

Demystifying the Web

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One of the side-effects of working in the IT industry is the constantly shifting sea of technology-related buzzwords that you have to navigate on a daily basis.

And an undesirable side-effect of this (apart from a mild bout of nausea) is that innocent bystanders outside the industry, and even many in the industry, are alienated or even intimidated by the language used to describe the technology which itself may actually help their business, organisation or other venture succeed. For example, a business owner may not know or care whether he has an RSS feed or not, but if you tell him there's a great new way to keep in touch with his regular customers and target them according to their tastes and preferences, he will more than likely be really interested.

Conversely, the origin and meaning of some buzzwords can also be quite amusing and interesting, as I discovered recently when I came across buzzwordhell.com, a website which encourages users to consign the latest buzzwords to semantic purgatory. I decided to write this article to explore and expose some of the more perplexing, annoying and downright bizarre phrases that are currently floating around in (to coin a particularly overused buzzword) cyberspace.

No article about web buzzwords would be complete without mentioning the current King of them all, Web 2.0. No-one can entirely explain what Web 2.0 is or does, but it seems safe to say it describes a 'second generation' of community-based websites that make increased use of shared content and user collaboration. Facebook is the true epitome of a Web 2.0 website.

In my search for a universally agreed definition of Web 2.0 I also discovered World War 2.0. First coined by Wired magazine to describe a wave of East European based hacking attempts, World War 2.0 is apparently used to describe online crimes where many hundreds or thousands of hackers join forces to target a single computer server.

I'm sure you've also heard of DotComs, but amid the explosion of web-related business ideas over the last ten years many a dot-bomb has been deployed. Like home-made fireworks, the recipe for a dot-bomb is simple and highly risky; come up with any idea that involves building some kind of web business (preferably 'Web 2.0'), get venture capitalists to invest lots of money in marketing campaigns and training loads of staff, then watch the whole thing collapse 2.0 years later.

While we're on the gloomy subject of failing businesses, the revolting meatball sundae (derived from the title of a US marketing book by Seth Godin) can be used to describe what happens when you take two perfectly good business ideas and try to make them work together. I can't help wonder what the Manx equivalent would be... Kippers'n'custard?!

If your business is not in fact a dot-bomb or a meatball sundae, there's a good chance it might be bricks-and-mortar (a 'traditional' business not run on the internet). If your business model is half in the real world and half online (eg Amazon) you might call yourself clicks-and-mortar, or bricks-and-clicks.

Social networking (a general term to describe the use of online communities and forums) is a buzzword that has itself spawned a whole army of buzzword children including the following three. Friendquest describes the activity of lonely computer geeks who use the internet as a place to make friends with random strangers in online games and forums. The opposite of going on a friendquest is going trolling, the act of deliberately posting controversial or offensive messages with the intention of baiting other users into a heated debate. As well as trolls, social networkers should beware of sockpuppets, that is to say internet users who create false identities in order to achieve marketing - or more malicious - objectives. In 2007 the CEO of US company Whole Foods was found to have praised his own company whilst predicting a dire future for rival Wild Oats Markets using a concealed identity on a Yahoo Finance Message Board.

Another neologism that is currently popular with online journalists is crowdsourcing. Nothing to do with hiring movie extras for crowd scenes as I first suspected, this term describes the process of outsourcing a task or project to a large undefined group of (usually) volunteers over the web. Crowdsourcing has been used in a number of ways that are both effective and exploitative. In 2006, Canadian mining company Goldcorp published a large amount of geological survey data about its 55,000-acre Ontario site and offered a \$500,000 prize for anyone who could accurately identify gold-yielding areas. The project was absurdly successful with over 1,000 entrants worldwide collectively identifying areas which, once mined, produced 8 million ounces of gold – worth around \$3 billion!

Bloggers, the journalists of the online world, have also been responsible for many new additions to the 'marketing dictionary', including the blogosphere (the blogging industry), blogola (free products, trips, payments and other goodies that bloggers receive as payment) and blog grovelling (companies offering blogola in exchange for favourable write-ups).

It's safe to say that the internet has already created more than its fair share of buzzwords and jargon, most of it annoying, some of it amusing. I'm sure there'll be a whole lot more of it too, but in all honesty I think it's time I stopped writing about buzzwords before I turn into someone who uses far too many of them! Now what could you call someone who uses too many buzzwords?

A buzznerd?