

## Public broadcaster clicks online

Music is pumping, cappuccinos are flowing, and bigscreen TVs are flashing memorabilia. Sue Gardner, head of CBC's website, takes the podium, and faces the crowd of CBC employees who have been lured by iPod giveaways and lavish spreads of food to come celebrate the website's tenth anniversary. She talks about the mid-1990s. "People didn't believe in the Internet. They were skeptical about it. The company didn't have five cents to rub together. We were nervous. We were entrenching. We were worried about the future. And, at that time, a small group of folks made a pitch to managers of this ... company to say we should invest in online news." A group of evolved managers said yes, a brave thing to do, she tells the gathering. "So, where are we today?" she continues. "We have 160 people working for the website. We have 750,000-plus pages of material online. ... Over the years, I think we've won every major award out there. ... Our audience over the past year has increased 60 per cent ... and we are the Number 1 news media website in Canada since December, and still holding steady at the Number 1 spot ...

"We're not just a rising tide raises all boats. We're overachieving. We're doing better than everybody else."

Data from comScore Media Metrix puts the combination of CBC and Radio-Canada's websites in the Number 1 spot. "CBC.ca has become a dominant and credible brand on the Internet," even beyond Canada's borders, said Ian Morrison, spokesperson for Friends of

Canadian Broadcasting. "In my own opinion, I think it's because it stands out. It's different than a number of its competing sites," he said. On a recent business trip to Singapore,

Morrison tuned into Canadian radio news via CBC.ca. The site's design is clean and pleasing, he said, and when it comes to content, "CBC is the most trusted source of news and information in the country." Getting to this point hasn't been easy for CBC.ca, and its struggles aren't over yet. It was 10 years ago that CBC hired staff dedicated to the site, but its experiments predate the past decade. Gardner repeats a well-told story of a comment attributed to retired CBC executive Alex Frame, that "the Internet is just CB radio for the '90s." "The reason it makes me laugh is that, Alex Frame's son, Angus Frame, today runs globeandmail.com," Gardner said. In the early days, some TV and radio executives bristled because they were concerned the Web would cannibalize, she said. Turns out "the CBC audience are media junkies. If we give them more, they take more."

Aside from winning over executives, there was the need to train broadcast journalists to write for the web." Spelling, that's been our big learning curve," Gardner said. Broadcast scripts are spelled out phonetically, and the writers don't spell or punctuate correctly, she said. Blair Schewchuk, who created the site's training program for editorial staff, recently wrote a column recalling the time "we gave Diana the title 'Princess of Whales.'" The site introduced a "report a typo" feature

in the fall of 2004, and gets hundreds of comments a month, Schewchuk said. Beyond writing struggles, there have been technical struggles. In 1997, a hacker replaced the homepage with "The Media Are Liars." Like numerous news sites, CBC.ca crashed because of the overwhelming demand for news following Sept. 11. "Literally, we would publish using the same pipeline that viewers were coming in through," Gardner said. That was fixed a few years ago. Another struggle along the way was design. The 1998 Newsworld site had a black remote control on the left side of each Web page as a navigational tool, presumably because it would comfort TV viewers who were new to the Web, CBC.ca employee Paul Gorbould wrote in a column. Then there was the incident, in 1995, when an advertising agency convinced CBC to pay it to redesign the site to accommodate ads. "The only thing making money on the Web at the time was porn," CBC.ca business director Bob Kerr told Gorbould. "They came back with a site that looked like a porn site." To this day, the site's biggest problem continues to be money, Gardner said. "We want to do a lot of things and we need to figure out ways to pay for them." The site has had ads since day one, with the first version of the news site being sponsored by IBM, she said. About a year and half ago, CBC.ca decided to expand advertising to the bulk of the site - excluding the kids pages and the radio pages - but the site is still not profitable, Gardner said. Its budget has increased, but "we used to joke that we're just a rounding error," she said, declining to reveal any specific

budget details. Given that the site has 160 employees, Morrison estimates the site's costs are between \$10 million and \$20 million. While some observers might suspect that CBC has more room, as a public broadcaster, to experiment with a medium that's not profitable, Gardner said the reality is opposite. "It's hard for us to justify making a big investment, especially in technology or research and investment," because it's tax dollars, she said. "We typically are later on these things, because we have a responsibility to be prudent and careful." Morrison said he remembers CBC being criticized in the 1990s by a former chair of the CRTC for spending a significant amount of money on the Internet. Budget constraints are also partially to blame for the lack of archived material on the site, because CBC.ca has to buy the rights to use material it doesn't own, Gardner said. For instance, CBC doesn't own some of the theme songs for its radio shows, so the music is cut out of podcasts. Beyond music, there are rights struggles with freelancers, actors' unions and services that sell video clips, to name a few. "Everytime we screen a clip, we have to look out for all of these red flags," said Gorbould, who works on the site's archives. If the clip contains music, acting, a movie clip, writing, or a piece of art, it's likely to raise a copyright issue. CBC.ca sets aside a portion of its budget for clearing rights, Gorbould said. "Budget is always an issue." Web surfers can amuse themselves for hours playing on CBC.ca's archives, which feature old interviews, profiles, in-depth issues pieces, and pages dedicated to a myriad of topics from science to sports, complete

with clips and written explanations. The pages "skew heavily towards news and current affairs, because that's the stuff CBC owns outright," Gorbould said. He calls the archives, which have been around for four years and now have more than 10,000 clips online, a "treasure trove of material, some of which hasn't seen the light of day for 30 years." And it should, he adds, because the public's paid for it. "In a perfect world, everything that CBC does would have Internet rights negotiated upfront," he said. "That's what we're working toward." This summer, CBC.ca is going to be slapping up more clips without the accompanying writing and other pieces of context that the current archived material has, he said. "There's an appetite now to just put more online," he said. Teachers and other users have asked

CBC.ca to allow them to download the archived clips, but that's not currently in the cards. "It's a political question, in terms of what are we willing to give away and out of our control," Gorbould said.