

The Virtual Showroom

by Scott Shelley

Wouldn't it be nice to have a huge showroom — a space big enough to display every imaginable cabinet and appliance, and hundreds of electrical and plumbing fixtures? With everything under one roof, you could cut down on the time it takes your clients to make product choices.

Unfortunately, even if an abandoned mall was available in my town, I could never afford to rent or maintain it. But there is another solution to the showroom problem — the Internet. Almost every major building products manufacturer now has a useful site on the Internet, with more coming online every day. Since most people now have a computer and access to the Internet, or can gain access through a school or public library, the idea of using the Internet as a “virtual showroom” makes perfect sense. Once online, you can find not just product literature, but detailed specs and rough-in requirements for just about anything your clients will need for their projects.

There is still one big drawback to this

idea: Searching the Net can be tiresome and frustrating for inexperienced computer users. So I decided to make it a lot easier for my clients by building a virtual showroom for them on a floppy disk. I use my word processing software to create a document, such as a cover letter, that includes a menu of all the different sites that might be of interest for a particular project.

Finding the Sites

To identify individual “sites,” the Internet uses a system of addresses called URLs (Universal Resource Locator) that look like this: <http://www.jlconline.com>. (The “www” stands for “World Wide Web,” commonly called simply the “Web.”) To find construction Web sites, you'll need to dig into manufacturers' printed product literature as well as online search engines, then organize them into your own master list by category — window/door, plumbing, lighting, and so on. A good place to start looking is a construction “mega-site” like Alan Wickstrom's BuildingOnline

(www.buildingonline.com), where you can search for thousands of products.

Once you find the URLs you're looking for, it's easy to include them in a special kind of word processing document, one that includes a “hypertext link” to each Web site. When your clients click on a hypertext link in the document, it automatically connects a browser like Netscape Communicator or Microsoft Internet Explorer to the Internet and finds that particular site.

To make the links, first type in your list of company names and products. The procedure for creating links varies from one word processor to another, but basically it involves highlighting the text you want to link to, then selecting “Create Hyperlink” from the menu bar, or clicking on the hypertext icon on the toolbar. A dialog box will appear with a place to type in the URL of the Web site (see Figure 1). Once the link is made, the text will change color and be underlined, indicating the link. This master document can be updated, and the contents cut and pasted into other documents as needed. It's a good idea to test the links you create on your own computer to make sure they all work before handing them over to an unsuspecting client.

Building a Showroom

Once you have a master list of links, you can customize your virtual showroom for each client or project. For example, you might create a document that groups manufacturers by category, such as windows and doors, kitchen appliances, and plumbing fixtures. You could give this file to people who had a lot of selections to make, but who had not yet done much homework. For clients who are further along in the planning process, or who have asked you for suggestions, you can edit the file to include only links

Figure 1. To create a “master list” of Web site links in your word processor, first make a list of the products and manufacturers you want to include. Clicking on the “hyperlink” icon brings up a dialogue box into which you can type the Internet address.



Figure 2. Use the master list of Internet links to create a custom “virtual showroom” for individual jobs. Here, links have been cut and pasted from the master list into the “Jones Virtual Showroom,” a file created in Microsoft Word, then saved in HTML format so it can be opened directly in any Web browser. Other features, such as an embedded e-mail link, can also be added.

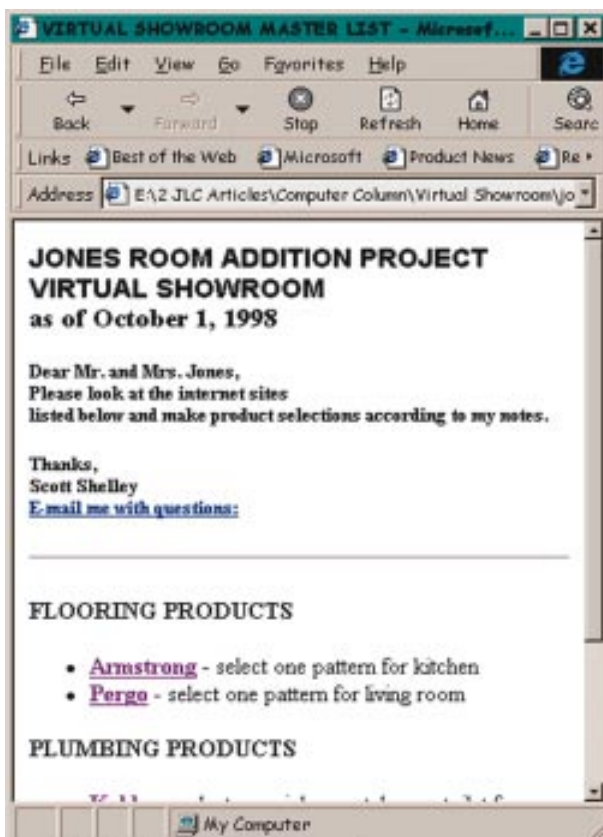
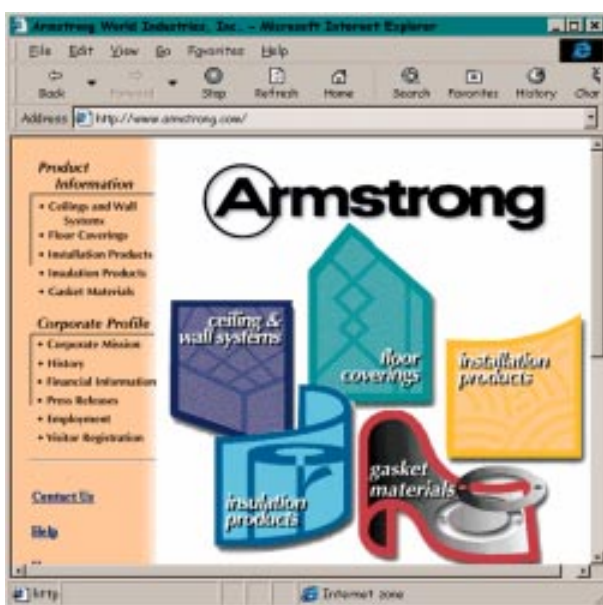


Figure 3. To use your showroom file, your client will need a computer, a modem, an Internet account, and a browser, such as Netscape Communicator or Microsoft Internet Explorer. Clicking on a link in the file will take them straight to the product Web site, where they can view samples and read specs or installation guides.



for products you recommend (Figure 2). In each case, be sure to save the file under a different name so you don’t overwrite your master list.

If your client uses the same word processing software as you do, or knows how to convert to another program, you’re done. More commonly, however, your client will be using a program that can’t open your file directly. Rather than put them through the hassle of converting the file themselves, I convert

it for them to HTML format, which can be read by any Web browser. All high-end word processors now have tools that generate HTML files, so it’s a simple matter to clicking “save as” from the file menu, then selecting “HTML” (or “HTM”) in the dialog box.

The final step is to copy the showroom file from your computer onto a floppy disk; alternatively, you could attach the file to an e-mail message you send to your client. If everything has been done

Computer Bytes

Microsoft Office Bugs

Beware of Microsoft Office Service Release 2 (SR2), a patch that addresses Y2K problems as well as calculation bugs in Access and Excel. According to BugNet, a Sumas, Washington-based software "exterminator," the SR2 installation program will stall if it detects an original version of any MSOffice application. BugNet advises users to install Service Release 1 (SR1) prior to installing SR2. In a public statement, Microsoft claims to have "thoroughly tested the product before posting it and had cautioned users from the very beginning that they needed to install SR1 before attempting to install SR2." Well, not exactly: SR2 was posted at the Microsoft Web site by September 8, and the warnings arrived on the 14th.

To avoid the 23 MB download, which can take up to several hours, order a free CD-ROM containing both SR1 and SR2 at www.microsoft.com/office.

iMac Printer Support

It seems there's a worm in the new Apple iMac computer, which relies solely on the brand new Universal Serial Bus (USB) for peripherals. Until recently, the only printer available with iMac USB support straight out of the box was the less-than-perfect plug-and-play Epson 600; old-fashioned parallel port printers required an adapter cable. The first fix suggested by Apple involved switching various components on and off in just the right order. Luckily, Apple has made a software solution available for download (www.apple.com) that improves the reliability of devices using USB. Additionally, Epson has expanded its iMac support to five models by using the Apple adapter and special driver software, which can be downloaded from www.epson.com.

Free Y2K Utility

To find out if your PC is Year-2000 compliant, try running a program called "Y2K Test," a free utility available for download at www.zdnet.com. The program makes three passes at your real-time clock, re-booting each time. If it finds problems, you can buy a fix from the program's developer. Y2K Test works on most PCs, but it includes a Readme file with a list of excluded systems, just in case. On the downside, the utility messes with your system clock, so you'll have to reset it when you're done testing.

carefully, all the customer has to do is double-click the file and the appropriate program will launch. If you've saved the file in HTML format, the default Web browser will launch on your client's computer and automatically load the file. All the links will then be accessible by simply clicking on them.

Time Saver

I have had many clients tell me how they spent their whole weekend running from store to store trying to make product selections. Many times their frustration in dealing with this "homework" leads to delays in the job, and frustration for everyone. This handy virtual showroom isn't a perfect substitute for visiting actual showrooms, but it will certainly help clients narrow down their choices. An hour spent online will save them days of running around looking for the same information.



Scott Shelley owns *Scott C. Shelley Construction* in Petaluma, Calif., and consults on using computers in construction.