typically must fulfill two other roles (Beachboard & Weidman, 2013) and devote their time to projects that generate income (Burgoyne, 2005; McLellan, 2012). Paradoxically, small agencies likely have far fewer resources to devote to their own online presence, even though they need higher online visibility to compete with larger companies. To study large sites may not reveal much new information or insight, as one might expect them to do well given their greater resources. Additionally, small agencies have been underrepresented in academic and industry literature, even though they constitute the majority of U.S. agencies (Advertising Research Foundation, New York, personal communication, December, 2012; Beachboard & Weidman, 2013).

***RESEARCH QUESTION: DO SMALL ADVERTISING AGENCY WEBSITES COMPLY WITH BEST PRACTICES CRITERIA THAT CAN ENHANCE CORPORATE BRANDS?***

Do small advertising agencies, specialists in persuasive communication, demonstrate their expertise effectively and brand themselves distinctively in a competitive environment? Irrespective of company (ad agency) size, some observers think not. "What a shame that an industry that sweats over producing and sharing clever, creative and surprising work does not give the same consideration and dedication to its own marketing" (Levy, 2012, p. 20). Marketing communication includes an ad agency's website, because everything an organization does sends a signal about itself (App et al., 2012) and websites are available around the clock and around the world.

We approached this inquiry from the perspective that a major role of ad agencies is to help their clients be perceived as experts in their fields, to attract and retain customers. The context can be anything from selling packaged goods to running a political campaign or convincing children to attend college. Threats to the livelihood of ad agencies proliferate, partly because the Internet offers a world full of competitors (Ng, 2009; Swain, 2005). Ng (2009) argued that agencies need to portray themselves as expert consultants capable of guiding clients and worthy of compensation. To convince clients that professional services are worth premium prices, ad agency managers need to send signals that indicate competence, superior quality and distinction (App et al., 2012; Dawar & Parker, 1994;

Keller, 1993; Koku, 1995; Trout, 2008; Wilden et al., 2010). Keeping valuable clients and maintaining a satisfying agency-client relationship should make a company more profitable and its CEO's job easier. These considerations may be especially important for the focus of this study, those advertising agencies functioning on a small scale. First we evaluate what Udo and Marquis (2002) called fundamental "physical" characteristics. A website must demonstrate that it can publish a correctly functioning homepage before it can win the trust of clients seeking to buy sophisticated communication solutions. Entering an expensive contract for advertising services is a high-involvement decision, which makes an information-based website especially appropriate (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; McMillan et al., 2003). What constitutes an effective, "informing" website? Numerous publications have identified characteristics of effective web communication. Elements recurring in the literature are included in this study as described in the following section.

## EVALUATING WEBSITE CHARACTERISTICS RELATED TO BRANDING

Validated criteria by which to evaluate websites' essential characteristics range from website-evaluation questions published by the Search Engine Journal (Cumbrowski, 2016), Management Centre International [MCIL] criteria (2014), evaluation forms from CyberBee (McLachlan, 2002) and other professional literature (Nielsen, 1999) to U.S. Government criteria (Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997) and extend into scholarly research from the fields of computer information systems management (Davis, 1989; Udo & Marquis, 2002), computer machinery (Fang & Salvendy, 2003), electronic commerce (Schneider & Perry, 2000), and industrial marketing management (Chen et al., 2007). Criteria from these sources were considered relevant if they linked to this study's focus constructs (clarity, credibility, and distinctiveness) as they relate to branding. For example, good website navigation promotes communication clarity. Technical functions offer evidence of web designing expertise and enhance credibility, another key concept in reputation building. An intuitive URL and other forms of uniqueness are related to a distinct identity or differentiation, a significant aspect of branding. The 11 elements described, indeed prescribed, by these sources are grouped into three broad categories for ease of discussion: website navigation and functionality, connection opportunities, and identification and expertise indicators. Following that are summaries of the experts' advice in all of these areas. Logical linkage is outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Linking web criteria to research concepts**

| <b>WEB DESIGN CATEGORY</b>                       | <b>WEB EVALUATION CRITERION</b>                | <b>RELEVANT RESEARCH CONCEPT</b>                     |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Website Navigation &amp; Functionality</b>    | <b>Intuitive URL</b>                           | Identity differentiation                             |
|  | <b>Speed</b>                                   | Web designing expertise & credibility                |
|  | <b>Scrolling</b>                               | Web designing expertise & credibility                |
|  | <b>Navigation Ease &amp; Logic</b>             | Clarity; web designing expertise & credibility       |
|  | <b>Technical Functionality</b>                 | Web designing expertise & credibility                |
| <b>Connection Opportunities</b>                  | <b>Links to Portfolio</b>                      | Expertise & credibility                              |
|  | <b>Contact information</b>                     | Facilitates communication which enhances credibility |
|  | <b>Links to Other Relevant Content</b>         | Expertise & credibility; identity differentiation    |
| <b>Identification &amp; Expertise Indicators</b> | <b>About Us</b>                                | Credibility; identity differentiation                |
|  | <b>Experience, Professionalism, Uniqueness</b> | Credibility; identity differentiation                |

## ***WEBSITE NAVIGATION AND FUNCTIONALITY***

**Intuitive URL.** The site's URL is intuitive: i.e., as close to the company's name or brand as possible. Management Centre International Ltd. refers to this as *findability*. It's important because "47 percent of all website referrals come from direct navigation (the URL typed directly into the navigation bar)" (MCIL, 2014).

**Speed.** Website pages download quickly (Cumbrowski, 2016; Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997; MCIL, 2014; McLachlan, 2002; Work, 2011). Download time can make all the difference, according to a study by Nielsen (1999), which found 84% of participants complaining about slow response times. For better or worse, accessibility may outweigh quality. "What is most surprising is the threshold point where a source is considered inaccessible is very low. Similarly, somewhat disconcertingly, accessibility overrides such issues as the credibility and authoritativeness of a source" (Johnson, 2015, p. 227).

**Screenfuls/Scrolling.** Homepage appears on one screen without the need to scroll up or down – sometimes referred to as "above the fold" (MCIL, 2014).

**Navigation Ease and Logic.** Navigation is sensible (Fang & Salvendy, 2003; Morris, 1998; Udo & Marquis, 2002) and intuitive (Cumbrowski, 2016), or navigation options are distinct and spelled out (Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997). Content is organized logically (Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997), and the user can easily move around within the site (Benbunan-Fich, 2001; McLachlan, 2002; Rosen & Purinton, 2004). Ease of use leads to greater user satisfaction (Davis, 1989; Udo & Marquis, 2002).

**Technical Functionality.** Users do not have to download an application or a plug-in to enter a site (MCIL, 2014). Scripts are error-free (Cumbrowski, 2016). In short, all the parts work (Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997; McLachlan, 2002).

**Links.** Hyperlinks are all valid and active, with no dead ends or wrong destinations (Cumbrowski, 2016; Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997; MCIL, 2014; McLachlan, 2002).

## ***CONNECTION OPPORTUNITIES***

**Contact information.** Email address is readily available, and telephone contact numbers are provided (Cumbrowski, 2016; Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997; MCIL, 2014; McLachlan, 2002; Udo & Marquis, 2002). Some authorities call for including contact information for an individual or entity responsible for site content (Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997; MCIL, 2014; McLachlan, 2002) and for inclusion of an address (Cumbrowski, 2016; Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997).

**Links to Other Relevant Content.** Hyperlinks to other useful websites are provided (McLachlan, 2002). Newsletters or subscription options "encourage future or viral visitation" (Cumbrowski, 2016). The MCIL (2014) calls newsletters "attractors [that] draw individuals and business to your site." Flores (Flores, Muller, Agrebi, & Chandon, 2008) connects strong consumer relations with "members of the website email newsletter program."

## ***IDENTIFICATION AND EXPERTISE INDICATORS***

**About Us/History/Mission Statement.** The purpose of the site is clear within a few seconds (Cumbrowski, 2016). Mission and available services are described (Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997; MCIL, 2014). A history of the company is available (MCIL, 2014), or an About Us page identifies the content author (Cumbrowski, 2016). A statement from management shows "the business vision and values of the company" (MCIL, 2014).

**Expertise or Professionalism.** Content uses a professional tone (Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997). Copywriting style suits the website's purpose (Cumbrowski, 2016).

**Uniqueness.** Rich and unique qualities lend a “distinct identity” (Rosen & Purinton, 2004) and “inspire users to visit the site regularly” (Eschenfelder & Beachboard, 1997).

## METHODOLOGY

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The author adopts a pragmatic critical-realist perspective. The research is an application of informing science theory to the evaluation of branding communications of small advertising agencies through the medium of their websites. Thus, the study is less an extension of informing science theory than an instrumental application of academic theory and industry best practices intended to “inform” (i.e., report on) the state of website branding practice in a particular professional community. The work is prescriptive to the extent that small company website designers are reminded of the importance of website function and content as a branding communication medium; the study underlines the desirability of demonstrating expertise by adhering to website quality recommendations.

Advertising agencies’ publicly available company websites were deemed appropriate material to analyze because of their capacity to convey a comprehensive representation of the companies (Ohiagu, 2011). Looking at messages that advertising agencies made broadly available facilitated access to extensive digital content posted under company control. The study used content analysis on a large number of companies/websites. Multiple trained coders addressed questions about specific characteristics of the websites including the characteristics described above.

### *SELECTION OF STUDY SAMPLE*

Seeking a broad list of small advertising agencies from which to select a sample, we obtained data from TheListInc.com via the American Advertising Federation (AAF). The AAF represents nearly 40,000 advertising professionals across the United States, providing industry information and promoting development opportunities and ethical practices. TheListInc provides contact information on advertising, media and marketing companies to support business development. This source claimed to have the most thorough, complete listings of any source (L. Brock, email messages, Jan. 21, 2016). There were 1,247 agencies with 10 or fewer employees. We sorted the list by self-reported category and kept only those that had self-identified as advertising, full-service, branding, or integrated+ (marketing communication or related term). Thus, we eliminated agencies claiming to work only in public relations, design or interactive, or tightly specializing in a single industry (e.g., sports or ethnic marketing). We also removed firms that were exclusively creative shops or that referred to branding in a narrow sense such as designing logos. Because there are thousands of agencies with a wide range of specializations and staff sizes, restricting our focus to this subset increased sample homogeneity (Kerlinger, 1986). We eliminated any companies that were obviously part of a larger, umbrella organization, even if the particular office had few employees. Our rationale for this was that these seemingly small firms would have access to a large network of services through a parent organization. We also excluded firms that appeared to be one-person shops, on the grounds that they may have little time for self-promotion and likely do not compete for the same clients as slightly larger small agencies. Firms that had changed names recently or whose names bore no relationship to their Internet URL (47 cases) were not considered, on the grounds that they seemed prima facie to have branding or identity problems or an unstable history. The resulting list of 361 was sorted randomly (using a modified Excel function), and 42 agency names were drawn. This number was an artifact of a pilot study (Beachboard, 2016).

Because the sample was randomly drawn, we believe it reflects the broader universe of small U.S. advertising agencies. All companies were full-service agencies; this means they do strategic sales planning, develop visual and verbal advertising or public relations concepts, and produce and disseminate messages via a wide range of communication media. All companies served multiple clients in a range of profit- or not-for-profit industry categories. All were independent (not a branch or subsidiary of a larger organization), and none had more than 10 employees. None of the websites revealed annual billings or income figures. The companies in the sample all had intuitive URLs clearly reflect-

ing their company names. All used some type of logo or logo font to identify themselves. All homepages used both graphics and text and were several levels deep with links to other internal pages. All referred site visitors to some form of social media.

### ***CODING INSTRUMENT***

Selection of study variables was informed by the literature review. Not finding any previously published instrument, the primary researcher developed coding questions directly based on the best practices web criteria from a dozen experts as listed in Table 2. Following is a streamlined version of the questions addressed by content coders. These items all relate to Research Question concepts.

**Table 2. Coding instrument questions and types**

| <b>QUESTION</b>   | <b>TYPE</b> |
|---|-------------|
| 1. Web site loading time acceptable? (Comments?)*   | Binary      |
| 2. Number of times you must scroll or page-down to see entire homepage.   | Count       |
| 3. Does homepage tell (or link to) history, about us, mission statement, or similar background information?   | Binary      |
| 4. Phone number? (Easy/hard to find?)*  | Binary      |
| 5. Email address (Easy/hard to find?)*  | Binary      |
| 6. Type of email interface?   | Categorical |
| 7. Website logic, clarity, ease of navigation: information is logical, clear, easy to find; information is confusing or hard to find? (Comments?)*                  | Qualitative |
| 8. Did all the website's features load, display, and function correctly? (Describe technical problems or anything especially impressive.)*                          | Binary      |
| 9. Client work/portfolio: uses text descriptions of work the ad agency has done for clients.  | Binary      |
| 10. Client work/portfolio: uses graphic/photo/video examples of work ad agency has done for clients. (Comments?)*   | Binary      |
| 11. Testimonials from satisfied clients or explanations of campaign results? (Copy/paste quotes here.)*   | Binary      |
| 12. Does the ad agency homepage include links to its own content on social media sites, newsletter, blog, etc.? (Which ones?)*                                      | Binary      |
| 13. Top-level links (from home page): how many? (List them.)*   | Count       |
| 14. Do you think this ad agency demonstrates expertise or competence? (Why or why not?)*  | Qualitative |
| 15. Describe indications of unique personality.*  | Qualitative |
| 16. Does this ad agency seem trustworthy? (Why or why not?)*  | Qualitative |
| 17. If you were a company CEO, would you hire this agency to develop advertising, PR, or other communication plans or products for your company? (Why or why not?)* | Qualitative |
| 18. What is your overall impression or evaluation of this ad agency based on its website?   | Qualitative |

\* Follow-up question in parentheses allowed for open-ended input, which is reported as coder comments and descriptions.



## DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

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In addition to the primary researcher, two trained coders (advanced mass communication students) evaluated all 42 websites in the sample and recorded their assessments on the assigned criteria. They did their coding in the winter of 2016/17. Responses were maintained in a spreadsheet. Several types of data were collected, as follows. Binary questions addressed whether or not each site included contact information (Questions 4 & 5 in Table 2), third-party testimonials (Q. 11), an *about us* section (Q. 3), connection/engagement opportunities beyond email or telephone: e.g., social media (Q. 12) and client work portfolios (Q. 9 & 10). (See Table 2.)

Coders described the type of email interface category (Q. 6). They counted the number of links from each home page and recorded the name labels of the links (Q. 13). They evaluated technical functionality (e.g., did links work, photos load, and videos play properly) as a binary measure accompanied by the opportunity to describe particularly good or bad examples (Q. 8). Coders assessed website speed/loading time with comments allowed (Q. 1) as a binary measure and number of screens or scrolling required to view the entire home page (count), relying on user perceptions and conditions (Q. 2).

The remaining questions called for qualitative coder judgment and commentary on each site's use of logical and easy navigation cues as well as clarity and ease of finding information (Q. 7), expert capabilities/competence (Q. 14), trustworthiness (Q. 16), and distinct personality (Q. 15). Open-ended questions allowed coders to make qualitative observations on speed (Q. 1), professionalism of graphic elements (Q. 10), technical problems or accomplishments (Q. 8), and logic of navigation and ease of finding information (Q. 7). Coders were asked for overall impressions of each ad agency based on its website (Q. 18). They also addressed a hypothetical question on whether, if they were company CEOs, they would hire an agency and why or why not (Q. 17). This approach allowed richer descriptions of features and phenomena than reliance on quantitative measures alone.

In an earlier pilot study (Beachboard, 2016), 42 upper-division, mass communication students each examined and evaluated one advertising agency's company website without knowledge of the study's research question. They were assigned randomly selected small company URLs on which to do content analysis, addressing 11 website evaluation criteria. The resulting input validated the clarity of the questions. The only pilot-study observations included in this report are some of the student quotes, as they enrich our description of particular sites from the broader user perspective of "digital native" respondents. Quotes were not included if the primary researcher found them at odds with the formal coder consensus. Quantitative findings reported in this paper reflect only the three formal coders' input.

## STUDY FINDINGS ON THE 11 WEBSITE CRITERIA

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The following results are based on trained coder evaluations of 42 small advertising agency websites, applying the best practices criteria described in the literature review. The inquiry sought information about advertising agencies' online presence in 11 areas organized for ease of discussion into three main categories derived from the literature:

1. Website navigation and functionality
2. Connection opportunities
3. Identification and expertise indicators

### *WEBSITE NAVIGATION AND FUNCTIONALITY FINDINGS*

**Intuitive URL.** Since we eliminated from the sample any agencies whose names did not match or even seem related to their company names, this was not a distinguishing factor. As a hypothetical example, if Acme Advertising Agency had a URL like smith-and-jones.com, it was deleted from the sample.

**Speed of Homepage Download.** This question was binary, coded according to site visitors' judgments; actual download times were not measured. Coders found 12% of homepages loaded slowly enough to complain about. The percentage was higher on pages deeper in the websites. This is not appealing to today's busy web visitors, many of whom are apt to leave an inefficient website (Nielsen, 1999). The result could be devastating for a small business in a competitive service industry. Typical of the associated comments was, "The slide show was too slow. I got too impatient to watch it all the way through." Another person remarked, "Took a while to start up, but ran great after."

**Screenfuls/Scrolling.** Fewer than one-fourth (19%) of the homepages loaded their entire contents in one screenful (no page-up/scrolling required), based on coders' use of a laptop or desktop computer (not mobile viewing). Another 28% of sites were slightly larger than one screenful. The remainder of homepages filled three or more screenfuls. One coder complained that a homepage was too long, with "everything on the same page" (all initial links were internal, page links). Comparing our sample to the cited experts' standards, which are admittedly high (one-screen limit with no scrolling required), scroll-free homepage loading may not be the most important physical function, but it was the weakest. This study related compliance with best practices on screen scrolling to our research concept of web design expertise and professional judgment. Findings in this study indicate low compliance, which represents a missed opportunity to favorably impress site users.

**Navigation Ease and Logic.** Site navigation was deemed clear, logical, and easy on all sites but one. In spite of this apparently positive outcome, there were criticisms including, "The organization of the information got a little bit confusing at times" and "This website is a bit problematic to navigate. They have three links that send you to different areas of the website... the video link takes you to an entirely different website... confusing... disjointed and makes things more difficult." A positive evaluation was, "I liked that this website was easy to navigate and had enough going on to remain engaging, but not so much that it was overwhelming." This criterion relates to the research concepts of clarity and expertise, both of which lead to credibility and brand reputation (see Figure 2). Nearly all the ad agencies in the sample fared well in this regard. However, the observation on one website that "Information is easy to find, but there is not much information" would not comply with McMillan's advice (McMillan et al., 2003) that high-involvement decisions demand thoroughly informative websites.

**Technical Functionality.** There were multiple complaints about how various features performed on the websites, although 85% received coders' approval. Some of the problematic functions were:

- Misaligned elements on the page (4 instances)
- Page failed to load or it froze while loading (3 instances)
- Page elements such as portfolio photos and radio or video spots failed to load
- Error messages (2 instances)
- Plug-in required (1 instance)
- Popup blocker impeded accessibility (1 instance)

Quotes from specific coder complaints included:

- One page was missing the main graphic image.
- I like the first slide show. But the slogan is written over it, and it obscures some of the images.
- The work examples were nice, but they weren't displayed correctly. You have to be in full-screen mode or some of the wording is cut off.
- The biggest problem with this website is that the photos of their work aren't all of high quality and can appear grainy.

Good technical functioning relates to perceived expertise (Table 1). Since 15% of studied sites failed in coders' judgment and there were a dozen negative comments, some companies were harming their brand reputations in a rather basic area.

Coders also remarked on technical features they especially liked. They were pleased when videos were available on the agency sites rather than on YouTube. It seemed acceptable, though, if the videos were hosted by YouTube, as long as they were embedded "so I could watch them directly from the website and didn't have to open them up in multiple windows." Other positive comments regarding various sites included:

- "I thought it was impressive the way each tab would slowly break down as you click, like a tree."
- "The effects switching between graphics was very clean and fast. The layout was consistent and smooth."
- "The entire site is very responsive. You can click on the business logo in the upper left corner, and it takes you to their homepage from wherever you are. The icons and photographs are all clickable, which makes it easy for the viewer to navigate the page and view their portfolio."
- "I found their *about* page to be fun, and it had some impressive technology going on."

**Top-Level Links from Home Page.** More than half of the websites (53%) featured 5 or 6 links from their homepages; 80% had from 4 to 7 links. This included sites ultimately rated as strong. In all but three cases, the links appeared in a row along the top of the homepage. All homepages had at least 2 links. Only one had more than 8. The most common types of top-level links directly from the homepage included background on the company (81%), contact information (88%), and examples of previous work (57%). Handing of hyperlinks indicates professional judgment and communication clarity and efficiency. It is also evidence of web design expertise, which enhances credibility, a key factor in brand reputation.

### ***CONNECTION OPPORTUNITY FINDINGS***

**Ease of Finding Telephone Number.** Contact telephone numbers were deemed easy to find in all but one case.

**Ease of Finding Email Contact.** An email address or contact interface was deemed easy to find in all but one case. Some 18 websites featured an email tool configured as an on-page fill-in box, but 12 of those didn't show the actual address; some coders complained about this omission. Two sites provided email addresses for individual employees, and coders liked this. One appreciated that there was "contact information on every single page, which I felt offered a level of convenience that other webpages did not." Coders seemed to want more information about the companies: "I think they do have expertise and competence, but their website does not demonstrate it. After looking them up on Google... there is a significant amount of information about them that is not on their website. I am not sure why." One unique feature garnered praise: "They were the only site that had a space for comments on their work. I liked this because it gives them another avenue for feedback." Facilitating contact enhances credibility and promotes further communication, thereby increasing opportunities to build brand reputation. Findings suggest that many sites could easily improve in this area.

**Social-Media Links.** This question was developed to address the experts' recommendation of providing links to other relevant content. Some 69% of ad agencies linked to Facebook, and 64% linked to Twitter. Also popular was LinkedIn, connected to by 49%. About 31% linked to materials on YouTube. Instagram was available from 17% of the sites. Some 12% offered subscriptions to agency email or newsletters, whereas 36% offered blogs, one of which was praised for its "meaningful and heartfelt quotes." While newsletters were recommended by some experts in recent literature, it may be that blogs and other social media have taken their place. Just three sites linked to as many as

six options, and those always included Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, GooglePlus, and a blog plus one other option (either LinkedIn or Instagram). Seven sites did not link to *any* social media from their web pages. (See Table 3.) Companies that link to social media offer website visitors a chance to learn more about their distinctive brand reputations and expertise. About one-third of studied sites appeared to miss these opportunities.

**Table 3. Social Media Link Occurrences**

| <b>MEDIUM</b>                 | <b>PERCENTAGE OF WEBSITES</b> |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Facebook                      | 69%                           |
| Twitter                       | 64%                           |
| LinkedIn                      | 49%                           |
| YouTube                       | 31%                           |
| Blog                          | 36%                           |
| Google Plus                   | 18%                           |
| Instagram link                | 17%                           |
| Email/Newsletter Subscription | 12%                           |
| Tumblr                        | 2%                            |
| Pinterest                     | 8%                            |
| None                          | 17%                           |

### ***IDENTIFICATION AND EXPERTISE INDICATOR FINDINGS***

**About us, history or mission statement.** Some 93% of agencies linked to pages introducing themselves. Half of these pages were called *about* or *about us*. Others addressed (*our*) *story*, (*the*) *agency* or *who we are*. Three sites did not appear to address this area at all. No one used the term *mission* in the link label, though four used it in body copy. In the text of their introductory statements, 10 agencies used the word *story* or *history* to discuss themselves; six referred to their *philosophy*, and two to *vision*. One company featured the triple-slam of *history*, *mission* and *philosophy*, while mentioning its own name three times in 186 words. These paragraphs of text afford great opportunities to express unique brand personalities and to address areas of particular expertise (see Table 2), but several sites neglected to introduce and distinguish themselves.

**Expertise, professionalism, or uniqueness.** Questions relating to these areas sought indications of superiority compared to competitors: claims or demonstrations that would bolster trust. They discussed *capabilities* or *what we do* (17%) or *services* offered (38%). In links from homepages, 67% of agencies referred visitors to a page with actual examples from their client work or portfolios. Top client categories served were restaurants/tourism/travel (50% of agencies in the sample); banking/financial/insurance (36%); health (36%); food (31%); and technology (26%); followed by automobile, construction, hospitality, and legal (each at 19%). Some 14 cases used this space to emphasize that they were full-service agencies. Two sites did not list any specialties, and several others were vague. For example, one website had a banner claiming “extraordinary expertise” but not identifying a specialization anywhere on the site. Another mentioned no particular area of emphasis but promised, “Yes, we do that. All projects, great and small.” Quality criteria relating to credibility (expertise) and brand uniqueness that were most often missing were client testimony, indication of awards, and links to third-party news about the ad agencies. Such omissions could lead visitors to assume that the companies have done nothing exemplary.

## ***FINDINGS OVERVIEW***

Websites were scored on quantitative measures and also assessed on qualitative perspectives indicated by coder evaluations and comments. A quantitative overview of the presence of key website factors is represented in Table 4. There was no criterion on which all 42 sites were compliant. The weakest area was scroll-free homepage loading, at just 19%.

There were a couple of notable patterns of co-occurring characteristics. For example, sites that scored 10 out of a possible 11 points on the quantitative questions were, by definition, missing one criterion, and this was either a third-party news link (2 cases) or mention of awards (1 case). Sites scoring 8, and thus missing the mark on three counts, were absent news links and awards information and also missing either testimonials or failing on a functional or navigational area. Among advertising agencies claiming to have done award-winning work, most also showed client work graphically, and the correlation was especially strong for those who actually named specific awards they had won. This makes sense because they had credentials they were proud to highlight.

**Table 4. Overview of web criteria occurrences**

| <b>WEBSITE CRITERION</b>     | <b>OCCURRENCES</b> |
|------------------------------|--------------------|
| Email address (or form)      | 100%               |
| Phone presence               | 98%                |
| Logical navigation           | 98%                |
| About us (or similar)        | 93%                |
| Quick download               | 88%                |
| Social media links           | 84%                |
| Functioning flawless         | 74%                |
| Client work/portfolio        | 67%                |
| Scroll-free homepage         | 19%                |
| Number of homepage links     | Average of 5 or 6  |
| Number of social media links | Average of 3       |

The combination of quantitative scores and qualitative observations led us to identify some websites as better or stronger – that is, more compliant with best practices – and others as particularly weak. Comparing quantitative with qualitative results, one site scored 9 of 11 possible points on the quantitative questions and garnered 6 positive comments, while another “9” had no favorable comments and 3 negative ones. Several of the high quantitative scorers were knocked out of the winners’ circle by negative comments in the qualitative evaluations. Only three of the sites scoring 9 or 10 could be considered strong when qualitative analysis was considered.

Websites that were lowest on the quantitative measures, scoring just 5 out of 11, never had more than 2 favorable comments and never got more favorable than negative remarks. The site with the most negative critiques (5) represents a weak example of an advertising agency website. Interestingly, 19 sites netted more positive than negative comments, while just 13 got more complaints than compliments. (See Table 5 for examples at both extremes.)

Sites that scored lowest (5 points) on the quantitative criteria were missing testimonials, awards, and news as well as, in most cases, client work and adequate technical functioning. A “5” quantitative site may have had some positive remarks such as “neat” or “organized,” but this wasn’t enough to make it seem strong overall. The weakest website scored just 5 on quantitative criteria and failed on qualitative feedback as well, with no positive comments and 2 negative comments.

Winning awards correlated with above-average quantitative scores, although just one award winner earned 10 points from our coders. Two sites naming specific awards had poor navigational logic or bad technical functioning, an unsettling contradiction.

Homepages that seemed strong overall typically offered four to six social media connections. Most of the more-impressive sites hosted blogs, a vehicle relevant to expressing unique personality and increasing credibility. These factors are key to building client relationships and a strong reputation. The number of internal links did not correlate with other quality compliance factors. Evaluators wanted email addresses to be more readily available and they favored the three sites that went so far as to provide email addresses for individual employees.

**Table 5. Examples of quantitative versus qualitative feedback**

| <b>QUANTITATIVE<br/>POINTS<br/>(11 POSSIBLE)</b> | <b>FAVORABLE<br/>COMMENTS</b> | <b>NEGATIVE<br/>COMMENTS</b> |
|--|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Strongest websites</b>                        |                               |                              |
| 10   | 3                             | 1                            |
| 10   | 3                             | 1                            |
| 10   | 1                             | 3                            |
| 9  | 6                             | 0                            |
| 9  | 0                             | 2                            |
| 9  | 0                             | 3                            |
| 9  | 1                             | 5                            |
| <b>Weakest websites</b>                          |                               |                              |
| 5  | 2                             | 2                            |
| 5  | 1                             | 1                            |
| 5  | 0                             | 0                            |
| 5  | 0                             | 1                            |
| 5  | 0                             | 2                            |

## **DISCUSSION OF THE THREE KEY RESEARCH CONCEPTS**

This section offers examples and descriptions of strengths and weaknesses found in the sampled websites. No advertising agency site had everything the experts recommended; in fact, a few websites were notably lacking on multiple evaluation criteria. Other websites were quite impressive. Positive coder evaluations referred to sites as organized, consistent, capable, professional-looking, sleek, or neat and clean. One particularly complimentary remark was, “I’d love for them to create a campaign for my product,” and for another agency came this especially relevant comment, “If their final product reflected the quality of their website, I’d be happy.” The following descriptions of some of the strongest and weakest features will give readers a picture of what some of the websites did that made them notable while exemplifying the focus constructs of this study: clarity, credibility and distinctiveness.

### ***WEBSITES EXEMPLIFYING CLARITY***

Several websites in the sample were exemplars of communication clarity. One of these had six sophisticated but clear links that pulled down to reveal logical sub-menus on mouse-over. The site included a map to the advertising agency’s physical address on the contact page. Coders called the site simple, clean, neat, and professional-looking. On another well received site, the contact page had a fill-in submission box as well as listing the email address, a convenient feature that coders considered a plus.

In contrast to these success stories, some of the negatively evaluated sites elicited derogatory adjectives including: clumsy, confusing, frustrating, haphazard, cluttered, and mediocre. These comments

betray a lack of clarity. Navigation instructions like “please click on the thumbnails below to view samples of our work” may seem quaint but did avoid ambiguity.

### ***WEBSITES EXEMPLIFYING CREDIBILITY OR EXPERTISE***

Multiple coding factors addressed the concept of believability and capability, traits essential to persuasive communication. (See Table 1.) Coders liked sites that were quick, smooth-functioning, and well organized and singled out one with “lots of informative pages but none too text-heavy.” They were impressed by attractive graphics that represented client work. One observer remarked on sample ads that were “well produced.” Evidence of experience supports credibility, and coders found some sites with as many as 10 examples of prior client work including three or four videos. One-third of the websites displayed some of their work on YouTube. Other impressive web pages boasted national awards and testimonials from clients. One home page even had a search function.

Unfortunately, there were problems as well. For example, a return-home link from a graphics page consistently loaded garbled html code instead of the actual home page. In one case, some text was a bit small or run across long lines, inhibiting legibility. One homepage was eight screenfuls deep and loaded slowly. Its graphics were blurry, and a coder complained about “too many mistakes.” Criticisms mentioned “glitches” or said an agency had not represented itself well via its website execution even if it boasted a long list of clients or showed good portfolio work. These functional failures caused coders to question a company’s claims of expertise. Particularly disappointing to a professional agency would be the term “amateur,” earned by two sites in the sample.

More difficult to assess were websites had many nice features including pop-up pictures, pull-down menus, and video examples of client work, but that coders felt loaded too slowly. This condition reflects a judgment that web communications may often face: fancy versus fast. Sometimes everything works but the gestalt is somehow lacking. One observer stated, “I am missing the ‘wow’ factor” and another was “underwhelmed.”

### ***WEBSITES EXEMPLIFYING DISTINCTIVE PERSONALITY***

Most websites had links to Facebook and Twitter, and about one-third of them offered blogs. A few offered subscriptions to emailings or newsletters. Coders liked a company whose staff members could be reached via conventional email or through an online contact form. All of these vehicles give advertising agencies added opportunities to connect with their publics and to convey distinctive personality traits. Some ad agencies had graphic logos that represented the concepts behind their names. All but two used specialized logotype to express their company name. These traditional brand elements “help specify the identity and personality of an organization” offer information about services offered and appeal to their target publics (Adir, Adir, & Pascu, 2012).

Some of the more-unusual homepage links were blog, service, testimonials, our capabilities, and project gallery. One company’s *about us* page addressed company “philosophy.” These labels showed some distinctiveness without hindering clarity. The “service” link let visitors see right up front that the company did pro bono work, an activity that increases company visibility, improves client relationships and generates business (Lardent, 2000, pp. 6-7). One website in our sample had a record eight top-level links but no testimonials or social media.

In summary, no website in this study was flawless. Overall, thorough but simple sites fared best. While site visitors may praise embedded videos and sophisticated motion graphics, we would note that special effects dazzle, but failed ones fizzle. It may be tempting to go for the “wow” one coder mentioned – this may even be necessary for an agency claiming to develop great online advertising – but it’s safer to present something modest that consistently works.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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Most of the advertising agency websites exhibited some of the expert recommendations for internet presence, but none of them did everything proposed. This study revealed deficiencies in website design and function that affected visitor perceptions of competence or expertise and thus credibility, as predicted by the literature. Many agencies could have presented their success stories more convincingly than they did. Agencies missed opportunities to validate their credentials, build relationships, and brand themselves distinctively. Clarity of communication was sometimes lacking. In other words, there seemed to be room for small advertising agencies to improve their online presence and thereby enhance the effectiveness of their websites, which are a mainstay of online communication and an important reflection of brand reputation.

Making a competent first impression quickly and clearly should be a top priority. Probably the most important areas to address, judging by coders' impressions of the sampled websites, would be:

- Technical functioning (no broken links, error messages or site crashes)
- Error-free typography (no typos and no misplaced text boxes)
- Speed
- Accessibility of all content (similar appearance across various platforms and no plug-ins required)
- Portfolio of client work
- Introducing the ad agency itself

These features were stumbling blocks for many websites. Improvements in these areas, therefore, should greatly enhance the landscape and more favorably impress visitors.

Importance of a criterion does not necessarily equate to ease of compliance, of course, so we now suggest an order of priority for refining the less-than-perfect ad agency website. A modicum of familiarity with web editing would suggest that physical elements would be the easiest characteristics to perfect: email address, phone number, scrolling, viability of links, proofreading, and *about us* statements. This would constitute the low-hanging fruit to be gathered first. In our sample, everyone included some form of email contact and all but one had a phone number. However, fewer than 20% managed a scroll-free homepage, and only 93% had "about us." Introducing one's own staff shouldn't be too difficult, though the information must be kept current.

The next rung to address would yield improvements in navigation logic, speed, technical functioning of sophisticated graphic effects, and client work examples. Navigation logic was acceptable on 98% of sites, whereas speed was satisfactory on 88%, and technical functioning passed on just 74% of sites. Only 67% showed examples of their own work (see Table 4). Blogs were hosted by just over a third of our sample (see Table 3). It should be possible to reduce graphic sizes so pages load quickly, and to show a portfolio, some of it on the highly popular YouTube. Posting static work on social media should be feasible, whereas fancier techniques may require additional resources or outside expertise. Maintaining a high-quality blog would require a great deal of knowledge, commitment, and, probably, personality.

Hardest to address would be awards and third-party news because these are earned acknowledgements outside direct control of the agencies. However, if such recognition has been accorded, it should be easy to post the information on one's own site. Client testimony also should be attainable with a modicum of gentle pressure. Compliance figures suggest difficulty in achieving at this level, however: just 27% of sites mentioned awards, 29% featured testimonials, and 24% had links to third-party news. Investment at this higher level should be worthwhile, though, for its ability to increase credibility and inspire client trust.

Companies should note that when visitors were asked whether they would hypothetically consider hiring a particular firm, they were quick to note discrepancies between client work portfolios and the



actual ad agency website: “Yes, if I saw the final products only. If I just went off the website, no.” Underscoring the importance of demonstrating expertise were comments like these: “Their presentation makes me question their ability” and “They had a lot of mistakes in the website. I’d be worried that those might transfer over to their [client] work.” It may be unfortunate, but visitors tend to form their “trust perceptions... based on interface design features” (Skarlatidou, Cheng & Hakley, 2013, p. 1672). Owners therefore need to test and retest their sites on a range of user platforms. Marketing communication consultants must communicate professionally on the World Wide Web and display mastery of the medium. To fail at this is to fail to perform effective informing practices.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

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This study adopted a pragmatic, critical realist perspective. Its aims were largely informative and instrumental: to provide practitioners and researchers a rigorous description of website design practices of small advertising agencies in the USA. The selection of the sampling frame was intentionally limited to a particular class of company communication medium. Thus, the findings reported here should not be extended beyond the targeted class of websites reviewed. As an informing exercise, it might be useful to extend this study to other categories of commercial websites with branding intentions or reputational aspirations. It may be possible to adapt the approach to evaluate the effectiveness of other “informing” websites: e.g., healthcare information sites.

With respect to methodology, while all coders used desktop or laptop computers (as opposed to mobile devices), they did not all use the same web browser. Employing different platforms could have affected functioning of some website features and result in negative evaluations of some functions. However, our position is that a professional marketing communication agency should test and maintain its primary website for compatibility with all common platforms. The reader must understand that on issues such as loading times, factors other than the website design potentially influence website performance. If one’s interests are more technical in nature, it might be useful to do multiple reviews of a smaller number of websites to ascertain performance variation over time, or include other technical measures to control for delays that might result from Internet performance or even performance issues of the client device.

Future research connected with the current project is planned to include further exploration of advertising agency branding. Having documented some of the effects of physical website functioning and compliance with recommended website content, we hope to analyze the meaning of advertising agency websites’ content and how it relates to branding.

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