

And the best site is...

At about this time every year a certain newspaper joins forces with another major sponsor to promote the search for Australia's best website. It is claimed that this is the premier event of the Australian web calendar, and accolades fly in every direction to allegedly-worthy recipients. There are almost as many categories as websites (or, there used to be, at least), so most people go home happy.

Whilst ALIA has been an active and eager participant in previous years, this will be the first year that we fail to nominate — unless someone else has fronted up with the required 'nomination fee'. The idea of a nomination fee is presumably to reduce the burden on the selection panel and to weed out the tens of thousands of potential applicants, reducing the field to a manageable few. It may also help to sponsor the medals or prizes that they dish out, too!

However, it is interesting to note that there is a growing and more vocal disaffected group of web-users and web-builders alike who question the value of such award systems. After all, one judging panel's view on the merits of a particular website may not match that of the intended audience. Sites that have all of the flash, and little of the dash, are ones that demand the most from the visitor. Information professionals, in particular, are forever searching for the magical nirvana of a fast-loading, highly-informative and yet simple to use website, whilst those with more time on their hands and who see the web-based medium as more than outright information will go in search of the eye-candy and the innovation — download times notwithstanding.

Most award systems or programs or events focus on the good, but never the bad or the ugly. It is rare for a site to be publicly denounced on the basis of its poor navigation, poor content, ability to crash web browsers, illogical or clumsy use of javascripting or cookie technologies — and yet these are the sites that need the most help. Users, by and large, stay away in droves from these sites. With no time to spare, slow-loading sites are almost always left in a wake of hurried mouse-clicks that takes users elsewhere.

There is no denying that ALIANet (the website) suffers slightly in this department — the initial homepage that many people bookmark can often take too long to download,

although subsequent pages appear much more quickly. The speed factor is entirely due to an element that is not directly within our control at present — bandwidth. If the website alone had a significantly larger 'pipe' attaching it to the internet backbone, then the appreciable speed difference would delight all users of ALIANet. This is something that we are going to be looking at much more closely over the coming months.

What's on your wish-list for ALIANet?

The ALIA Board of Directors have asked me to undertake a review of all ALIA National Office information technology requirements for the Association. To begin the process, we will need to have a much clearer picture of what you — the members — would like to put on your shopping list. For example, as foreshadowed more than six months ago and due to member demands, we shall be offering e-commerce functionality (secure webserver transactions) on ALIANet later in the year, which will allow secure and direct payments over the internet, via credit cards.

Some obvious items are already on the 'wish-list'. For example, we are working towards allowing direct member access to maintenance of their own individual membership record details, and to permit renewal of membership through our website. We are also hoping to be able to offer improved access to all functions of our website through a much-needed upgrade to the size of the 'pipe' that connects us to the rest of the world (presently, our bandwidth is a single 64K ISDN link, which was considered luxurious only a few years ago).

But before we take any further steps in building the infrastructure to support new and improved features, we must determine the boundaries of what we have to deliver in the first place! When ALIANet began back in 1994, we were most certainly at the forefront of technology (at 'the bleeding edge', I continually reminded myself at the time...).

Now, at the turn of the century, it is time to re-evaluate how we can best serve the needs of members — and to demonstrate to the sector and to the wider community that we are still at the vanguard of the digital age. Tell us what you want, and we will see if we can build it for you. Send you ideas, comments and suggestions to wishlist@alia.org.au — and we will endeavour to report back in subsequent *inCite* issues what transpires! ■



Ivan Trundle

Manager,
communications
and publishing
ivan.trundle@alia.org.au

To begin the process, we will need to have a much clearer picture of what you — the members — would like...