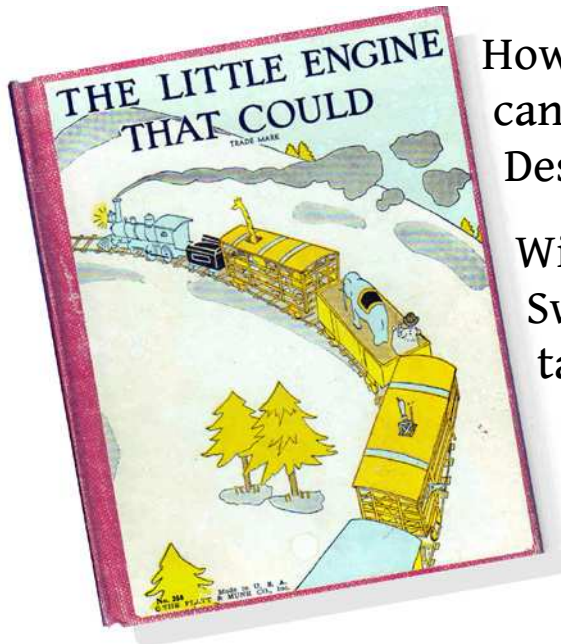


The big Railway that couldn't.



How good design
can hide bad
Design of Communication.

With the website of the
Swiss Federal Railways
taken as an Example.

by Markus Seger

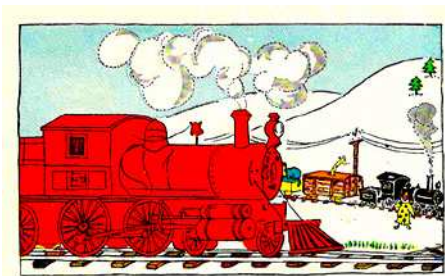
What we are talking about.

This is about the presentation of a national railway company in the Internet. But, what could that have to do with “The little Engine that could” that I put on the title of this paper?

In Wikipedia we find the following about this very famous American children’s book:

“In the tale, a long train must be pulled over a high mountain. Various larger engines ... are asked to pull the train; for various reasons they refuse. The request is sent to a small engine, which agrees to try. The engine succeeds in pulling the train over the mountain while repeating its motto: "I-think-I-can, I-think-I-can, I-think-I-can ".”

But look at the attitude of one of the big engines as written in the book:



But the Shiny New Engine snorted: “I pull you? I am a Passenger Engine. I have just carried a fine big train over the mountain, with more cars than you ever dreamed of. My train had sleeping cars, with comfortable berths; a dining-car where waiters bring whatever hungry people want to eat; and parlor cars in which people sit in soft arm-chairs and look out of big plate-glass windows. I carry the likes of you? Indeed not!” And off he

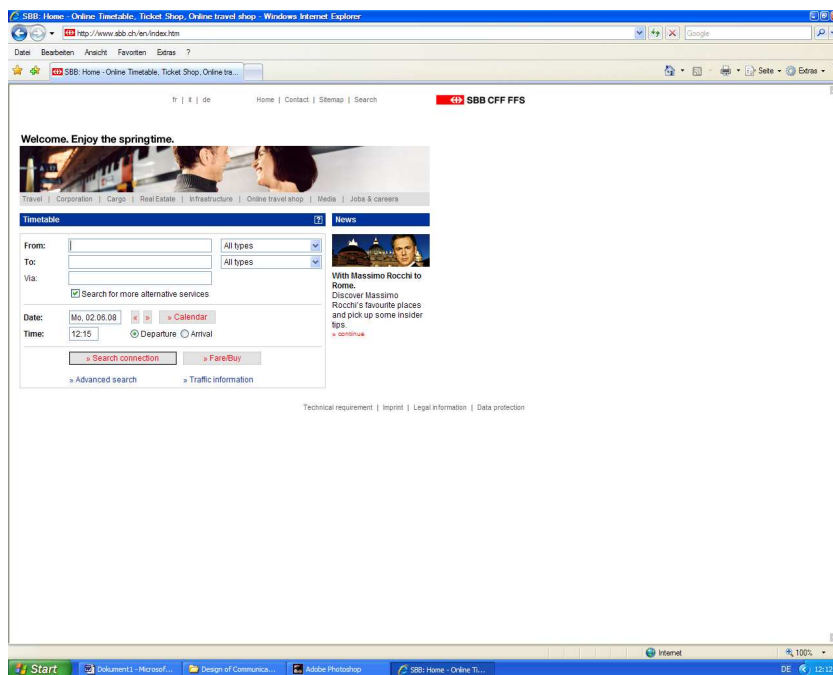
“...off he steamed to the roundhouse, where engines live when the are not busy. How sad the little train and all the little toys and dolls felt!”

That’s not so much different of how I feel when I visit websites like the one of SBB, our national railway company, for a little help and guidance. They do little more than telling me how great and wonderful they are, and little they care for my immediate needs as a simple passenger. And all of this in such a cool design, but with no feeling for what I use to call Design of Communication. Which would include the concern for a few other things than just the form.

It is about SBB because they are so excellent in a lot of what they do as a railway company, and because I think they deserve to be no less than excellent in the Internet.

SBB taken as an Example.

As I said: As a railway company SBB (Swiss Federal Railways) is probably one of the best of the world. Their website (www.sbb.ch) is probably the most visited one in the whole country. But mainly for one reason that has little to do with the quality of the rest: They offer the best timetable available, not only for their trains, but for the whole system of public transports in Switzerland and even beyond the borders of the country. This is what you get, as a homepage, on www.sbb.ch



But remember: We are visiting the homepage of the Swiss Federal Railways. Wouldn't you expect a little more than just a timetable? True, you can calculate your fare for the trip with this tool as well. And you can click to a trip with a certain Massimo Rocchi to Rome. Or, if you put on your glasses, you have a choice between the following links in the menu: Travel, Corporation, Cargo, Real Estate, Infrastructure, Online travel shop, Media, or Jobs & careers.

Am I the only one to feel a little lost, with this choice, if I simply want to know what they have to offer as the great Railway System they are?

Passenger's needs taken as a Benchmark.

The core business of SBB is traveling, and mainly traveling by train. Wouldn't you agree though that their main target group is travelers? And that the main need they meet is the one for mobility, and mainly by train?

Apparently SBB agrees to this predisposition. Why else would they put the timetable so prominently on their homepage? To know when you have your next train to wherever you want to go is a train traveler's basic need.

What else would she or he want to know? What's the price of the ticket is one thing. SBB took care of that as well. The fares for your connection are just one click away. So, for one trip once in a while your needs are taken care for pretty well. Under one condition: That you are familiar to the system, like a lot of people are, in Switzerland.

But what if, for any reason, you're not. You might be shocked by the price for the fare. You might wonder whether there are any discounts and under what conditions. How horrible is second class if first class is so much more expensive? Or is it not? Could you get a meal in the train? What about your baggage? And wouldn't you expect to find a map, somewhere in this website, to see where the trains go?

For all the answers to such questions we are used to look for in the menu of a homepage. What is offered there by SBB to the traveler in need for information?

Out of 8 links only 2 seem to have to do with traveling: "Travel" and "Online travel shop". Forget the latter for the kind of needs we are talking about. It's an online travel agency where you can book all kinds of trips and vacations by whatever means of transportation. Not what we are looking for.

So there is one single straw left, in the menu, to hold on for the one in search of train traveling related information. A little little, I would say. But let's try it anyway.

Click “Travel” to get lost.

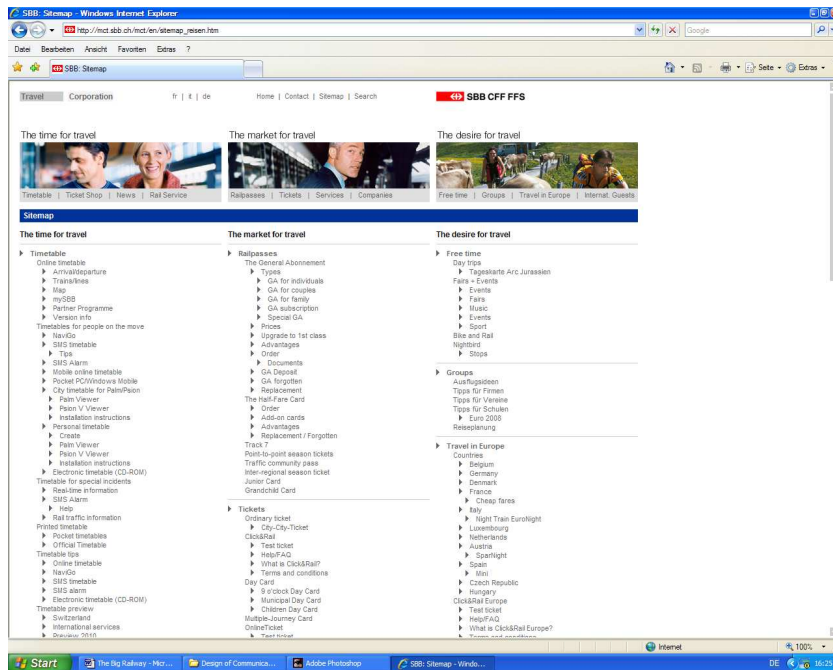


Doesn't this look familiar? Coming from the timetable we successfully clicked to another timetable. In fact, for whatever reason, it is the same, this time with the very smart headline “The time for Travel” to go along with the ones of the two other columns: “The Market for Travel” (whatever that might be) and “The Desire for Travel”. If you didn't see enough timetables so far you can click on “Timetable” again in the menu of the first column. Don't wonder what “Ticket Shop” has to do in the timetable column. There was just not enough space in the neighbored column where in fact it would belong. And should you already be confused and looking for a telephone helpline, take a guess. – Right: They call it “RailService”! Experienced clients know this. Didn't you?

I already mentioned that mysterious “Market for Travel”. It's not just a bad translation, as one could think. “Reisemarkt” in the original German version is as meaningless if used outside of the marketing department where it was probably invented. Didn't they hide the rail passes and the tickets pretty well? Or would you ever have guessed to find them under this title? Well, maybe not less than finding business traveling services under “Companies”.

Tons of Needles in a Haystack.

It's a National Myth in Switzerland that everybody knows Swiss Geography by heart. That's probably why the map of the Swiss railway network is hidden so shamefully in SBB's website. It's there, I know, I found it once, not through their search machine but in this sitemap. Go try to find it yourself, and you are going to find out something else:



This website is a haystack made of needles, and some even of gold! Everything is there, each and every information you could possibly ever need plus so many you would never think to ask for, thousands of them.

But, at least to my knowledge, a sitemap was never meant to take the place of a good site navigation. It's okay as an emergency exit, if everything else fails, or for research on a website.

The big and otherwise so admirable railway seems to have a big problem when it comes to face normal peoples needs for information in the Internet. Not because the information wouldn't be there. They are. – But then why?

Insiders vs. Dummies.

A second glance at that ominous sitemap gives way to a suspicion: Could it be that its structure is nothing else than a mirror of SBB's organization? Where titles would reflect the fields of responsibilities of departments and subtitles those of lower levels of competence etc ?

I guess it is, more or less, and it has a great advantage: For each item in the sitemap (representing a page in the website) there is somebody in the organization responsible for the content of that page. All you need to do is to instruct all these people how to use a content management system and the website fills itself up, automatically. – Great, one would say! No need of further editing of this monster made of information. Everything is correct, because it comes from the very source.

That's how the insiders at SBB might think.

But sorry: How should a dummy from the outside, and we all are dummies confronted as outsiders with the complexity of big companies, how should somebody like you and me understand the structure of this administrative masterpiece?

And there is a second suspicion: Of course they know at SBB that 99% of the visitors of this website click on it as travelers or potential travelers. That they come for SBB's services to the passenger and not because they belong to the much rarer species of clients for cargo, infrastructure, real estates or human resources. Could it be a question of power that the corresponding departments demand so much of the valuable and anyway extremely limited space in the menu on the homepage? Remember, there is already a link to "Company". Wouldn't you say that the one percent of visitors looking for it would easily find these departments under that link? And anyway, why should they look for it in the timetable?

I admit: www.sbb.ch is cleanly designed. But what I would call its Design of Communication is as presumptuous as the one of the big red engine on the first page of this paper.

Looking at it from the other Side.

“The little Engine that could” in the children’s book that gave its title to this paper has only one thing in mind: To serve those who need it and to do it’s best for them. Not like the big red engine whose only concern it is to show how big he is.

Seen from the outside a national railway company exists to deliver a wide range of services suited to a whole country’s people’s needs. And SBB does a great job, but not on its website.

“*People’s needs*” is the keyword. In front of the computer, surfing around in the Internet are not “markets” or “target groups”. There are single human beings with limited time and patience and individual needs. To them a Website is not a monument to celebrate the greatness of its owner. It’s a service.

The timetable is such a service. That’s why it is so greatly appreciated. Is it only luck that SBB found what a magnet for visitors this service is? And why not to learn from this for the rest of the website and to design it as a source of services instead of a mirror of the organization?

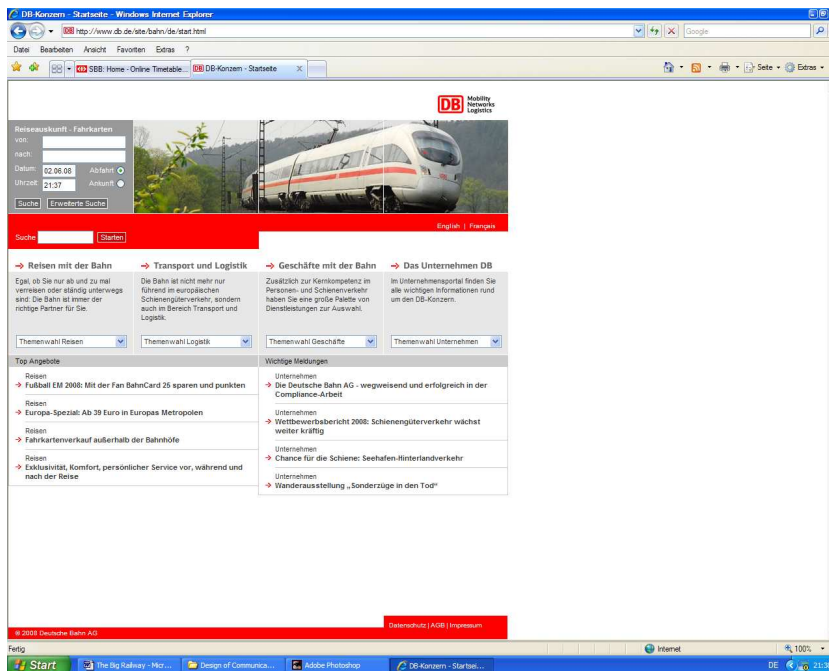
Everything is there, in terms of content, and probably even too much. But it’s carelessly stacked in a structural frame that has little to do with the frame of needs of those who visit the website in search for information and services. Texts are written correctly but with no care for what the reader might not know yet. Useful links that would transgress the field of responsibilities of one author to another one’s are often omitted, so one theme does rarely lead to another smoothly. It is only too obvious that there is no editor in charge for the website as a whole.

Seen from the outside this website is a heroic compilation of information, put in a nice design but, *as a whole*, with little concern for the needs of its users.

Still better than the Rest?

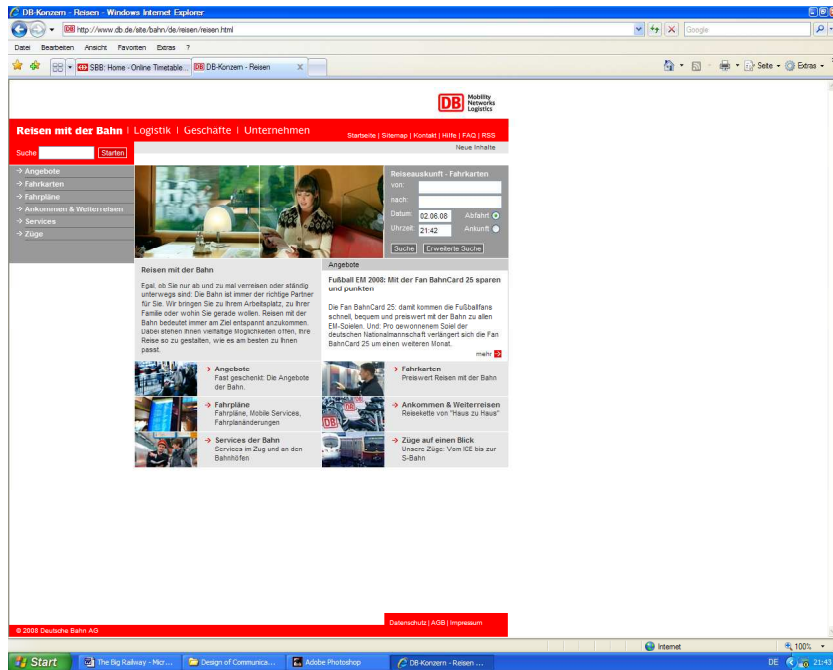
They should be, because they are, in a lot of ways. SBB is the backbone of the densest railway network in the world on a national scale. They closely cooperate with over a hundred of smaller transportation companies in the public sector in a perfectly coordinated system of timetables and pricing. SBB is the leading force in this outstanding system. The “national scale” is small, compared to the rest, but the performance is huge.

Let's concentrate on communication in the Internet again. Germany is considered to be “The Big Neighbor” by the Swiss. Shouldn't their national railway system have a website better than the one of the small province in the Alps? (www.db.de)



Well? – At least it's clear that this is not meant to be the homepage of a public service. Take away the timetable and it's simply the website of the public affairs department of a big company.

It's getting better though, if you click on "Reisen mit der Bahn" (they seem not to care about people who don't speak German).



But they too, and even more so, spoil the bigger part of their menu to the concerns of their "Unternehmen" (company) but still have the decency to give to the visitor (and client) of their website the choice between "offers", "tickets", "timetables", "arrivals and departures", "services", and "trains" in the vertical menu.

The "Deutsche Bahn" is a huge company trying hard to prove that they made it from government owned public services to being a big player in national, if not global, economy.

But, where do they earn their money, if not with their clients? They attempt to please everybody: politicians as well as the stock markets and, why not? – Their clients.

Maybe the French are a little better?

Put on your sunglasses. It's going to flicker.

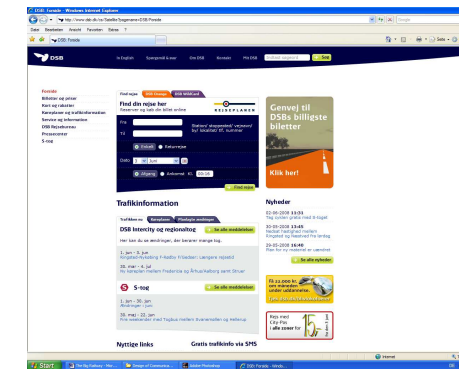
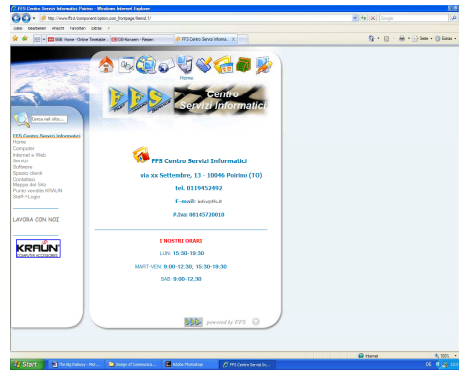


This is the English version of SNCF's website. (www.sncf.fr) If you don't understand it, don't care. Probably the French don't as well, and I guess that they probably wouldn't care. It might be enough that they have the TGV, which is great, and Paris in the centre.

Cultures are different, and we shouldn't "compare apples with pears", as we say in Switzerland.

There must be one railway company, at least, in Europe, that has a model website for everybody else in the branch.

I decided, and only not to bore my readers, to take together Austria and Italy as Switzerland's other neighbors, plus Spain and Denmark, because I expected some movement there, but in vain, as it turned out to be.

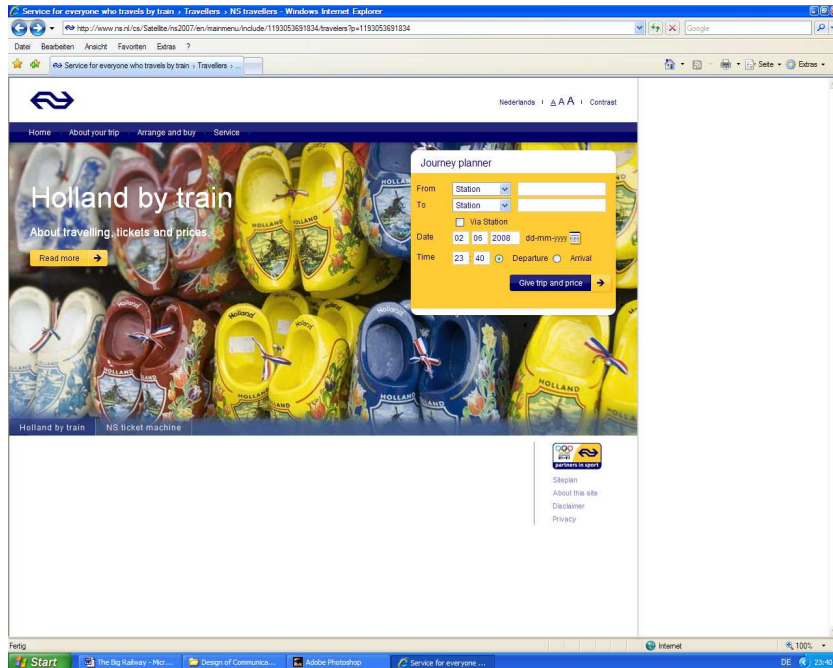


Don't care to put on your glasses. The Austrians are on a decent level, comparable to one of Switzerland's regional railway companies. And those are pretty good already. But, unlike the Austrian Railways, they would never care to inform their clients, or at least not in such prominence (meaning in the place of a menu navigation), about all their subcontractors, as the Austrians do. The Italians, very simply, seem not to be arrived yet, in the modern times of the Internet, and Spain is only a little bit ahead of them. Whereas the Danish, who were far ahead of everybody else in the branch in their communication's design of the eighties, seem not to have made it, in the meantime, to keep that level in the epoch of the Internet.

Forgive me, for being so harsh in my judgments. But try yourself: www.oebb.at, www.ffs.it, www.renfe.es, www.dsb.dk

A little Fresh Air from the North.

As all the other websites I mentioned you should try this one in its original language to be just in your judgment. Here is the English version of the Dutch railway's website (www.ns.nl).



This homepage even tells you what it is all about: “Holland by train”. Are you aware that words like “train”, “railway”, “rail” or even “Switzerland” are simply missing on SBB’s homepage? In the English version these words are even missing in the so called “meta tags” in the source code. This is simply a deadly sin.

Here is the only website I found that concentrates on being a help to the clients of passenger services. It has what it takes to serve the traveler, and that’s meaning *less* in the first place: Less talk about how great the company is, less links to branches of the company with no interest to the users of the train, less “Quicklinks” to things that you were not looking for.

When I began this little expedition in the Internet in search of something definitely better than www.sbb.ch I thought it would be easy. In fact I found that SBB is close to the top in the branch, in many respects.

SBB revisited.

I was amazed to find out that SBB's website is close to the top, amongst those of other national railway companies in Europe, if you judge them by their professionalism. Most of the others are much less up to date, some just out of date.

But now, at the end of my excursion, I feel fitter to redefine why I still find SBB's website quite awful:

In its classy outfit of state of the art web design there is no heart. Its like a shiny building made to impress the visitor instead of welcoming him.

I happen to know the headquarter of SBB's Passenger Division in Bern. The similarity is amazing to me. You enter this building through an opening in an impressing large glass front. But you first have to find this opening (they finally had to put a sign in front of it!). There is a second glass front inside. If you expect to find the "door" of that one straight ahead you're going to bang your head badly against this second glass barrier. This door is not where you think either. Inside, behind a desk made for a whole team of them, you find one single receptionist, nicely dressed, very polite, and you're asked your name and whom you want to see. You'll be safer now, because this person is obliged to pick you up at the desk. Otherwise you might bang your head again, against a third glass wall, where you might not see the opening if it wouldn't be opened for you. Once inside the building you get aware that you would never have found whomever you wanted to see by yourself. They are sitting on two floors , hundreds of them in even rows, all of them working behind the same desks with the same monitors on top, and all of them behind endless glass walls.

Hidden behind what looks like the embodiment of transparency: That's where the authors of www.sbb.ch are doing their work. The result is a perfect mirror of these conditions.

What it would take to make it better.

- To concentrate on what the client wants to know, instead of what the organization wants to tell.
- That means to know what the client wants to know in the first place. It's no big deal. It doesn't take a market research to find out. It takes the humility to try to understand. Ask some neighbors, if you don't know. And outside of the business, and not only your own kind. Don't hesitate to think that they are dummies. Keep in mind that the "For Dummies"-series is one of the biggest successes in general interest books.
- To be generous with information but not to drown your clients in it. And not to try to impress them, with the complexity of the matter and of what you know.
- As an author, to write with an understanding for the need for help. To place links to further information with this understanding, and not to drown them out with links to what you want to sell.
- To understand that the Internet is a public place for your website as a public service. That means to place just one link to the less public messages (like "About the Company") on the homepage, to open to an institutional sub web, instead of trying to bake together all of the companies activities in one big cake. Your institutional partners will be thrilled to find that you care for your clients first. This way they'll find their way to their specific messages anyway and even better. And don't forget that, as individuals, they are clients as well. So give them a chance to click back, if they want.
- To structure your messages along the needs of your public. Find the most basic and most common keywords for the menus. Don't try to be funny. Define tags (keywords for the internal search machine) for each article. Your clients are not looking for the last ten press releases when they click on "search", they are looking for help.

- To be very skeptical if your sitemap looks a lot like your organigram. To be skeptical as well if your homepage looks like a press release. To be even more skeptical if your homepage is splattered with tons of little ads (as so many websites are).
- To have somebody (or a group, if necessary) in charge to edit your website on a constant base and along coherent standards. You may use CMS (content management systems) in the organizational units in charge for each theme and you probably have to. But make sure that no article is ever published to the web without being checked, and edited if necessary, by the ones responsible for the website as a whole.
- To actively induce response by your public and to take make sure that it is taken care for in the organization as the most valuable source of insight it is. To take care that e-mails are answered and their relative concerns registered in the right place. To take the same care to any kind of response. (Funny little games and contests to activate the surfers are okay, but they are not what I mean here.)
- To check in to your own website once a week at least. Not even as the CEO you can delegate this task. And as such you should take care that anybody along the line doesn't. Websites are rotting quickly if they are not taken care for regularly by those responsible for them.

That's what I would say, if I was in charge. With great respect for the best railway company in the world, and because of this respect.

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