

# 20 Common Mistakes that Sabotage Your Website

(and how to avoid them)



# Introduction

So many things can go wrong with a website it's hard to choose the 20 biggest mistakes. But the basic idea is easy sum up:

*Your website is not about you, it's about your visitor.*

If your site isn't focused on meeting *their* needs and making it easy for *them* to accomplish their goals you can be sure you're losing potential customers.

Take a look at the examples of what NOT to do. You'll see not even the world's largest and most successful companies are immune.

Bear in mind, you can't possibly be objective about your own website. Get a professional website evaluation or conduct basic user testing to identify the specific problems you need to fix on your site.

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# 1. Doesn't look professional

**Visitors begin to form an opinion about your site very quickly— before they read a single word.**

If it's obviously outdated or doesn't come across as professional you immediately and irrevocably undermine visitor confidence. In other words, they hit the "back" button.

## Hint

1

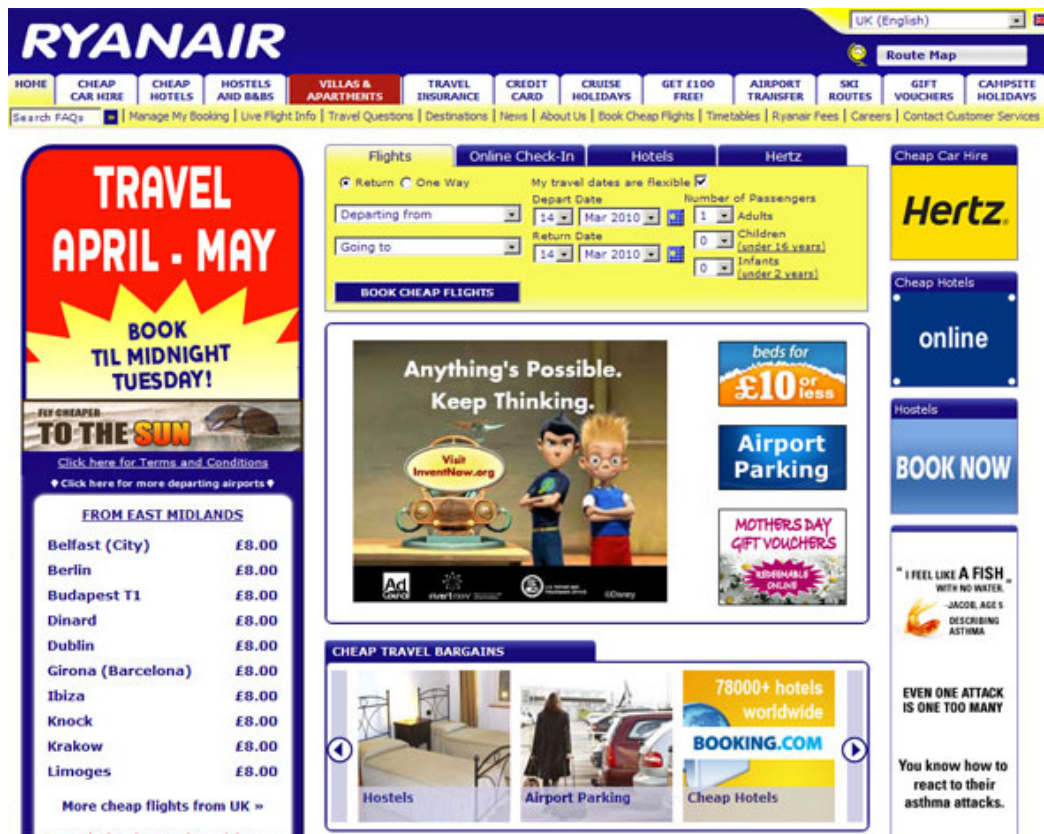
If it says "Welcome to our website" it's outdated.

## Hint

2

If it contains more than 1 moving element (and it's not a gaming or gambling site) it's not professional.

# 1. Doesn't look professional (cont.)



## Warning:

The RyanAir home page contains five flashing elements and one slideshow.

I'd think twice before I'd trust my life to this airline, no matter how cheap their tickets are.

## 2. Lack of hierarchy

### **Can visitors quickly understand what your site is about?**

Do they know what they're supposed to look at?

### **Is the most important message the most obvious?**

Take the squint test. Squint your eyes and look at your home page.

### **What pops out?**

If it's a stock photo or animated graphic, chances are your eyes are moving to the wrong thing.

If any element on the page doesn't add value for the visitor, get rid of it!



# 2. Lack of hierarchy (cont.)

The screenshot shows the Charles Schwab website homepage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'LOG IN', 'Contact us | Visit us', and a search box. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with categories like 'Welcome to Schwab', 'Investment Products', 'Research & Strategies', 'Advice & Retirement', 'Active Trading', and 'Banking & Lending'. A large banner on the left promotes 'ONLINE EQUITY TRADES SLASHED TO \$8.95 FLAT.' with a 'GREAT NEWS' badge. To the right of the banner is a login section with fields for 'Login ID' and 'Password', and a 'LOG IN' button. Below the login section are links for 'Call us at 800-435-4000', 'Find a branch near you', and 'Visit other Schwab Sites'. Further down, there are sections for 'Schwab Bank Rates and Solutions', 'Schwab Exchange Traded Funds', and 'Market News'. The layout is dense with text and links, illustrating a lack of clear hierarchy.

▶ If you're not interested in "online equity trades" good luck finding what you want on the Schwab home page.

A huge number of links, buttons, boxes and backgrounds make finding what you want difficult and slow.

Shame on you Chuck.

Table of Mistakes

## 3. Difficult To Scan

Few humans start at the top of a web page and systematically move their eyes down, reading each word.

**We scan.**

Our eyes jump around quickly. Big blocks of text are hard to scan, so we have the choice of reading them or clicking to another site.



It is impossible to scan the Gravoc Software page. There is no headline, no sub-headers, no bold text, no lists, nothing whatsoever to make scanning an option. There's always the BACK button.

P.S. Could be one of the ugliest graphics ever created. Ditto the logo.



## 4. Confusing Navigation

If visitors can't figure out where they are, where they've been, and where they can go, there's always the browser's BACK button.

### Navigation no-no's include:

- Too many different menus
- Too many options at one time
- Names that aren't clear
- Links that don't look like links and my personal favorite
- Links that are obscure icons

Not even the Amazing Kreskin would know that clicking on the "eye" icon links to the "Line Advance is Back" page (see inset)?



# 5. Too Much Text



**Say whatever it is you need to say quickly.**

How do you know if you have too much text?  
Try reading it aloud.

If you can't get through it without getting bored, you have too much.

**Would you read this home page?**

This page is also an outstanding example of no hierarchy, difficult to scan, and no call-to-action.

**Hint**

**3**

**If you're not a good writer hire a professional copywriter. It is an excellent investment.**

## 6. Not Enough Text

**Do you think your photos “speak for themselves?”**

**They don't!**

You need to help visitors understand and appreciate the value of what they're looking at.

This is especially important for designers and portfolio websites.



## 7. Bad Photography

Too small. Blurry. Generic. Not informative.

Bad photography detracts from your message. It adds visual clutter and distracts visitors for no reason. Stock photos of happy smiling people are ignored or worse— they undermine your credibility because visitors sense they're fake.

**Good photos enhance your site by providing useful information about your products and services.**

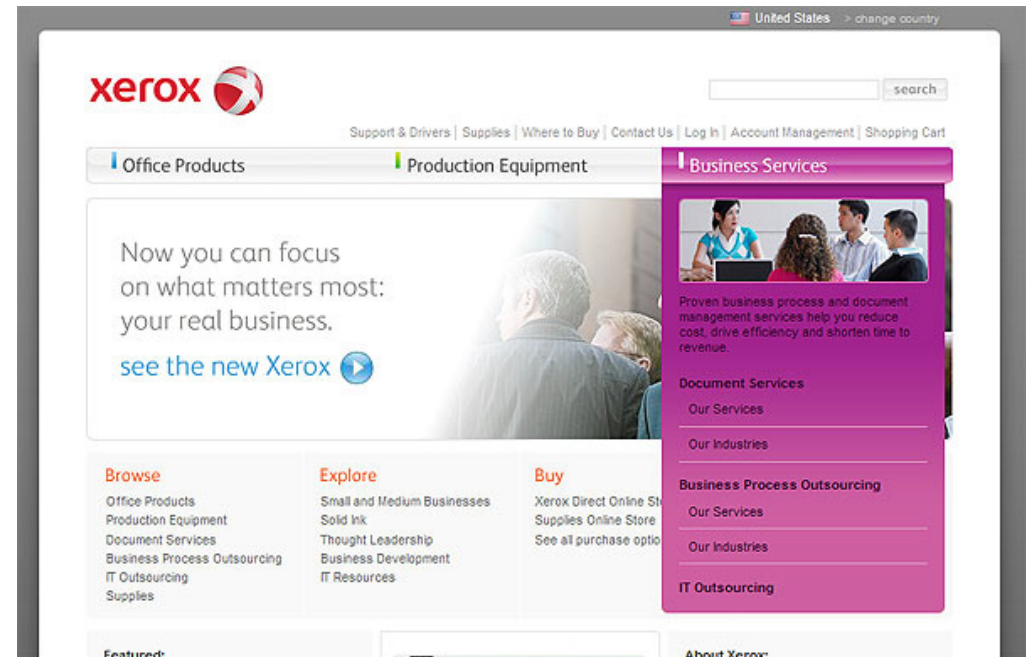


## 8. Not Enough Contrast

Low contrast between text and background makes reading difficult, especially for people with less than perfect vision. This is a very common problem and reflects a lack of user-focus.

Even some of the world's largest and most successful companies are guilty of this mistake. Xerox's black text on purple background is an example of design trumping usability.

Sadly, the design isn't all that great either.





## 9. Poor Copyrighting

Indecipherable, confusing, meaningless groups of words that make you scratch your head and say “whah?”

Typos. Misspellings. But the big problem— copy that’s all about your business rather than your visitors.

Founded in 1996 Absolute, has a proven track record of high quality, on-time, price performance achieving a successful year over year growth. Highly flexible and agile in its approach to projects; consistently meeting and exceeding customers expectations; set Absolute apart from the mainstream vendors. Absolute has continuously reinvested in infrastructure, systems and most recently installed solar power to reduce costs and environmental impact We look forward to discussing your needs and our capabilities in more detail at your earliest . "Partners, in your success".



# 10. Using Terms Your Visitors Don't

Your site's goal is to **communicate** clearly with visitors. Avoid using terms or jargon they don't understand, especially in your navigation.

Zip, Zeek, Zak, Zo, Zoosh? Do these link names mean anything to anybody? If someone is *really* interested they might start to click on those right side "footprints" but who has the time to play around? Most likely they'll click their browser back button.

**Frog Reading** Wild Daisies PUBLICATIONS LIMITED

**A Fresh Approach to Teaching**

Introducing Zip, Zeek, Zak, Zo and Zoosh.  
A cast of unforgettably exciting frogs accompany children as they travel from reading levels 0 - 14. This integrated reading program has been used in many schools and homeschool environments in Australia and New Zealand over the last decade. More than 400,000 books have been sold.

**72 Books . 5 Series . 5 Frogs . 14 Reading Levels**

Preschool, elementary & homeschool early integrated reading curriculum.  
Corresponding lesson plans with introduction suggestions. Includes activities related to each book.  
Written & illustrated by a passionate teacher of over 25 years and still counting.  
For learners of ALL levels, including ESL students!  
Non-biased by gender or ethnicity.

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512.695.0171

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**Side note:** The combination of red, green and yellow maybe playful but I find it painful.

This is also an example of mistake #8, not enough contrast, #3 difficult to scan, and #12 no call-to-action.

# 11. No Clear Value Proposition

**“What is your value proposition”** is the business-school way of asking:

*What’s in it for me and why should I do business with you?*

That’s what your visitors want to know. But most websites fail to answer in a concise or coherent way (if at all).

There are two reasons:

- 1) The business owner or web designer **didn’t think about it**
- 2) They’re **really difficult questions** for most of us to answer

# 11. No Clear Value Proposition (cont.)



The Integrated Business Group is a little worse than most. They suppose I'd want to do business with them because they're gonna REV MY 2010 YEAR with a new ERP Solution Microsoft Dynamics? At least it doesn't say 2009.

## 12. No Call-To-Action

***“What am I supposed to do on this page?”***

Don't make them think, don't make them guess. Every page on your site should have a call-to-action that guides your visitors, one step at a time, to do what you want them to do.

**Unless you're a dominatrix don't use a button that says “submit.”**

Avoid “click here” links.

The best calls-to-action include a benefit:

***“Get a no-obligation quote” or “Start your free trial.”***





# 12. No Call-To-Action (cont.)



Paradigm Technologies has scrolling news & events, flashing headers, sliding customer quotes, and rotating text inside that strange arrow-wheel. There's less going on in Times Square (but nothing resembling a call-to-action).

P.S. If it happened in 2004 it is no longer "news."

Table of Mistakes

# 13. Slow-Loading Pages

## Nobody likes to wait for a web page to load.

A study by Equation Research found that **78 percent of consumers** jumped to a competitor's site after encountering slow-loading pages or errors. Not only that, they're likely to share their bad experiences via social networking.

## How fast does your page load?

Vertain Software <http://www.vertain.com/?sst> tells you, compares the results to benchmarks, and offers suggestions on how to improve the speed. Free.



# 14. No Keywords

## **No keywords in your copy? Expect your site to get very low rankings in the Search Engine results.**

If you want people to be able to find your site you must know the most important keywords they use and include them in the copy on every page. Each page can and should be “optimized” for keywords that are relevant to that page. Be sure to include keywords in your Browser titles too ([see #15](#)).

Don't try to optimize any single page for more than 2 or 3 keyword phrases or stuff your page with keywords. **Remember you're writing for people, not Search Engines.** Try to use keywords in your page titles, headers and links.

**Google offers a free keyword research tool, as does [Wordtracker](#) and [Keyword Discovery](#).**

# 15. Bad Browser Titles

**Many small businesses use a generic browser title (usually their company name) and repeat it on every page throughout the website.**

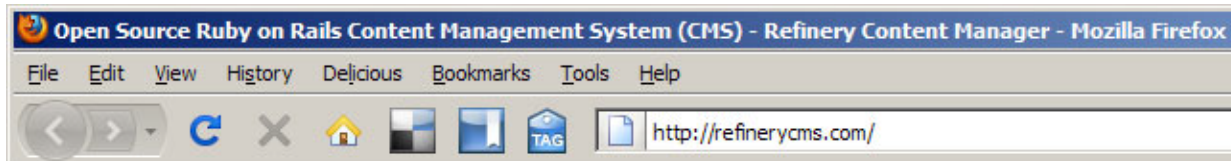
This is a mistake because it denies you three important advantages:

1. **The page title shows up at the top of the browser window**, orienting visitors and telling them what the page is about. They know what content to expect (which is reassuring).
2. **Your page title also appears on the Search Engine results pages**. If it contains keywords you're more likely to get people to click on it.
3. **You want a unique, keyword-rich title for each page** because Search Engines use it in their algorithms to determine your site's ranking.

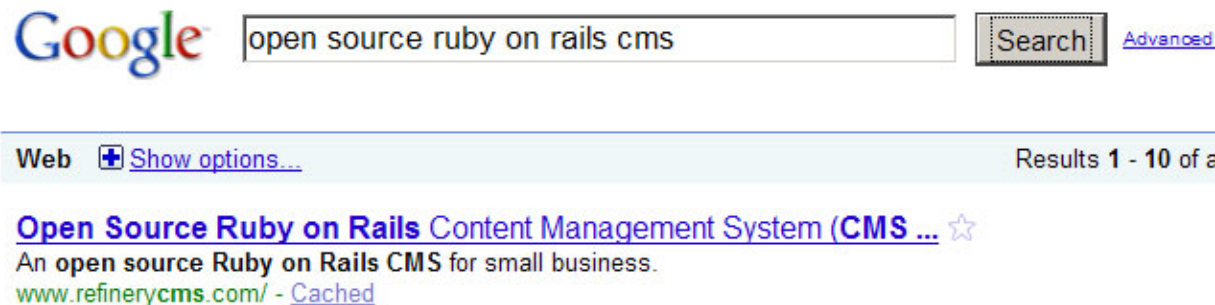
# 15. Bad Browser Titles (cont.)

**A good title is no longer than 65 characters (including spaces) and contains relevant keywords specific to the page.**

How the browser title appears: Note the site name (Refinery Content Manager) is at the end, after all the keywords.



How the browser title appears in the Search results. Note the keywords are in bold.





# 16. Long Forms

**Long forms are an obstacle. The more effort required, the more time it takes, the less likely that visitors will complete it.**

Nobody should have to read a lot on a form.

Nothing should interfere with the flow from field to field to the action button.

On the example, after filling out all the standard name/email/password and payment fields, visitors are confronted with big text areas, three checkboxes and three pulldown menus before they eventually see the tiny gray “Sign up” button at the bottom.

The screenshot shows a registration form titled "Register" with the following sections:

- Registration Fields:** First name, Last name, Email, Password, and Password confirmation.
- Executive Membership! (Green box):** \$50.00 One Time Enrollment Fee, \$60.00 Membership Fee, \$180.00 + GST.
- Payment Details:** Address Line 1, Address Line 2, Country (Canada), Province/State (Alberta), City, Postal Code/Zip, Phone Number, First name, Last name, Card type (Visa), Card number, CVV, and Card expires on (2010, 3 - March).
- Sign me up for HappenLink:** A checkbox and text explaining the service.
- Sign up for the McCraig Self-Development Survey:** A checkbox and text explaining the survey.
- Register me for HAPPEN's Recruiter Workshop:** A checkbox and text explaining the workshop.
- Sign up (CLICK ONLY ONCE):** A small, gray button at the bottom of the form, circled in red.

# 17. Too many required fields

**Only the information that is *absolutely* necessary should be required on a form. Ask for too much and one of two things will happen:**

1. **Visitors will leave** without submitting the form
2. **They'll enter fake information** just to be able to accomplish their goal (c'mon, you know you've done it too)

This site requires nine fields *just to join the mailing list!*

[Join Our Mailing List](#)

Please fill out this form to sign up for our mailing list. We will keep you apprised of new releases. Fields marked with \* are required to complete your addition.

**Billing Information**

\*First Name:

\*Last Name:

\*Email:

\*Please Re-Enter Email:

\*Mailing Address:

Mailing Address2:

\*City:

\*State:

\*Zip Code:

\*Day Phone:   
as 123-456-7890

# 18. About Us Pages That Aren't

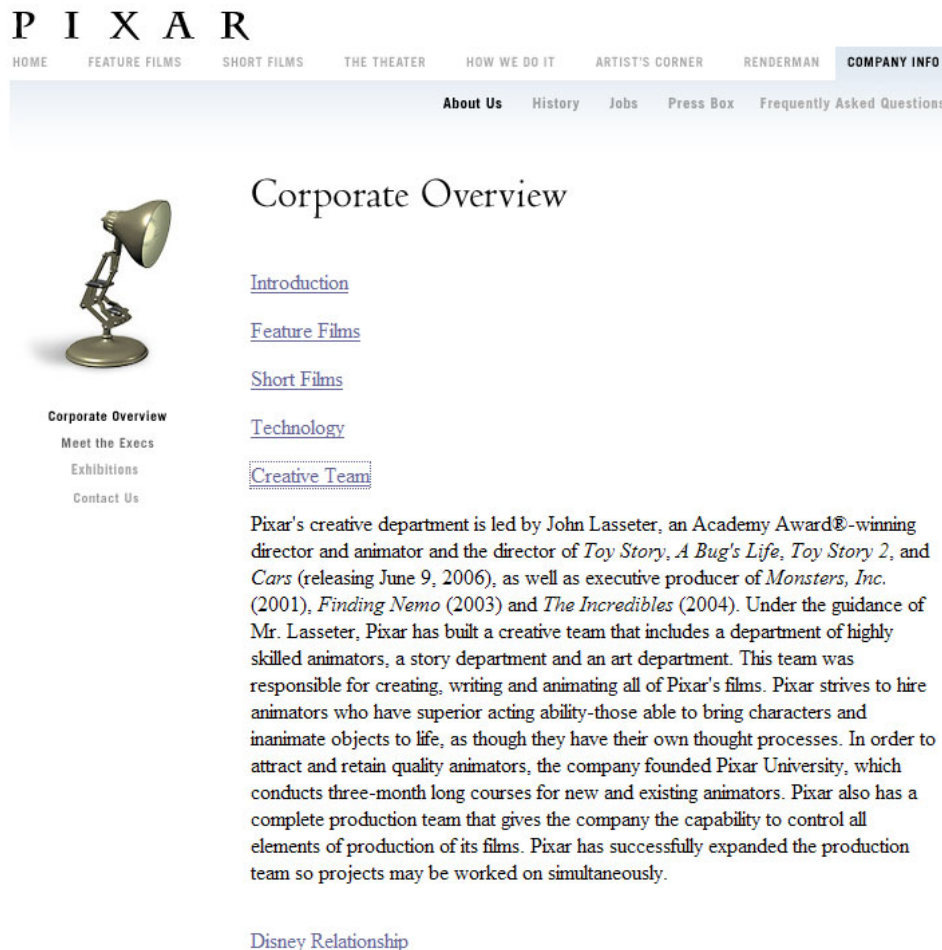
**This is the one place on your site where it is OK to focus on you!**

One thing we've learned from web analytics is the About Us page is one of the most frequently visited pages. Of course this varies according to the nature of your business but if you want and expect people to interact with you, you can be sure they want to know who you are.

**That means at least the names of your key staff, a little biographical information, and a photo.** Think of it as a chance to introduce yourself. Say too little and you lose an opportunity to build a relationship with your visitors. Say too much and they'll simply stop reading.

**Don't use the About Us page to tell people what you do. It should reflect your personality, your passion and tell a story that's human.**

# 18. About Us Pages That Aren't (cont.)



P I X A R

HOME FEATURE FILMS SHORT FILMS THE THEATER HOW WE DO IT ARTIST'S CORNER RENDERMAN COMPANY INFO

About Us History Jobs Press Box Frequently Asked Questions

Corporate Overview

Meet the Execs

Exhibitions

Contact Us

## Corporate Overview

[Introduction](#)

[Feature Films](#)

[Short Films](#)

[Technology](#)

[Creative Team](#)

Pixar's creative department is led by John Lasseter, an Academy Award®-winning director and animator and the director of *Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life*, *Toy Story 2*, and *Cars* (releasing June 9, 2006), as well as executive producer of *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *The Incredibles* (2004). Under the guidance of Mr. Lasseter, Pixar has built a creative team that includes a department of highly skilled animators, a story department and an art department. This team was responsible for creating, writing and animating all of Pixar's films. Pixar strives to hire animators who have superior acting ability-those able to bring characters and inanimate objects to life, as though they have their own thought processes. In order to attract and retain quality animators, the company founded Pixar University, which conducts three-month long courses for new and existing animators. Pixar also has a complete production team that gives the company the capability to control all elements of production of its films. Pixar has successfully expanded the production team so projects may be worked on simultaneously.

[Disney Relationship](#)

Pixar does a surprisingly bad job on their About page. Clearly their Creative Team was too busy to waste time on their own website.

This is BOR-ING.

# 19. Contact Pages Without Contact Information

**Here's an example of a Contact page that doesn't include basic contact information.**

You have to go to the Retail Location page to find the address, hours, phone number, map, everything you need to contact this business. But why isn't this on the Contact page (where they have only a toll-free number, fax, and email link)?

The contact page should also include a simple contact form so you don't have to open your email program, and they can send you a nice friendly auto-reply message thanking you for your inquiry and telling you about their new cookie recipe or special deal.

See our blog post on [12 Tips for an Effective Contact Page](#).

The screenshot shows the 'Contact Us' page for 'HOPE'S COUNTRY FRESH COOKIES'. The page has a yellow header with the brand name and three cookies. Below the header is a navigation menu with 'Contact Us' selected. A shopping cart summary shows a subtotal of \$0.00 and 0 items in the basket. The main content area is titled 'Contact Us' and includes the text 'Send A Box Or Tin Today!' followed by contact information: 1.888.COOKIE-9 (1.888.266.5439), Local Fax: 610.272.1020, USA Toll-Free Fax: 1.877.767.7918, and E-mail: [comments@hopescookies.com](mailto:comments@hopescookies.com). There is also a 'Shop for Upcoming Occasions' section with a dropdown menu and a 'Shop for other Occasions' section with a dropdown menu.



# 20. No Credibility

**What's a credibility builder? Anything that reassures your visitors that they can trust you:**

Third-party endorsements, awards, affiliations, associations, testimonials, testing services, professionalism, spelling...

Here's a bank site that completely lacks credibility.

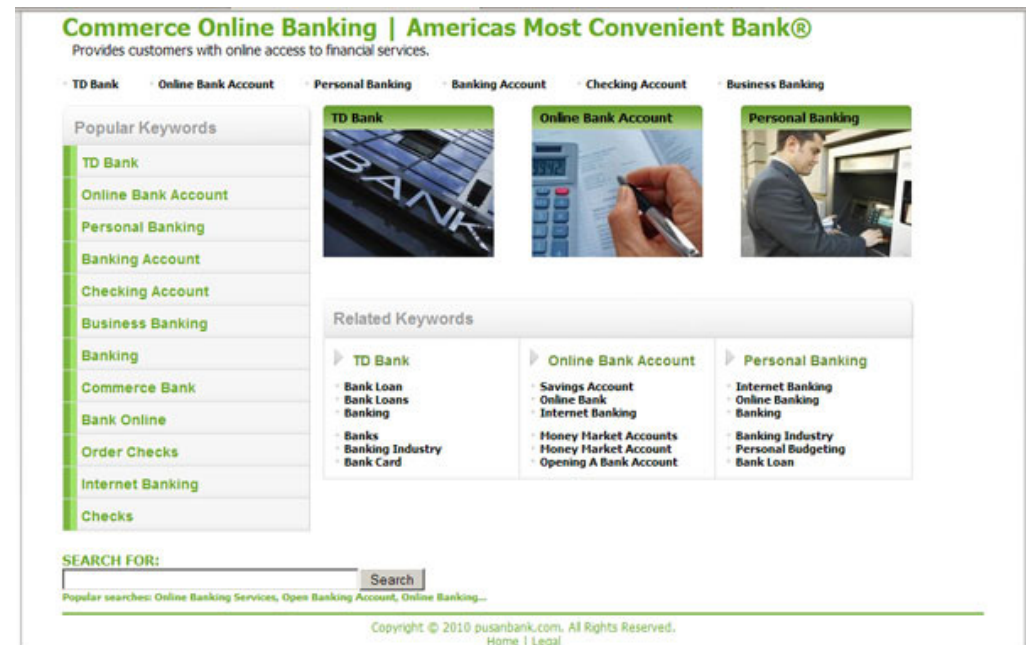
How about FDIC insured?

How about a contact link or a phone number?

How about an apostrophe after "America?"

Having spent a little more time on this site I've come to the conclusion that not only does it lack credibility, it's mighty suspicious.

I'm outta there.



# Selected Resources

## Attention Wizard

Artificial intelligence algorithms simulate human eye tracking. Free "Lite" Account. <http://attentionwizard.com/>

## CrazyEgg

See your heatmap in less than 2 minutes, starting at \$19/mo.

<https://crazyegg.com>

## Feedback Army

Simple, cheap usability testing. \$10 responses, \$10. The challenge is to ask the right questions. <http://www.feedbackarmy.com/>

## Keyword Discovery

They compile keyword search statistics from all the major search engines to create a powerful keyword research tool. Free trial.

<http://www.keyworddiscovery.com/>

## Refinery HQ

Create your own business website in the time it takes to finish your morning coffee. A simple and effective solution for non-technical people. <http://www.refineryhq.com/>

## Resolve Digital

Professional website evaluations starting at \$499. We identify problems that may not be revealed by do-it-yourself testing and we offer recommendations to fix them.

<http://resolvedigital.com/>

## Usabilla

Collect feedback on any webpage, mockup, sketch or image.

<http://usabilla.com/>

## UserTesting

Watch and hear real people as they use your website. \$39 per user.

<http://www.usertesting.com/>

## Vertain Software

Free website speed test.

<http://www.vertain.com/?sst>

## Wordtracker

Discover the keywords you need to succeed online. There's a free trial and they also offer a link builder tool to boost your search engine rankings.

<http://www.wordtracker.com/>



# About...

## The Author

Barry Harrison was trained and worked as an architect in Chicago, New York and San Francisco before turning to the web in 1995 (about the time the first ads with URLs began to appear on bus shelters and billboards). In 2001 he founded **Resolve Digital** to meet the online marketing needs of professional service firms and other small businesses.

## RefineryHQ

Can't afford our custom design and consulting? We created RefineryHQ as a do-it-yourself option for sole proprietors and small business owners. There's no easier way or faster way to build your website. Make your own website before you finish your morning coffee!

*Sign up for your **FREE TRIAL** at <http://refineryhq.com>*

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but please don't sell or  
change the content*

