

Learning

Really Useful Websites

By Kevin Kelly Whole Earth Winter 2000

I'm not the only one tired of seeing Yet Another Web Site. Visiting a new site is now low on my list, and returning to one is rarer still. Yet...there are some truly useful ones out there, providing novel services that warrant repeat visits. Some ought to be better known. Recently I surveyed my circle of friends and asked them to suggest a couple of Web sites that they used often and gladly. The ones I didn't know I tried out a while; the ones I kept returning to I present in this annotated list. Not included are content and news sites, or good destinations with specific niche appeal. With a few exceptions I list here primarily sites that act as general purpose tools.



eGroups (<http://www.egroups.com>)

Anytime you find yourself having to manage an ad hoc or emergent group, head to this site. It offers an easy way to send out mailings to a list of people and coordinate their replies. It also offers calendars for groups, automated reminders for groups, and other community-minded features. It's used with gratitude by book club members, parent organizations, one-time panels, and anyone else in a conspiracy to accomplish something.

Evite (<http://www.evite.com>)

Another group-oriented site, this one smoothes the chore of coordinating the schedules of people who are not only dispersed widely but who often don't know each other. Its simplest function is to invite a bunch of people to a party or meeting, with the option of having invitees share the emerging list of who's coming, so that the invitation becomes a truly group effort. It's so convenient and handy to use that students on college campuses use it to coordinate evening get-togethers.

PayPal (<http://www.paypal.com>)

I've been waiting for years for true peer-to-peer electronic money to arrive. Well, it's here. PayPal allows you to e-mail (for free) as little as \$1 to anyone with an e-mail address. To collect the dollar (or more) the recipient needs to sign up with PayPal (free) and give them a bank account to put the money into. Once signed up, they can both send money from that account (or from a credit card) or receive money sent to them by others. It is by far the easiest way to pay someone. It's free, fast, secure, and unbelievably convenient. It's also becoming the preferred method of payment on the auction sites.

Universal Currency Converter (<http://www.xe.net/ucc/>)

There is nothing like it. Calculators and stale financial pages just won't do. For finding out how many pesos in a Thai baht, or what that cab ride in Cairo cost in dollars, this is the place to go. For those who travel overseas a lot, this is the only sane way to deal with those foreign receipts.

Encyclopedia Britannica (<http://www.britannica.com>)

One of the first brash predictions made in the dawn of the digital age was that you would never need to buy a bookcase of heavy encyclopedias again because all that knowledge would be online at your fingertips. This is one of those rare predictions that came true. The venerable, trustworthy, and still useful Encyclopedia Britannica is not only on the Web in full, but it's free. Once you bookmark it, you'll use it all the time.

Individual.com (<http://www.individual.com>)

A free clipping service that e-mails you headlines or summaries of whatever subjects you ask for. (Or you can go to a personal Web page.) The bias is weighted toward technology and business topics, but still, the thing churns up a daily roundup on some of my oddball interests like religious cults or alternative energy sources.

Google (<http://www.google.com>)

If Google isn't your primary search engine, you are searching with one eye closed. This is the best search site so far.

CNET (<http://www.cnet.com>)

Ignore the news department; what this site offers is the best recommendations for electronic and computer shopping around. Buying office equipment? Gearing up for digital photography? Cnet has the smartest, broadest, and easiest to use recommendations for what to buy in popular consumer electronics.

Epinions (<http://www.epinions.com>)

For recommendations on almost anything made. Movies, gear, ski slopes, other Web sites. The genius of epinions is an ever-evolving set of tools that lend credence and trustworthiness to informed consumer opinions. Users recommend products and rank the opinions of others. The highest-ranked opinions and products are highlighted, while the best reviewers are made into stars, and the stuff with the best reviews rises. This is where I go when I want to find the street cred on something. And if you have opinions about something this is the place to post them. It's sort of a peer-to-peer open-source version of Consumer Reports.

eLance (<http://www.elance.com>)

Guru.com (<http://www.guru.com>)

I recently needed various freelance work done, which ranged from technical wizardry, to graphic expertise, to someone to wire up my house with Ethernet. I found the right person at the right price on either guru.com or eLance.com.

eBay (<http://www.ebay.com>)

People think of eBay as a place to swap Barbie dolls and old lunchboxes, but it turns out that eBay is the best place to find ANYTHING that is hard to find. It is now the first source people check when in need of something new or old. eBay has yet to stump me, or anyone else I know, when asked to find some obscure item.

Bibliofind (<http://www.bibliofind.com>)

Everyone knows about Amazon. They are still the best for stuff "in print." Some people go to Powells.com for books because Powells will offer both new as well as used copies. But to harness the full power of distributed intelligence, go to Bibliofind whenever you are searching for an out-of-print book. Bibliofind aggregates the holdings of thousands of used bookstores around the US, allowing you to search once to immediately see all the copies available, and?this is the cool part?compare prices. You can then order directly from the store of your choice. This means increasingly there is little distinction between books in print and out. You can usually find any book at a reasonable price.

MyYahoo (<http://www.my.yahoo.com>)

MyYahoo has emerged as the default homepage for most of the people I know. Smart and flexible, it allows both novice and veteran alike to direct their choice of headlines, stock quotes, weather, favorite sites, reports, etc. onto one constantly updated page. Ten years ago this ability to have any and all information you wanted updated hourly on one page would have been pure visionary baloney. Now it's free, works perfectly, and is overlooked. One radical poweruser I know does everything on Yahoo, including his e-mail and storage of all his files. He has ditched his computer and PDA while travelling since all he needs is access to someone's Web to get to his Yahoo and he can work.

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