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# Think Before You Link

By D.L. Perkins

When you link your Web site with another, or cite a website in an article, e-mail or speech, your reputation is at stake. Just as your personal reputation will suffer if you associate with shady characters, your business reputation will suffer if you associate with websites that don't meet basic standards of professionalism, credibility, dependability and appropriateness.

But how do you know whether a website meets your standards? The quick answer is: thoroughly review the data on the site. In doing so, consider the following:

**Who's the Publisher?:** Does the page or site have an "About us," "Philosophy," "Background" or "Biography"? If you can't find one, truncate the URL (Web address). Do this by deleting the end characters, stopping just before each / (leave the slash). Press enter and again look for information about the publisher. Continue this process, one slash (/) at a time, until you reach the first single slash preceded by the domain name. This is the page's server or publisher.

**Contact Information:** Does the publisher of the page or site make it easy for you to contact it? A "Contact Us" or "Customer Feedback" link should be prominent, disclose the identity of the publisher and offer various means of contact.

**Freshness:** In most cases, you're better off with frequently updated sites. The best way to assess this is to peruse the site. Look for dates on content and in articles. Some publishers place a "last updated" date at the bottom of each page, but many do not. But don't rely on the date listed at Internet Explorer's File | Properties or Netscape's Mozilla's View | Page. These dates can be updated automatically.

**Longevity:** When was the site first created? A site's longevity is a clue to its stability. But finding this can be difficult. As an alternative, look for the date when the site was first registered. This can be found at [www.Network-Solutions.com](http://www.Network-Solutions.com): Click the WHOIS button in the bottom navigation bar. Type in the domain name of the site to see various data, such as whom it was registered to and when.

**Focus:** Is the Web site committed to its purpose? If so, all of the content and links on the site will have quality and relevance.

**Structure:** Is the site well structured? Does it contain an index or table of contents?

**Advertising:** If there is advertising, is it professional, appropriate and secondary, or is it dominant, aggressive and random?

**Biases:** Are there any apparent biases? Racial, gender, religious, or other types? Even nonprofit sites with the .org suffix may be biased.

**Privacy Policy:** If the website requires the visitor to enter personal information, make sure the site has a privacy policy. For example, the American Heart Association, [www.AmericanHeart.com](http://www.AmericanHeart.com), offers its policy at the bottom of each page behind a link titled "use of personal information."

**Legal Disclosure:** Professionally managed websites have appropriate legal disclosures. Often this is just a copyright notice. Other times they're disclaimers or, as in the case of the American Heart Association, an ethics policy and a conflict-of-interest policy.

**What Is the Domain Type?:** Today more than 20 different domain extensions are available. Still, the domain type can say a little about the source. For example, .org is used mainly by nonprofits and .com and .net are used primary by for-profit entities. .edu domains can be used only by accredited educational institutions. .gov and .mil can be used only by U.S. government and U.S. military units. Each country also has domain extensions that can be used only by citizens or organizations of that country. For example, .us, .uk and .de correspond to United States, United Kingdom, and Germany, respectively. ❖

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