



Pest Control on the World Wide Web

Become the spider, not the fly, in this vast, often confusing information and communication center.

BY DR. GEORGE ROTRAMEL

Despite all the hype, the World Wide Web and the Internet aren't really new. The Internet system goes back to the 1960s, when it was set up as a military communications safety net in the event of nuclear war. As the Cold War faded, the net became a UNIX-language, text-based system that also linked many high-tech non-defense organizations to each other around the world. However, it took a computer "tekkie" to use it.

The World Wide Web came to life in the mid-1980s, when Tim Berner Lee invented a graphical interface that let a person use the Internet without knowing all the complex text commands. Now anybody with a computer, a modem, a phone and \$20 can trade information with another Web user anywhere in the world.

There is no way to measure the size of the Web or the size of the Internet. Network Wizards of Menlo Park, Calif., searches the Web for sites twice a year. They measured 16 million registered hosts last January, compared to less than 1.5 million hosts when the first survey was done in January 1993. The number of newsgroups and bulletin boards is also huge, with more than 20,000 currently and expanding every day.

The Pest Control Web

How much of the Web is devoted to pest control? Once again, nobody can tell for sure. The pest control Web is growing faster than you can crawl it, but you can tell that there is a lot of information out there. A general query in pest control can produce millions of "hits." A specific query for info on a narrow topic, like termite baits,

will produce 38,000 hits or more. A search for comments on pest control topics on bulletin boards and in newsgroups produced more than 700 responses.

So, there is a lot going on with pest control on the Web. Want to know which pest control companies are on the superhighway? None. Because there is no superhighway of any sort. So far, we have built a big, amorphous splash of "information asphalt," an "information flea market" where people can walk around wherever and whenever they like.

This "virtual flea market" is different from the real ones you've seen in the past, because right next to a booth selling dented hubcaps and old milk bottles, you'll find a state-of-the-art, portable department store worthy of New York City's Fifth Avenue or the most prestigious mall in the country. This hodgepodge of trash and treasure stretches as far as the eye can see. If you can't stand real trash, stay away from real flea markets. If you can't stand information trash, however, you still can't afford to stay off the Web. If you own a pest control company, you may choose not to waste much, if any, of your time on the Web. Like it or not, though, you need a booth at the flea market.

Why You Need a Web Site—A Web site has become a badge of technical competence in pest control. Some of your customers will want to visit your site and learn about your company before they hire you. Even more of them will look for a Web address in your Yellow Pages ad and in your promotional materials.

These people may not have a computer or know anything about Web sites, but if you don't have a site, they may think you are not as competent as those of your competitors that have one are. Sophisticated cus-

tomers expect you to have a Web site, even if they never use it.

How Customers Use Web Sites—Now let's talk about customers who do look at sites on the Web. What are they going to find when they go to the flea market? Chances are, they don't want to wander around the aisles. Most won't make the trip unless they have the exact address that takes them directly to the site they want to find.

If they don't have a starting address, they'll run into crude, single-page ads that are basically on-line Yellow Pages. They'll also find beautifully organized and illustrated presentations from major companies, however. A customer can spend a half hour or more at one of these big sites, just learning about their pest problem and what can be done about it. Of course, they will also learn how to send in an e-mail message to get a free inspection and how to fill out a survey form that "lets us know more about our customers."

A Good Web Site

Some of big flashy Web sites that customers will run into are very poorly done. A lot of money has been spent on Web sites that are peppered with misspelled words, filled with graphics that take too long to paint on the screen and are just plain boring. If I punch out of a Web site because I don't want to wait for another irrelevant bug graphic to come up, how long will a person who just wants to find out about termite jobs stick around? Don't think about

what your Web page looks like, instead, think about how long it takes to paint on the screen.

If you have news or other information on your site that can get stale, make sure you keep it updated. You aren't sending your customers a high-tech, high competence message if your site is still publishing "news" dated from early 1996.

An effective Web site doesn't have to be big or complex.

Big, complex sites are great if you can afford them, just like big Yellow Pages ads, fancy brochures and sales videos are great if you can afford them.

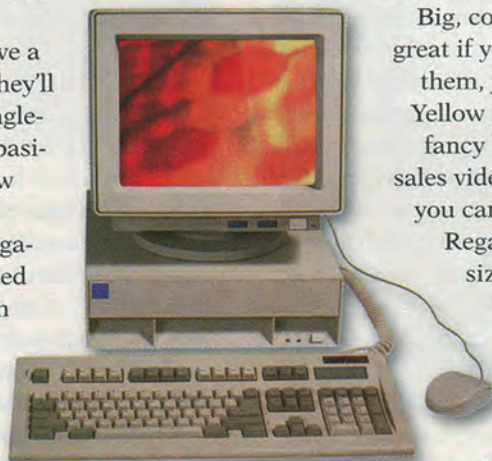
Regardless of its size, the goal of the Web site is to show customers the kind of company you are and to get them to call

you. The key is a Web site design that communicates what you want to say, and does it in a hurry. If you have to, you can put your key message and make a special offer on just one page.

If you put your Web address in your print advertising and literature, people can use this information to contact you directly on the Internet, no matter where they live. If you also want people who don't have your Web address to be able to find your Web site, you will have to pay attention to the search engines and modem ratios available from your service provider.

To be reached by people who don't have your address, your site needs to be searchable by the engines that operate in your sales

continued on next page



World Wide Web

from previous page

area. Being accessible via small, local service providers may be as important as being listed on a larger service that reaches all around the world. Beware of companies that offer to list you on large numbers of search engines at a very low price. The low price may mean that it is almost impossible to find you on these systems. It can also mean that if customers can find you on the system, only limited information like your company name and phone number will be available.

Another way to help people find your site without starting with your address, is to connect your Web site via a "hot link" to a more general site that deals with pest control. Links can work both ways, however. The hot link from the general site can bring you more visitors, but these people are also going to be able to visit all the other sites from your competitors that were also connected to the general site. A two-way link will let the customers who got your Web address from your advertising "wander off" to look at your competitors' sites via hot link.

A "hit counter" is another accessory that you may or may not want. If you put a hit counter on your site, the number of hits may impress your visitors, but if a customer is going to be impressed by the number of hits, he will either find a bigger number on somebody else's site, or suspect that the number of unlisted visits to a site operated by one of the major companies will dwarf whatever number is listed on yours.

Browsing the Web

So much for your Web site. Now let's look at getting information off the Internet instead of putting it on the Web for others to use. We're going back to the flea market, but this time we'll be visitors.

Some of the most useful information you can find on the Web

involves your competitors. You can check out the sites of your local competitors for ideas and see what they are promoting. You can look at the sites of innovative companies across the country and around the world for ideas on site design and how to promote your business.

You can also get reams of technical information on products and pests off the Web. Nearly all of the manufacturers and distributors have Web sites, and several of these are a pleasure in which to wander around. You can see actual data on their products, request literature and leave e-mail questions for their sales and technical people. Many pest control associations and federal and state agencies also have sites with good information on pests, issues and regulations. Don't just browse your own state association and agencies, but check out a few others as well.

Cookies and Your Privacy—If privacy is important to you, here's something else to consider before visiting other people's Web sites. Most of the larger, better sites are set up to learn about you when you visit them and then dump this information into a data base that can be sold, traded or used for some other purpose. The files that allow this to happen are called "cookies." So, if you don't want to provide free info while you are browsing the Web, make sure your cookies files are disabled.

Pest Web from Van Waters & Rogers (VW&R)—Currently, the most important "central site" for pest control on the Internet is the Pest Web site run by VW&R, with support from several of the basic suppliers. The site gives you access to technical information and hot links to the sites of manufacturers, regulators and research groups that can save a lot of time.



Dr. George Rotramel

What's Ahead

Finally, let's get a look at just two changes the Internet and the Web are going to make to pest control in the relatively near future. Both make more information available more easily to more people. The companies that succeed will be the ones with systems

that deliver the most information that their customers want.

The first area is customer service. The Internet will allow menu-driven systems to become an essential part of customer service at all levels of the business. One good thing about all these computer-based systems will be that you won't be seeing a wide range of options on your screen at one time. You won't have to wait for a recorded voice to recite 13 alternatives before you get the option you need.

In-service training is another area that the Internet and the Web are sure to change. The Web sites of several large applicator and supplier companies already have what amount to on-line tutorials in pest biology and control. VW&R has just started an on-line training program for their customers via Pest Web.

Competition to furnish good menu-driven, on-line training materials should really benefit pest control operators (PCOs), especially small companies and companies in out-of-the-way locations. If regulators will give recertification credits for on-line training, we may soon have more time at association meetings and industry seminars to discuss more advanced topics and current research. **PC**

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Pest Control Products

InterNet Inc. introduces a heavier, stronger polypropylene netting to its line of structural pest control products. With significantly greater tensile strength and a one-inch-by-three-quarters-inch hole opening (the most open of InterNet's standard birdnet products), the new product is suited for the more demanding application requirements that pest control operators (PCOs) face. Now PCOs can select from light-, medium- or heavy-duty InterNet plastic netting for structural pest control installations. In addition to this expanded standard product of-



fering, InterNet Inc. has a wide range of long-lasting plastic netting with various weights and plastic configurations to meet almost any bird exclusion need.

For more information, call 800/328-8456.

Circle #181

FMC Corp. now offers the Talstar Lawn and Tree Flowable Insecticide in a pint sized squeeze container. Talstar, which controls small bugs, ants, ticks, crickets



and mites, is a water based formula that leaves no odor when applied.

For more information, call 609/951-3075.

Circle #182

Noble Pine Products Co. has announced the release of its new Steri-Fab video, *Can Your Product Do All This?* The video is available in a standard VHS format that is a single copy of approximately five minutes, and in a looped version, which consists of 12 copies on a single, 60-minute tape. The

many applications and benefits that the Steri-Fab product offers are examined in detail through the course of the tape.

For more information, call 800/359-4913.

Circle #183

Loveland Industries offers three new products marketed under Prozap brand pesticides. Approved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Prozap Insect



Guard, Moth Guard and Insect Guard Jr. are sized for specific use areas and are labeled for control of both flying and crawl-

continued on next page

Spotlight On: insect growth regulator

Archer IGR Receives California Registration

ZENECA's Archer insect growth regulator (IGR) is now registered in California. The juvenile hormone mimic acts primarily on the embryonic, larval and nymphal development of cockroaches and fleas. The product is photostable and virtually non-volatile, which allows it to stay where it's applied, while providing long residual activity against insect pests. Archer is considered low risk to mammals and other non-target organisms, including fish.

For more information, call 888/617-7690.

Circle #180

