Web Design and Marketing Solutions for Business Websites

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ISBN-13 (pbk): 978-1-59059-839-9

ISBN-10 (pbk): 1-59059-839-3

Printed and bound in the United States of America 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Distributed to the book trade worldwide by Springer-Verlag New York, Inc., 233 Spring Street, 6th Floor, New York, NY 10013. Phone 1-800-SPRINGER, fax 201-348-4505, e-mail orders-ny@springer-sbm.com, or visit www.springeronline.com.

For information on translations, please contact Apress directly at 2855 Telegraph Avenue, Suite 600, Berkeley, CA 94705. Phone 510-549-5930, fax 510-549-5939, e-mail info@apress.com, or visit www.apress.com.

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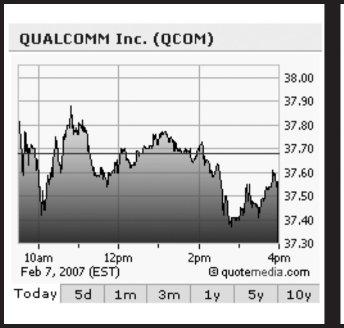
6 THE ABOUT SECTION



Every business has a story. It might take only 15 seconds to tell ("I quit my job at Kinko's to start a new business fixing large businesses' copiers"), or it might comprise epic sagas involving industry pioneers, hair-brained inventors, stock market fluctuations, and mergers and acquisitions. Whatever the case, every company wants to tell their story—it offers a common rallying point for employees and company leaders, and the historic foundation provides context to the current incarnation of the business. It's always nice to see "where we came from."

The About section of a corporate website offers an avenue for businesses to tell their tale. In fact, the section can and should be used for far more than a history lesson—it is the perfect platform for educating the visitor on all aspects of the company itself, from listing current job openings to profiling the board of directors, and from broadcasting the latest corporate news to offering comprehensive contact information. The bulk of any company website should be focused on marketing products and services and driving relationships with customers, but most people seeking to do business with you are going to do their homework and read your About pages so they can understand the philosophy and personality of the business they are about to give their money to. Because of this, maintaining a strong, accurate statement about your company is important. This is where public relations intersects with marketing.

These days, almost all websites have at least one page about the company. Even e-commerce domains contain a small About Us link with some fundamental information about the vendor. Some businesses that cannot feasibly sell their product online and require human interaction to conduct a transaction (like a law firm or enterprise-level software purchase) rely heavily on the About section to help build their case as a reputable company. In these instances, profiling corporate principals, well-known customers, previous successes, and more can heavily influence whether a person browsing your site for information makes that critical step toward contacting you.

This chapter is going to explore the About section in depth. We'll discuss the architecture of the pages, suggested terminology, and content that will benefit your business and your customers.

All about the About pages

The About section is all about your company. Any content related to the organization itself should be relegated to this corner of the site. The phrase "about page" is a common piece of terminology among developers, designers, and most clients, but it is a little misleading—most of the time, the material sprawls across several individual web pages to comprise a greater About section.

Linking to the About material

Years of development and the generation of millions of corporate websites have distilled the actual link name into three common options:

- About
- About Us
- About [*company name*]

The differences are subtle, but the nomenclature should reflect the rest of the site. For instance, if most links are phrased with single words ("services," "products," "contact," etc.), then the first choice makes the most sense. The second two add a bit more information about where the user is clicking, but differ in their point of view. "About Us" is written in second-person point of view (writing from an "us and you" perspective, like this book); "About XYZ" is third person. Again, this should mirror whatever point-of-view style is employed on the rest of the site.

Deviating from this established language runs the same risks as breaking any best practice or usability recommendation. If it's done, it needs to be done well, and needs to clearly communicate its function to users. The reality is that people look for the word *about*. It may not be the best word for the job, and certainly falls painfully short in literary elegance, but zillions of sites have thrown those five letters into their menus and the greater web populace has grown comfortable with the term. Unless you have a clearer, easier phrase, stick to what people know.

Placement of the link should reflect the weight it's given on the overall site. For instance, if your primary focus is driving customers to your sale pages where widgets are marked down 50 percent, you're probably not as interested in creating a long-lasting customer experience as making a sale to clear inventory. However, if your business relies on the influence and credibility of its leaders (for instance, a well-connected politician, or a highly respected engineer), or likes to parade past client success, then prominently displaying the link is critical to the marketing success of the site.

Depending on the menu structure, these links may appear in different places. For the first example, relegating the link to the footer makes sense; for the second example, keeping it in the primary navigation will give it maximum visibility. Always keep in mind the marketing angle you want to take with visitors. The About section either needs to get out of the way of more important messaging, or needs to play a lead role in speaking to customers about your product or service.

Content options

When building any section of a website, there is always the process of selecting what to include. Some designers and marketers subscribe to the "content bomb" methodology, smothering readers with a blitzkrieg of text, photos, illustrations, links, and testimonials; others scale back to a minimalist "less is more" way of thinking, where the content is stripped to a few essential facts on a single page. Most companies wisely arrive at a comfortable middle ground.

An About section can contain any number of topics, from mission-critical messages to superfluous bits of incidental information. Let's explore a few options before digging deeper into a select few later in the chapter.

- **The company overview**: This is usually the page most people are looking for, and is usually the first one people get when they click into the section. It's not a history of the company, nor a philosophy statement, although it could briefly mention select milestones and highlights of each. It's simply a fact-based statement summarizing the business, which is sometimes all people are looking for.
- **Current principals**: Some people, for various reasons, like to know who is running the company. It may be an angel venture capitalist looking to invest, or a potential prospect conducting research. Different companies display different leaders on this page; some divulge only the C-level ranks, others include the board of directors if it wields any type of decision-making power, and other smaller companies will put pictures and write-ups of their entire staff.
- **History**: As we discussed at the beginning of the chapter, every company has a story. It may be short and boring, or a saga worthy of Homer's pen. Most companies of any significant age have had watershed moments in their history—technological breakthroughs, a high-profile customer addition, an acquisition by a larger competitor—and this is the page to write about them. Sometimes a history page might seem like an antiquated idea, a curious stop for the ambling browser, but strong stories, even those in business, should be shared in order to boost credibility.
- **Past success**: Some companies use the About section to parade past success stories. These range from minor blurbs to full-blown case studies, from a few one-sentence write-ups to a self-congratulating customer list. We'll discuss these more in Chapter 8.
- **Philosophy**: As cheesy as it sounds, some companies build a reputation on their philosophy toward business. For some, it's simple: "Make good stuff, sell at good price." For others, it runs deeper, and involves a commitment to customer satisfaction, using only the best ingredients, giving back to the community, hiring only the smartest people available, and more. Many times, the company philosophy is derived straight from the founder. L.L. Bean, a clothing and outdoor activity outfitter, still carries its founder's original philosophy from 1912 right to its website, as you can see in Figure 6-1.
- **Career opportunities**: A company's website can be a powerful recruiting tool, so most companies choose to list their current job openings right on the site. Some have a dedicated Careers section outside of the About section, but most simply merge the two since they fall under public relations, well outside the standard marketing fare. In fact, for some larger, in-demand companies that always have job openings (think Microsoft or GE), the Careers section can be a detailed, portal-like environment for visitors to explore.
- **Press releases**: This is where the public relations side of the About section comes into full play. Press releases are pieces of news strictly generated by the company for publicity purposes. They are submitted to news wire services, printed publications, and industry websites, in the hopes an editor or beat writer will find something interesting in the story and write an independent article about the corporation's announcement. They are also reprinted on the originating website for the reading enjoyment of interested persons.

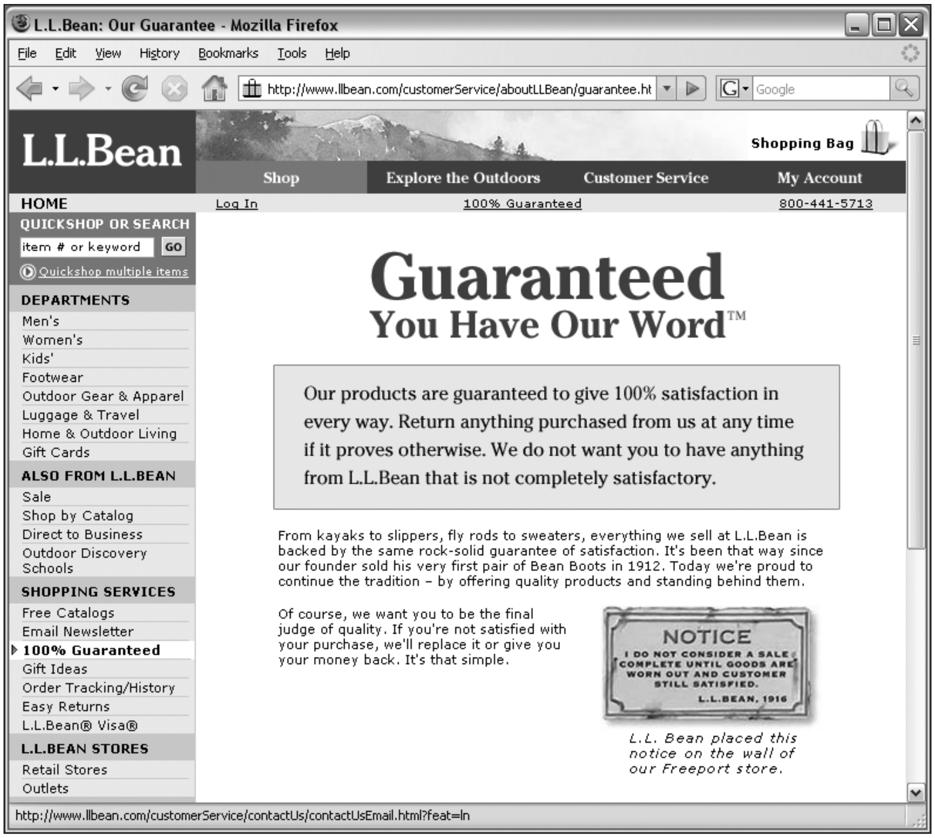


Figure 6-1. L.L. Bean broadcasts its philosophy of dedicated customer service prominently on its website.

- **Investor relations**: The weight given to the interests of investors is crisply divided: you either care, or you don't. For those that care, maintaining a unique, accurate page with information tailored to investors can be as time-consuming a task as maintaining a Japanese rock garden. The information that goes here is heavily biased toward the company's overall health and activity, and includes press releases, news clippings from third-party publications, financial metrics, and all manner of minor propaganda designed to present the business in as flattering a light as possible.
- **Contact information**: Just about any About section will contain some manner of contact information. The level of detail ranges. It can span a simple e-mail address to a series of addresses and phone numbers for worldwide offices. Many contact pages also include HTML forms for submitting queries. We'll cover these and other aspects of a contact page in depth later in the chapter.

As you can see, there are a number of topics for the About section. Some of these, like investor relations, could exist as a whole subsection of narrowly focused content; others, like the company philosophy, might consume only a single paragraph. Different pieces of content might even be combined into one web page. For instance, press releases might fold into investor relations, or the history might be wrapped up in the overall company description.

The About section of your site is a personal statement about your business, and should not be taken lightly. It can make or break a sale, and offers a powerful platform for marketing and public relations. In the rest of the chapter, we'll explore key pieces of the section, digging into what content should and should not be present, and best practices for portraying the company in the most positive light.

About the company

When people click into the About section, they expect to learn about your company. How much content you offer them is up to you; you may choose to tease them with only a brief description or immerse them in a deep discussion that touches on everything from the overview to a description of the company culture. This section will cover the pages that revolve around material about the company itself.

The grand overview

When your About section is thin and you don't plan on serving up page after pontificating page about your business, you will probably have a single lump of content that goes through the basic facts to provide readers with a 30,000-foot vantage point of the company. This grand overview should present the reader with a factual statement answering the basic questions: who, what, where, when, and why? *Who* is this company? *What* do they do or produce? *Where* are they located? *When* were they founded, and *why* did they come about? There is little room for marketing swagger or heavy-handed public relations. This is a profile, a summary, a fact sheet. Often, this is all people are looking for.

These pages work well in two instances: first, when it's the only page in the About section (as in the user clicks About Us from the main menu and this is what they get), and second, when it's the lead content for a larger section (the user clicks About Us and they land here, but there is another subnavigation with additional content, as shown in Figure 6-2).

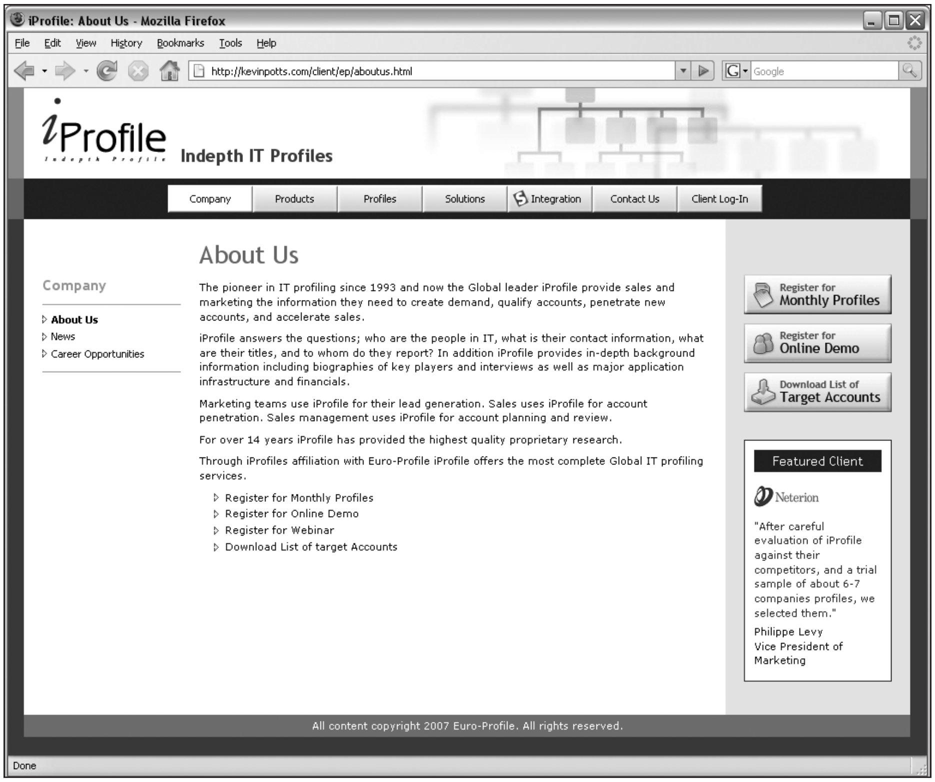


Figure 6-2. While iProfile's About Us page is the first page users see when they click the Company link in the global menu, it is only part of the greater section discussing the company.

Services/products overview

When writing text describing your business, never assume any prior knowledge from the reader. Think of every visitor as a complete stranger, someone who has stumbled across your doorstep and has no clue what the heck you do (which will probably be fairly close to reality). It's important to educate everyone—even if it's a refresher course—to what it is that you manufacture, sell, distribute, repair, or consult about.

This material doesn't have to be too long. Chances are that there is a long description of your products and services elsewhere on the site. This is only a synopsis, briefly answering a few questions:

- What does my company manufacture?
- What industry do we operate in?
- Do we have any marquee customers?
- Do we have any patents or unique expertise?
- What is our value proposition?

This might amount to only a page of content. In fact, it shouldn't be too much more. The goal is to offer readers an easily digestible overview they can use as a basic reference as they explore other parts of your site. The content should actively link to your primary products and services pages. As key terms and concepts surface, it's important for users to be able to jump to more detailed passages.

Company history

Unless they were formed with Russian mafia drug money and stolen computer equipment, most businesses are proud to talk about their past. The history page is the ideal location. Starting with the founding members and moving through historical milestones, this should discuss how and why the company is a success, along with plans for the future. There is no space limit or recommended length; the story should be as long as it needs to be as it answers basic questions:

- Who founded the company and where did it start?
- What was the first major milestone or big break?
- Did the company ever change names or identities?
- Did the company focus ever change (for instance, selling computer parts before graduating to full-blown IT consultancy)?
- When did the company go public?
- What are future growth plans in terms of project volume or customer base?

It's important to remember that a history page needs occasional tending to keep it up to date. For instance, if the content from five years ago mentioned that the biggest deal in the company's history was $200,000, and last year saw a deal worth $350,000, that detail needs to be updated.

The history page is a great opportunity to mix up the site layout and go beyond a straight column of text. A good story lends itself to illustrative touches, so take advantage of the medium and include photos, diagrams, and pullquotes to help build a stronger narrative.

Principals, leaders, and the board of directors

Some companies hinge their reputation on the experience and proven track record of their founders and upper management. The importance of elevating this information swings wildly depending on the company. Apple, for instance, made a big deal when Al Gore joined its board.

Founders often get promoted heavily. A startup formed by a prominent figure in the industry will get significant face time because their name brings a certain expectation of quality and/or notoriety. For instance, the venture capital firm HighBAR Ventures was formed by Bill Joy, cofounder of Sun Microsystems and chief architect of the Java programming language. Similarly, a company may be started by someone who most have never heard of, but has a deep history in the market and brings a unique set of experiences to the table. Describing this experience builds the confidence of customers.

For public companies subject to the whims of investors, this confidence is critical. Everyone and anyone leading the company needs to be profiled, including founders, upper management (usually C-level figures), and the board of directors. People care deeply about this information when their investment dollar is wrapped up in a corporation's performance.

From a design standpoint, it's very important to get photos of anyone profiled. Large companies will most likely have professional studio headshots of their executives for exactly this type of publicity. Keep the bios short and sweet (100 to 300 words is plenty), and place the photos right next to the text.

Company culture

Many companies like to promote their corporate culture. Some of them even have web pages dedicated to it. It's more of a recruiting tool than anything—people who are interested in working at the company will absorb the content with acute interest, and everyone else will just glaze over it.

A company culture page typically has lots of photographs of employee events featuring lots of shiny happy employees. It's not a complex piece of content, but it can be interesting for designers to put together, because it can take on a scrapbook-like feel that is elicits amiable, fuzzy feelings from upper management and potential hires.

Only companies with genuinely interesting cultures (a la Google, whose reputation as an employee-first company is unprecedented) should indulge in a company culture page. Showing photos of beige cubicles, fluorescent-lit employees, and strip mall campuses is not going to warm anyone's heart.

Philanthropy

Community service, charitable giving, support for nonprofits, and other philanthropic activities are a defining characteristic of many corporations. Some focus on a singular cause, others spread their money around. Whatever the case, many of these corporations promote their good deeds on their website for public relations and the reinforcement of an attractive corporate culture for potential candidates (see Figure 6-3).

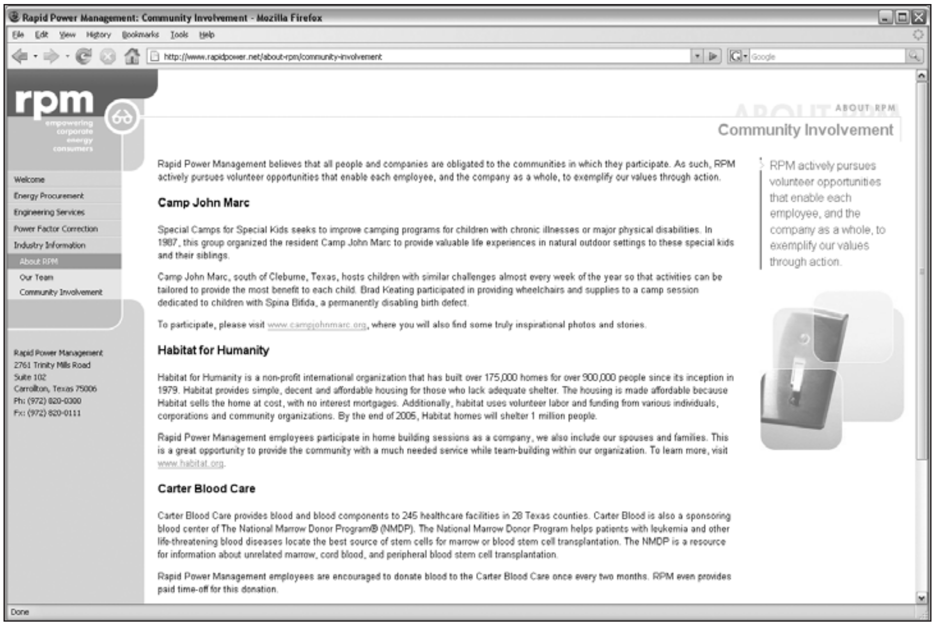


Figure 6-3. Many companies large and small like to promote their philanthropic activity.

Career opportunities

The Web has revolutionized the job market, from niche job boards to large-scale job sites like Monster and CareerBuilder. It's easier than ever to find job leads with only a few searches around the Web, and even easier to apply to them. Companies listing open jobs on their own website are giving themselves several competitive advantages in this new career market.

First, people may be looking specifically at your company for job openings. If you're a known and respected employer in the community, you are going to attract a lot of resumes. Candidates do not have to bother looking through Monster or CareerBuilder if your job listings are current—they will simply return periodically to check your website.

Second, when people look for jobs over the Internet, they don't necessarily head straight for the large job board sites. Instead, they will use common search engines as a starting point, entering a detailed string in the hopes of finding what they want right away (e.g., "C++ programmer jobs Seattle, WA"). Keeping job openings up to date and optimizing the site (and specifically the careers section) for search engines can push the company toward the top of the results.

The job list

Depending on the size of the company, the actual list of jobs could range from a singular entry to a vast global database. IBM's website prompts you to filter your search by region of the world, and then create a profile inside an elaborate password-protected section in order to submit your actual resume, all supported by a detailed help section. Smaller companies might only have a dozen or fewer openings. The design complexity of the list depends on the number of opportunities you want to advertise.

For most, the directory of job openings is going to be simple. It may be a straight list, or broken up by departments, or searchable by a few parameters. Whatever the case, each entry should link to the full description of the job. Take a look at Figure 6-4. The unadorned listing in the left column is common. The middle column is better, as it lays out the information in easier-to-read chunks. The right includes an additional level of detail, including a direct link for application.

Figure 6-4. A job listing can be laid out different ways.

The more effectively the design disseminates the information, the more people will use the job board. While including a date of publication and a direct link for application are optional (some companies may not want to show the age of the openings), breaking the listings apart via department is an excellent way of guiding people to the positions of most interest.

Finally, diligence and accuracy of information is paramount in the job listing. Anything publicly listed must be a real-life job someone can apply to; letting entries expire and failing to remove them from the site is an invitation for angry inquiries and possible legal action. By contrast, not updating the section with new listings can be equally if not more damaging—if people don't know the job exists, they can't apply.

The job entry

Once the user scans through the job listing and clicks on a position of interest, they are whisked to the full description of the opening. This is where they can read about the appointment in detail, learn more about the company and its hiring policy, and (hopefully) apply directly. There are several things a user will expect to find on this page:

- A **detailed description** is a must. A person perusing any careers section is interested by definition, and their interest should be rewarded with a thorough description that does the job justice. This includes a run-down of responsibilities, a detailed list of skill and experience requirements, some information on benefits and compensation, and any special instructions for applying (e.g., "Must be able to show three to five published samples of work.").
- The job entry should also include a **short description of the company** at the bottom of the page. This is valuable for those unfamiliar with the corporation or its line of business. This does not have to be long (100 to 150 words will do just fine), but should include the following bits: the legal company name (and stock symbol if applicable), an explanation of what it makes or does, where it's located, how long it's been around, and a link to a more thorough description.
- Any information regarding **hiring policy** should also be present. This isn't required, but it provides reassurance that the corporation does not discriminate against race, sex, religion, and so forth. This might be a short paragraph or a whole separate page that is linked from every job entry.
- It also helps to include the **date the entry was posted**. Again, this isn't required, but it's always nice to know—from a job searcher's perspective—the age of a job listing. This helps them focus on the warmest leads. Again, some companies may not want to publish this information.
- A **link to the actual application process** is mandatory. This might amount to no more than an e-mail address; other companies require that a resume be sent through a standardized form with a series of required fields. This covered in detail in the next section.

Providing as much detail as possible for a specific job only benefits the company. By listing specific criteria, requirements, and descriptions, it leaves a minimum of information to assumption, further qualifying any applicants that do take the time to express their interest. Next, we'll discuss the actual means of aggregating resumes.

Resume submission

After you have taken the time to create an engaging job listing and detailed descriptions to incite the career passions of any passerby, you need to construct the final link in the career section's chain: the process for the visitor to submit their resume. Everything else in the careers section is designed to funnel applicants to this point.

As discussed in the previous section, an individual job entry should have a clearly labeled link for applying to the position. This usually comes in two forms: a plain e-mail link or a link to a more formal contact form.

Choosing the format

Before you begin asking for resumes, decide what formats you are going to accept through the e-mail link or the form. Any IT dude will preach the perils of accepting foreign attachments, so it's important that those accepting the resumes have a basic understanding of what constitutes a dangerous attachment (for instance, anything with an `.exe` extension).

In the world of resume collecting, three formats rule: Word, PDF, and plain text. Between the three, you will have nearly ubiquitous coverage. Some people live and breathe Microsoft Word. Others might use a fancier design program like Quark or InDesign to lay out their resume, in which case PDF is the best choice for output. Still others shun any type of commercial software and keep their resume and cover letter in plain-text format for easy editing and universal compatibility.

It is very important to indicate what formats are accepted, and if there are file size limitations. The last thing you or a human resources (HR) specialist wants in their e-mail is a 25 MB PostScript file rendered from an obscure Linux-only publishing program.

The e-mail link

There is nothing wrong with employing a vanilla e-mail link for users to submit their applications. The usability benefits and penalties are obvious. People are used to the idea of clicking an e-mail address to bring up their e-mail client, and they will *always* be more comfortable working in their native e-mail application than traversing the rigid environment of a formal contact form (especially when dealing with long messages and attachments). On the other hand, if a user does not have an e-mail application on the device they are using, they may not be able to send their resume at all.

From a development standpoint, adding an e-mail link to the page is simple. Here are a few tips to get the most out of this method:

- **Use a generic e-mail address**: This could be `jobs@business.com` or `careers@business.com` or `sendyourresumetome@business.com`. Even if you are the only person in the company, avoid using a specific name in the address. This is beneficial for two reasons. First, it offers a thin layer of anonymity, which can help keep the e-mail of stalkers and other creepy folk demanding why you haven't hired them out of your personal inbox. Second, and on a related note, setting up a dedicated e-mail address allows for segregated workflow; you can check the account separately at leisure, and your personal address is not used when you respond to an applicant.
- **Write the HTML so the e-mail's subject reflects the title of the job**: For instance, if a user clicks the e-mail link for the Inside Sales position, you can instruct their e-mail application to automatically insert Application for Inside Sales Position at Acme, Inc. into the subject field. The HTML is simple: `<a href="mailto:jobs@acme.com?subject=Application for Inside Sales Position at Acme, Inc.">Apply for this job!</a>`. Simply add the query for `subject`, and you have immediately saved your applicants a step as well as established the format of how the e-mail subjects appear in your inbox (which can be a productivity boon when collecting resumes for multiple open positions).

- **Obfuscate the actual e-mail address**: Spammers regularly send out spiders across the Web to harvest “naked” e-mail addresses sitting in plain code. There are many ways to hide the e-mail address, from ASCII character and CSS tricks to JavaScript and server-side techniques.[1] Employing smoke and mirrors in the code may be more trouble than it’s worth to some companies, but be aware that an exposed e-mail address *will* be found and exploited by spammers. (Using HTML forms—covered in the next section—is the best way to avoid publicizing a corporate e-mail address.)

The contact form

Like providing a plain e-mail address, using a standard contact form for aggregating resumes has its pros and cons, but there are several important advantages. First, all contact to HR (or whomever happens to handle recruiting) is standardized—the same information is collected in the same way from every applicant, the idea being that no one has an advantage. (This standardization is actually required for American contractors who conduct business with the US federal government.)

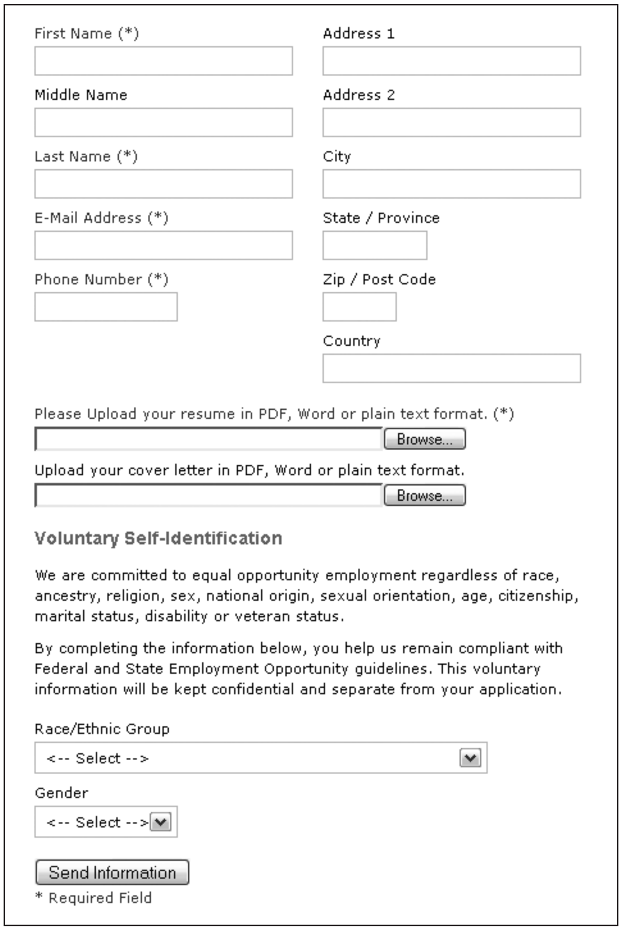
If a company wanted to, they could automatically collect all submitted resumes into a database from the HTML form and use that data for research and reporting. Entering that same data by hand from manually submitted resumes into a database would be tedious indeed.

Because this form should be usable by everyone, it is critical to create the HTML with accessibility and usability in mind. Make sure required fields are clearly marked, use large input fields with corresponding `<label>` tags, and make sure the tab index moves smoothly through the form for users confined to a keyboard. And whatever you do, don’t place a Reset button on the page—it’s a solution to a problem that doesn’t exist.

The one big decision the developer and HR department needs to make is whether to allow users to upload the resumes and cover letters, or whether they must copy the contents into a field as part of the form. This is a decision not to be taken lightly. There are security risks and potential compatibility issues with foreign attachments, but long, plain-text e-mails generated from the contact form can be unwieldy and harder to differentiate by the recruiting team.

Figure 6-5 demonstrates a well-organized job application form. Required fields are indicated both through color and an asterisk, the input fields accommodate lots of visible text, acceptable file formats are spelled out right above the uploading widgets, and the company’s hiring practice is clearly restated before the user hits Send Information.

1. Sarven Capadisli compiled many techniques for obfuscating e-mail addresses. The results can be found on his site at `www.csarven.ca/hiding-email-addresses`.



First Name (*)
Address 1
Middle Name
Address 2
Last Name (*)
City
E-Mail Address (*)
State / Province
Phone Number (*)
Zip / Post Code
Country

Please Upload your resume in PDF, Word or plain text format. (*)
Browse...
Upload your cover letter in PDF, Word or plain text format.
Browse...

Voluntary Self-Identification

We are committed to equal opportunity employment regardless of race, ancestry, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, age, citizenship, marital status, disability or veteran status.

By completing the information below, you help us remain compliant with Federal and State Employment Opportunity guidelines. This voluntary information will be kept confidential and separate from your application.

Race/Ethnic Group
<-- Select -->
Gender
<-- Select -->
Send Information
* Required Field

Figure 6-5. This well-organized resume submission form does just about everything right in terms of usability.

Promoting job openings

While having a smashing Careers section is a great thing for any corporate website, it doesn't mean anything if people don't know it's there. Promoting it is not all that hard, really, because it's one of the few sections of the website that people are either looking to explore or looking to ignore. Interested visitors will actively seek out the most recent job listing and everyone else will pass it by without a thought. Getting the right people coming back is pretty easy to do. Here are a few helpful hints:

6

- **Make the URL short and easy to remember**: For instance, `www.acme.com/jobs`, or `www.acme.com/careers`. It should be a snap to type in.
- **Promote it from the site's main navigation**: The current job listing is commonly a function of the About section and is thus buried among other pages within that section. However, some companies give the career opportunities tremendous weight, and provide a large click-friendly link right from top menu. This is ultimately a case-by-case call, but it will dramatically improve traffic.
- **Provide an RSS feed with the latest job positions**: If you are generating pages from a content management system, this should be fairly easy.
- **Offer e-mail updates**: When a new job is posted, send out an e-mail telling the world.

News and press releases

It's hard to determine exactly what the threshold is, but at some point in almost every company's growth cycle, the generation of press releases and proactive press contact begins. This usually comes on the heels of a business understanding the need to build a stronger media presence in order to promote themselves as a viable marketplace competitor. Third-party media coverage is just another form of marketing. Unfortunately, it's not a form over which businesses have explicit control—they must convince magazine editors, freelance writers, analysts, industry watchdogs, bloggers, and the rest of the industry to write about them voluntarily.

One of the first ingredients in forging strong media relationships is the creation of company-sanctioned press releases that get distributed to media outlets and wire services. Press releases serve two core purposes:

- They are official documents. The issuing company backs them up, on record, as the definitive statement regarding the topic.
- They are story leads for writers. When a notable press release floats across their desk, it can easily be transformed into a compelling news story.

Traditionally, press releases were sent directly to assignment writers at media outlets, or placed into commercial newswire services for general distribution. If a story didn't get picked up right away, it was probably lost. The Web changes that. Built for archiving content, it allows companies to stow their press releases in a public collection, where they can be searched and read at the leisure of writers, investors, and others. (The search engine optimization that naturally occurs with press releases is also valuable. Search engine robots seek out and favorably index long chunks of keyword-heavy content.)

Listing press releases

Like job listings, press releases lend themselves to a single page per article, which means you'll need to build a landing page that indexes recent entries chronologically. This list will be the first thing users see when they enter the section.

The amount of information presented with each listing can influence whether a reader clicks the link to read the entire news item. As you can see in Figure 6-6, additional information can give users a better flavor of the story, from providing the context of time (is this the most recent?) to briefly reiterating the who-what-where-when synopsis near the headline to provide a fuller description of the story.

Figure 6-6. Additional information in the press release listing allows users to make a more educated click.

Keep a few things in mind as you design the architecture and functionality of the press release listing. List the stories in reverse chronological order, with the most recent at the top of the list. This is the most intuitive way for people to grab the latest news without forcing them to scroll.

Keeping the entire company's history on one page will get unwieldy quickly, so consider how older news releases will be handled. There are several options:

- **Simply truncate the list after a certain threshold is reached**: This might be a year, or 18 months, or 2 years. Or you might choose to go by quantity, like 20 or 30. Whatever the case, the list of releases simply ends with no means of digging up older material.
- **Build an "archive" section that acts as a holding tank for older releases**: This is very much like the preceding solution in that the main list is kept in check either by posted date or total quantity, but older press releases end up here instead of mysteriously disappearing.
- **Organize press releases by year**: Many companies choose to list their press releases by year, where the current year's crop of news is shown when the user lands on the page, but buttons labeled with previous years are in plain view in case someone wants to do some snooping around.

When designing the press release listing, keep usability and easy navigation in the forefront of your process. People will come here to research and read, not mess around with visual gimmicks and convoluted menus. Make press releases easily searchable and keep listings clean to optimize for scanning eyes. Also provide a simple means for readers to be alerted when new content is available, such as an e-mail subscription or RSS feed.

The press release

Like a job entry, a press release has enough singular content to warrant its own individual page. Since press releases can cover any topic, their length can be erratic. Actual word count varies from a 200-word statement to a longer, 1000-word narrative rich in detail, quotes, and storyline. This is very much out of a designer's control.

Because of this, some companies publish press releases in alternative formats like Word or PDF instead of the Web. While this is a viable alternative, it is not ideal; both are proprietary formats, take longer to load, and do not lend themselves to fast consumption by readers. Since the Web is the ideal medium, the template needs to be flexible in order to handle the disparate word count.

Ninety-nine percent of press releases follow a preordained, fairly conservative format, so most chunks of content can be anticipated. This format contains several components:

- **Headline**: The headline serves double duty—it needs to summarize the story and grab the attention of readers. Some writers strive to write clever, pun-laden statements ("California Water Turns on Productivity Tap with New Software"), but that is certainly not necessary, and doesn't affect the design either way.
- **Dateline**: The dateline is a small bit that tells the time and place. It's the lead right before the body and is usually set in all capitals.
- **Introduction**: The first paragraph of a press release is critical because it quickly answers the who-what-where-when-how-why of the story. If a reader never gets past these first couple sentences, they will still know what the press release is about.
- **Body**: Everything following the introduction supports that initial statement. Facts, testimonials, descriptions of accounts, and more all provide further enhancement to the story, providing journalists and readers with plenty of details to explain why the event is worthy of news.
- **Boilerplate**: This is the one-paragraph company description appended to the end of every press release. It is independent of the narrative and is intended to provide a summarization of the issuer's background. For joint press releases—those issued by two companies at the same time—there will be a boilerplate for each company.
- **Media contact**: Since press releases are fed directly to the media, reporters and editors need someone to call if they actually pick up the story. This information should include the contact's full name and title, plus their phone number, e-mail, and address. The e-mail address should follow the same best practices laid out in the resume submission process.

When designing the template for press releases, take into account all of these pieces, because their value to the reader warrants their presence on every release web page. Since consistency is inevitable, consider styling the media contact and boilerplate differently than the rest of the release; making them a different color, or setting them off in a sidebar can help readers focus on the core content while still being able to find the supporting material. There is no reason to stick with the old-school, black-type-on-stark-white, photocopied look.

Investor relations

A company is either going to have a section of their website dedicated to investors or they're not, and that decision largely depends on whether they are publicly traded. For American companies, laws exist that demand certain types of filings with the SEC be made public on a company's website, so this section may be mandatory. For others, the simple desire to communicate avidly with stakeholders (or future stakeholders if the company is ramping up to go public) drives the need for this section.

Because this material usually appears on sites for larger corporations, drawing best practices and common design solutions is difficult because the sample pool is smaller. For instance, even the naming of the section varies, although the word "investor" is the primary term used to flag down interested parties. Some variations found across the Web are as follows:

- Investor Relations
- For Investors
- Investor Communications
- Investor Information

The goal of this section is to transcribe a company's financial information to the Web, where it can be researched and digested by members of the media, current stakeholders, and interested investors. Companies take this information very seriously. There are many regulatory laws that can be broken and investor fortunes lost if information is not accurately and completely represented. Designers are responsible for crafting the information architecture that is going to help people find the numbers they need to make educated financial decisions. A tall order? Definitely.

The stock

Former Enron employees reminisce about how, in its heyday, only months before its world imploded, the energy giant had a singular focus on the stock price. Upper management constantly reminded everyone of the price that minute, agonizing if it was a penny lower from the minute before, rejoicing when it ticked another penny higher. So ingrained was that point of focus in the corporate culture that campus elevators all contained screens that showed the current value of the stock.

It's hard to believe that fortunes are won and lost and economies grown and leveled by the movement of such small, singular numbers as ticker prices. But since the stock price is distilled from so many facets of the business—from management decisions to magazine articles to projected earnings statements—it represents a crude barometer of the company's health.

The stock price

Some companies like to show the latest stock price on their website. This does not accomplish anything a quick trip to a stock research site can't uncover, but it adds a small convenience to readers as they move around the site.

Unfortunately, the technical challenges of getting current stock information are daunting—you cannot very well update the number by hand every 20 minutes. Thankfully for web developers, there are several services that offer automated stock quote displays, from basic ticker price to complex charts and a wealth of information, like the example from QuoteMedia shown in Figure 6-7.[2]

Figure 6-7. QuoteMedia produces plug-and-play stock ticker graphics for business websites.

Dividend and split history

If a preferred stock has been around for any length of time, it has probably paid out dividends to stockholders. These pay periods are usually regular (GE, for instance, has paid out dividends every quarter for over 100 years), and are easily documented with a single table. Each dividend should include the date it was declared, issued, and paid, and the amount it was issued for. Other information can be included, but is not required.

Stock split history is not much different. The dates of the splits and the ratios of the splits themselves should be listed, but since these happen very infrequently, such lists should not be too long.

2. `www.quotemedia.com`

Dividend and split histories are not complex pieces of data, and can be easily represented in HTML tables. For instance, Figure 6-8 shows what a segment of dividend history might look like when laid out. Column headers and subtle visual dividers help readers easily follow the information.

Declared	Recorded	Payable	Amount Paid
12/08/06	12/27/06	01/05/07	$0.26
08/29/06	09/11/06	10/06/06	$0.25
06/15/06	06/28/06	07/06/06	$0.22
02/27/06	03/15/06	04/04/06	$0.21
12/09/05	12/27/05	01/06/06	$0.21

Figure 6-8. Dividend history is not complex data; usually showing these four columns of data is plenty.

Enhancing the display of tabular data

Corporate websites regularly contain tables to house data related to finances, sales, expenses, and other corporate metrics. While this information is not always sexy (look no further than the previous example of stock dividends), the information design has to be of the highest pedigree to ensure data is accurately and completely represented.

The first step in creating perfect HTML tables is writing the best possible markup. There are tags for column and row headers, special groups of cells, table footers, content summaries, and more. (For a great run-down of table-related markup, see Paul Haine's book HTML Mastery: Semantics, Standards, and Styling, *also from friends of ED.*[3]*)*

Once the HTML is mastered, you can start to use JavaScript and DOM scripting to accomplish advanced visual effects not possible with off-the-shelf HTML and CSS. Used discriminately, these scripts can enhance the visual display of tables as well as increase the clarity of the information. Following are a few examples of scripts other developers have made available to the web community.

The table ruler

*The **table ruler** is a small, unobtrusive script that helps navigate data. The idea is that readers might have a difficult time visually aligning tabular data in a lengthy table, which is exacerbated when numerous columns widen the object. This script highlights whatever row (or column) the user places their cursor over and guides their eye across the horizontal plane to help them make sure they are reading the correct set of cells. A good version of the script can be downloaded for free at DHTML Goodies.*[4]

3. www.friendsofed.com/book.html?isbn=1590597656
4. www.dhtmlgoodies.com/index.html?showDownload=true&whichScript=highlight_table_row

Zebra tables

Following the logic of the table ruler, information designers have long understood that subtly alternating the background color of rows can help readers traverse wide tables. (A well-known example is the design of Apple's iTunes, which uses white and light blue to differentiate songs in a playlist.) This would be tedious to accomplish with plain CSS (you would have to manually apply a class to every other row in the table), but easily automated with a small piece of JavaScript. Visit A List Apart for an article describing the technique and the necessary script.[5] *Also keep in mind that this functionality can be accomplished with a server-side language as well.*

Sorting tables

While elegantly laying out rich data in beautiful HTML tables is a great start, taking advantage of the interactive nature of the Web is the natural next step. Using JavaScript, you can add a layer of functionality to the information and allow users to customize the display. For instance, the long list of dividends in the previous example is fine, but readers are forced to disseminate information chronologically; using a small script, they can choose any table heading as a sorting value, and with a single click, re-sort the entire table—for example, by dividend amount instead of issuing date. Kryogenix.org has a good tutorial on the topic.[6]

SEC filings

There are many, many types of documents submitted to the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), all of them pertinent to the financial health of a company. These include annual reports and the corresponding Form 10-K, quarterly earnings statements, and more. While you will find many of these republished on corporate sites, certain SEC filings are required by law to be published on a company's site. Following are a few documents that might find their way to an investor relations section:

- **The annual report**: This is the year-end review that attempts to summarize the events of the year—from both cultural and financial angles—and spin them into a positive marketing piece. These books are usually thick with fluff content and expensive to design and produce, which is why much of their content is more of a PR statement than an objective fiscal analysis.
- **Form 10-K**: This is the annual financial report. It is the strictly business counterpoint to the annual report. The two pieces are often shipped together and occasionally merged into one document.
- **Form 10-Q**: This is the quarterly financial statement, which does not delve into any company facts or history. (Companies only produce three 10-Qs per year; the fourth quarter is summarized in the 10-K.)

5. `www.alistapart.com/articles/zebratables`
6. `www.kryogenix.org/code/browser/sorttable`

- **Form 8-K**: This somewhat rarer form is issued when an event substantial enough that it must be published as an official update to the 10-K occurs. An 8-K might be issued because of bankruptcy, a departing CEO, or changes to shareholders' rights.
- **Forms 3, 4, and 5**: These report on insider trading. These must be filed for anyone with more than a 10 percent stake in the company. Because of insider trading scandals in the past, the SEC passed a regulation stating that all insider trading reports must be published on a company's website for public viewing.

Designers and information architects must collaborate with the company's internal specialist to figure out how this information is best displayed. It can be as rudimentary or complex as you want. Because the SEC stores every filing from every public company in the United States in a public database called EDGAR,[7] some corporations simply send people to the EDGAR search engine where all their filings are listed. In order to be compliant with the SEC, however, two distinct links need to be published:

1. A link to only Forms 3, 4, and 5 in the EDGAR database, allowing people to easily find documentation exclusively focused on insider trading
2. A link directing people to *all* filings (everything in the preceding list), or to a list of filings sans Forms 3, 4, and 5

For some, those two links are the alpha and omega of their SEC filings section. It represents the bare minimum of design and information architecture work, but satisfies a company's legal requirements. For instance, Altria Group uses this exact technique, and, as you can see in Figure 6-9, EDGAR lists all their Forms 3, 4, and 5 for them.

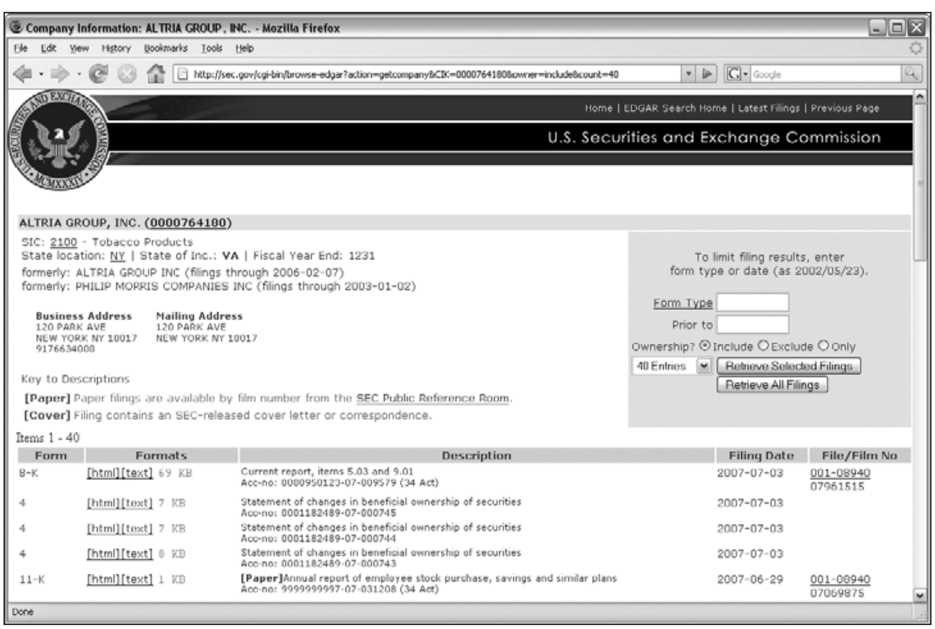


Figure 6-9. Many companies link directly to EDGAR, the SEC's database that stores all financial statements from all public companies. This figure shows results for Altria Group.

7. `www.sec.gov/edgar/searchedgar/webusers.htm`

Beyond EDGAR

While EDGAR is a powerful tool that can be easily leveraged by companies looking to meet the minimum requirements of SEC regulations, other companies choose a richer path. By reining in the design of the display of their SEC filings, businesses can provide their investors and readers with a reading experience more entrenched in the corporate brand, and avoid having readers leave their site. The major downfall, of course, is that keeping up with SEC filings can be full-time job for large companies.

Listing all SEC filings is the first step. From here, you can choose what formats and related documents to display next to each entry. Take a look at Figure 6-10, which shows a fictional listing of SEC forms.

2005

Quarter	Date Ending	SEC Form	Press Release	Additional
4th	12/31/05	10-K	HTML | PDF	Webcast
3rd	09/31/05	10-Q	HTML | PDF	Webcast
	07/21/05	8-K	HTML | PDF	
2nd	06/30/05	10-Q	HTML | PDF	Webcast
1st	03/31/05	10-Q	HTML | PDF	Webcast

2004

Quarter	Date Ending	SEC Form	Press Release	Additional
4th	12/31/04	10-K	HTML | PDF	Webcast
3rd	09/31/04	10-Q	HTML | PDF	
2nd	06/30/04	10-Q	HTML | PDF	
1st	03/31/04	10-Q	HTML | PDF	

Figure 6-10. A listing of SEC filings can comprise a number of documents related to each filing, depending on how big of a deal the company treats the announcements.

As you can see, each SEC form can carry several related documents with it. The larger the company, the more emphasis is going to be put on earnings statements, and quarterly earnings announcements can become minor media events requiring dedicated support material like press releases.

Press releases relating to earnings statements are usually little more than reiterations of the numbers in a narrative form, but are the reader-friendly summaries that get distributed to the media. Larger organizations even conduct conference calls to make the announcement and then release the recording as a webcast (or podcast, depending on how hip they are).

Some companies choose not to republish the actual SEC forms on their website. There is no rule for or against it, but since all material is indexed and searchable within the EDGAR system, some corporations don't take the time to duplicate the effort. For those who do, the formatting is bare bones—in fact, most simply link to a PDF version. In a listing like that shown in Figure 6-10, the link to a form like 10-Q could just as easily go directly to the SEC's website as it could a PDF version housed on the company's server.

Media and more

At the end of the day, an investor relations section of a corporate site can be as big or small as the company wants. The giants of the business world exert tremendous energy wooing their investors with portals rich with every possible crumb of information regarding the stock and the company behind it. For smaller corporations, it may mean just fulfilling their obligations to the SEC and leaving their investors to find their own information.

One valuable and easily implemented slice of content in which many investors have an avid interest is third-party opinions about the company. These include magazine articles, analyst reviews, newspaper columns, and books. Aggregating this content into a centralized repository is the bread and butter of large investor information sites like Yahoo Finance and E-Trade. People make investment decisions based on what the media tells them, rarely on the company's own propaganda.

Displaying this third-party media isn't difficult at all. Since you probably won't have permission to republish the material, it will be little more than a landing page with a list of pieces, each linking to the source. For instance, say your company scores a positive mention in *Forbes* magazine. This can carry significant weight with the financial community, but you have to get the word out there. Having a third-party media section baked into your investor relations section is the perfect medium for doing just that—a quick summary of the piece and a link back to `www.forbes.com` is more than enough. Collect enough of those, and suddenly everything else in the investor relations section carries more weight.

Finally, maintaining a short, basic fact sheet for investors can help keep them educated about your business and its stock. This is not a complex piece of content. It should have an overview of what the company sells, and then a raft of numbers: growth over the last year, net profit, operating expenses, stock fluctuations, financial rankings (think the Fortune 500 list), stock listing symbols, the fiscal calendar, and dates of earnings reports. This document is not for marketing purposes. Rather, it is a list of facts, a snapshot of the company's financial activity.

The contact page

Besides the homepage, the Contact page is the one section of content that every single business in the world should have on their website. Although designers love to architect high-water marks in branding design, and writers love to espouse clever language and marketing hooks, and *everyone* likes to tout the two-way, interactive nature of the Internet, sometimes a website is nothing more than a very expensive business card.

Eventually, just about every visitor is going to find their way to the Contact page. Sometimes they need a mailing address, sometimes a phone number, sometimes a specific department's e-mail address. Whatever the case, providing them with as much contact information as possible is key. There is no need to obfuscate this stuff.

How people actually find the Contact page is another story. It seems the larger a company gets, the more complex their page becomes, but even the biggest companies in the world recognize the value of placing a link to it right on their homepage. In fact, nine out of the top ten Fortune 500 companies have a direct Contact Us link in one of their main menus. (Wal-Mart is the only one that fails to do so.) Smaller businesses understand the same principle—the easier the contact page is to access, the more people will use it.

Like the general About section, there is little need to deviate from the word *contact* when leading people to this information. It's an entrenched standard. Users look for and expect to find it on all sites, and are confused when it's not immediately apparent.

The right information

When designing the Contact page, think about the information you would want to see. Small business owners—especially those working out of home offices—might have trepidations about adding their mailing address or phone number to a public website, fearful of angry customers and protective of their privacy. To this, the recommendation is clear: either get your business out of your house or set up a separate business address elsewhere.

Companies of all sizes have been guilty of hiding behind contact forms and e-mail addresses, not willing to make their physical location known. Unless you are manufacturing car bombs for terrorists, this is a terrible way of doing business. Companies that refuse customers and prospects basic contact information are immediately raising walls of distrust and deception, and come off looking like they have something sinister to hide from everyone.

Include everything reasonable

So what exact information do you include? The simple answer is everything that makes sense. For most companies, this page mimics their business card. For instance,

- **Mailing address**: Preferably this is a street address, not a PO box, for two reasons: any company that uses a PO box looks small and amateur, and certain shipping companies like FedEx will not ship to PO boxes because their deliveries need a signature.
- **Phone numbers**: There might only be one, or there might be a dozen. Including and clearly labeling the company's phone numbers is critical.
- **Fax numbers**: Similar to phone numbers, fax lines need to be clearly organized.
- **Alternate websites**: Perhaps there is a subsidiary company or separate product that warrants its own website; this is a good place to reiterate that information. (ConocoPhillips's website, for instance, lists 12 unique domains under its contact page.)
- **E-mail addresses**: Whether or not you include your company's e-mail addresses with or without a more formal contact form is up to you. We'll discuss this in more depth later.

Again, there is no real reason to hide any of this information. People will appreciate your consideration for covering all contact information in a comprehensive manner, which translates to more people reaching out to you, which equates to more satisfied customers. This is especially true if the information needs to be carefully organized, as we'll discuss shortly.

Break up where necessary

Small businesses rarely have more than one or two primary e-mail addresses, or even more than one office number. But as companies grow, departments become increasingly independent, new offices are opened, and people's reasons for visiting the Contact page are ever more predictable as you aggregate and track how people use the section. Intelligently organizing the growing disparity of contact information is a key ingredient to the page's success. There are several ways to divide the information:

- **By department**: As corporations grow, their internal departments swell with power and influence until they approach autonomy. Usually the first department to break off from the main iceberg is the support department, who has its own collection of e-mail addresses and phone numbers for customers to reach it directly. Other departments might include HR (especially in regard to recruiting), sales and product information, and any specific business lines that are unique to the industry. (For instance, a credit card company's contact page would include a special phone number for people reporting lost or stolen cards.)
- **By physical location**: One of the natural stages of an organization's growth is the expansion to new locations. These might come in the form of an additional headquarters (a company with a US headquarters covering North America and another headquarters in the United Kingdom to cover the EMEA territories), or in the form of regional offices. Corporations that rely on storefront activity (banks, restaurants, retail outlets, etc.) will probably have a searchable database of all their branch locations, each a self-contained digital Rolodex card with an address, phone, fax, and e-mail.
- **By service**: For certain lines of business, people will consistently visit a contact page for the same information. For service industries like banking, it is obvious to have a highlighted group of contact bits for account support.

Of course, these filters can be mixed up for even more effective visitor support. Look at Figure 6-11—there are two primary headquarters highlighted at the top, coupled with regional office information below. To the right is a button guiding users to learn more about Data Synapse's products and services, and if you were to scroll down, you would find e-mail addresses organized by department, from media inquiries to contact information. This company has done a masterful job explicitly classifying its avenues of communication.

Figure 6-11. Data Synapse employs several filters for its contact information, and organizes by physical location as well as department.

Contact via the Web

Providing detailed information about your address and phone numbers is important, but providing the ability for visitors to immediately contact you through the Web is just as crucial. Today, technology exists to set up instant chat meetings and send text messages to cell phones from websites, but we're going to discuss a technology as old as the Web itself: e-mail.

In a nutshell, there are two ways people can send you e-mail: through a plain e-mail address or through a web form. We covered many of the pros and cons of each when discussing resume submission earlier in the chapter. For HR purposes, sending a plain e-mail might be a viable solution when it comes to applying for a job; it's a niche application and most candidates won't mind using their own e-mail client. However, for general inquiries, it is far more professional to employ a traditional, HTML-based form. The advantages are too strong to ignore:

- The code that drives an HTML form can route the message to multiple e-mail addresses. In fact, the message might be dynamically directed to a particular e-mail based on certain variables filled out in the form. For instance, if there's a drop-down asking users to categorize their inquiry between Sales, Technical Support, and Billing Issues, and they choose Billing Issues, the message could be automatically routed to your company's accounting department for resolution.
- Forms conceal the e-mail addresses they go to. This prevents spammers from harvesting and abusing an e-mail address left out on an Internet site.
- The information people send is regulated. Everyone fills out the same fields, so you have a consistent template of each communiqué. Because an HTML form can be easily tied into a database for storing the messages, companies can run data analysis on all messages to aid in the contact form's refinement—discovering, for example, which fields people are ignoring, which ones regularly contain bogus information (you have no idea how many times "123 Fake St." appears in the address field), and which required fields are consistently missed.
- HTML forms can be filled out anywhere, from any machine. Because all of the code runs on the server, not the computer, there is no need for a user to have an e-mail client like Outlook installed.

Taking all of these points into consideration, it seems like a no-brainer to have one of these on your site. In most respects, it is. The only major disadvantage is the design and configuration of the form, which should be handled by someone with experience working with a server-side programming language like PHP or ASP. However, there are many free, practically plug-and-play scripts that allow web designers with only a passing knowledge of code to get a form up and running. (HotScripts has a huge library of contact form scripts in all languages,[8] and Wufoo actually hosts forms to eliminate the hassle of manual configuration completely.[9])

Asking the right questions

Now that you've wisely decided to create a contact form, it's just a matter of deciding what fields should be on the form, and which ones should be required. This is not a decision to be made lightly. You can come off looking amateur if you don't ask for the right information, but just as easily intimidate people with a poorly designed form that asks for too many unnecessary details. People want to feel confident their message will land in the right inbox without them having to offer their blood type, marital status, and favorite Beatles album.

At a minimum, three fields are required: e-mail, name, and message. These are the nucleus of the message. You cannot respond if you don't have an e-mail, you don't know who to respond to if you don't have a name, and you have no idea what their message is if you don't offer a place to enter one.

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8. `www.hotscripts.com`
9. `www.wufoo.com`

In order to more effectively respond to someone's query, ask for additional information. Many sites employ a drop-down with a predetermined list of options that help clarify the theme of the message. You may ask for additional pieces of information, such as a phone number, address, or a piece of data applicable to only your company (like a policy number for an insurance company). Review Figure 6-12—this small wine manufacturer offers a drop-down to help users better identify themselves, and offers optional fields for their company and phone numbers.

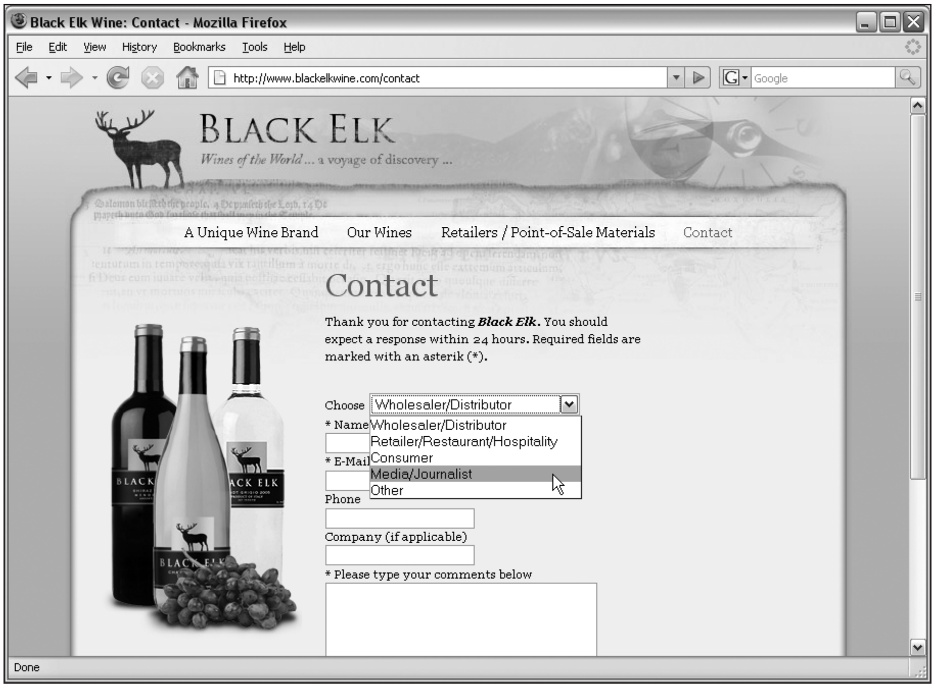

Figure 6-12. This small wine manufacturer enables users to better identify themselves when contacting the company.

Choosing required fields

Part of the task of building a contact form is deciding which fields will be required. There is no science to this, but it does take some deliberate consideration in carefully categorizing fields in order of importance. Looking at your final contact form, you should be able to place each field into one of these buckets. (Keep in mind that this thought process only works if you're honest.)

1. **Level A: Mission-critical, must-have info**: As we discussed earlier, e-mail, name, and message clearly fall into this bucket; in our other example, a policy number for an insurance claim could easily be considered crucial to processing the query.
2. **Level B: Fairly important, would-make-your-life-better-if-you-had-it info**: This might be a phone number for a technical support question, or a customer number, or some other tidbit you *could* live without, but would really rather not.

3. **Level C: Strictly supportive, in-a-perfect-world info**: This is the stuff that you couldn't seriously convince anyone would be required. Mailing address, middle initials, and the like all fall under here. These are the fields that only the very bored or anally retentive fill out.

Everything in level A should be required, nothing in level C. Level B, being the middle of the road, is open to interpretation; you should deliberate carefully over whether to require anything beyond level A.

People *expect* the e-mail, name, and message fields to be required, and marking them as such is more a formality than anything. If someone is taking the time to fill out a contact form, and they want a response, they will fill in every piece of information they think will help them get a better, faster response, whether the field is required or not. But if you mark everything in your level B as required, you may put off a certain segment of users who are not willing to give up that much anonymity and may just enter a bunch of junk data for fields you don't really need anyway.

It's easy for a marketing person to look at their contact form and say, "I want everything on there to be required" because it's their job to obsess over customer metrics, market analysis, and user behavior. But that's not realistic. People who *want* to fill it out *will* fill it out—it just requires a little faith on the part of the company to allow them to do so.

Usability considerations

Beyond the squishy realm of deciding on required fields, there are a few usability considerations for contact forms. These are not laws written in blood and stone, but rather best practices recognized by the general web community:

- Use the correct HTML tags when writing your form. Using the `<label>`, `<fieldset>`, and `<legend>` tags properly will aid in the general accessibility of your form. Also, dictating the tab index using the `tabindex` attribute ensures that keyboard users will flow through the form naturally.
- If using JavaScript to enhance the functionality of the form, make sure that the form works just as well if JavaScript is disabled.[10]
- When creating error messages, make sure that they are explicit in telling the user what field is affected and what they can do to fix the problem. For instance, if there's an error in the phone number field, a message like "Bad data" does not help anyone. But if the error is something like "Please make sure your phone number is at least seven characters long," users can quickly discover where they went wrong.

Once you've built your form, test it on different browsers with different length messages, and make sure they are being received by the proper inboxes. Remember that it's always the small, simple things that go wrong, and there's nothing more frustrating than breakdowns in communication—especially when they could have been avoided by some simple testing up front.

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10. Simon Willison wrote a great article for SitePoint called "Simple Tricks for More Usable Forms." It highlights some powerful enhancements that some minor client-side scripting can make to basic HTML forms. The article is available at `www.sitepoint.com/article/simple-tricks-usable-forms`.

Summary

Your company's About section is going to be a high-traffic area. People care about the little details like corporate charity and quarterly earnings, and the power of well-designed information cannot be understated. Take advantage of the medium and build a rich environment for your visitors. Well-organized press release pages, detailed investor relations, and a premium contact form will go a long way in building the company's name as a reputable contender.