Make Meta Information Public
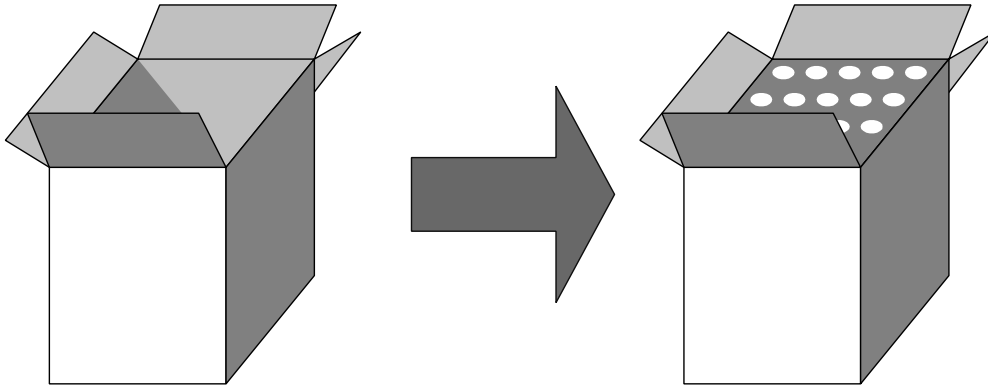
Show what's inside the box

The worst online stores refuse to give out a **phone number**. Customers can't reach them. Even the e-mail address is general; visitors know the webmaster isn't going to be very interested in their little problems.

So open up. On every page tell guests who made the page, when, and how to reach you. At a minimum, put your **name** and **logo** on every page.

Other **meta information** (info about the info) helps visitors put your page in a larger context, too—gauging its timeliness, its source, and its level of openness.

Bring 'em back alive

Some folks print out your page and then want to return, but their system does not include the URL on the printout. These people may never find the page again.

So include the URL at the bottom of every page. If your site is so scripted that you can't legitimately include the URL for this page because it will not be valid tomorrow, then put the URL for the home page.

All knowledge is of itself of some value. There is nothing so minute or inconsiderable, that I would not rather know it than not.

—Samuel Johnson, quoted in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*

State the status

Tim Berners-Lee, reflecting his background in the scientific community, urges that you "declare the status of the information: i.e., draft, final, in progress, for comment" (1995).

If your material ages like this, definitely alert the user to the current status.

Date your pages, too. Telling people how current the information is lets them evaluate its relevance. (You should, of course, set up some system for deleting old material gracefully).

Admit who you are

Put your name on the page and give your real e-mail address. Act as if a human being wrote the page.

> Provide an e-mail address and telephone number, or a conspicuous Contact link to this information, on every page of the site. The contact opportunities you provide customers reflect the value you place on customer service. (IBM, 1999)

EXAMPLES

Before
Original page ending:

And so, in conclusion, the committee has voted to prepare the standard for publication, with a target date of January, 1999.

After
Revised page ending:

And so, in conclusion, the committee has voted to prepare the standard for publication, with a target date of January, 1999.

Overview / Rationale / Recommendations / Conclusion

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> Contact: Jonathan Price

This page:
http://www.w8.org/reports/schema98

Posted July 1999
Formal Report (Archive version; will not be updated)

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Sure, why not?
TO LEARN	Helpful for those who get lost, wonder how current your material is, or need to get in touch with you.
TO ACT	Critical.
TO BE AWARE	Think of this as an exercise in honesty.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Following the guideline may seem tedious, but you open yourself up to your visitors.

See: Apple (1997), Berners-Lee (1995), Cook (1997), IBM (1999), Levine (1997), Lohse & Spiller (1998), Lynch & Horton (1997), Nielsen (1999d), Spyridakis (2000), W3C (1999).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*. (New Riders).