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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **WHAT MAKES WEB SITES CREDIBLE?**

*NEW STUDY BY STANFORD UNIVERSITY AND MAKOVSKY & COMPANY OFFERS SOME ANSWERS*

NEW YORK, NY – June 20, 2002 – Companies that fail to check their spelling on their corporate Web sites risk damaging their online credibility just as badly as if they faced financial or legal troubles. And while people uniformly trust Web sites they consider useful, they also have strong doubts about those sites that carelessly mix editorial content with advertising.

These are just some of the findings from a new study of over 1,600 American and European Internet users conducted by Stanford University's Persuasive Technology Lab and sponsored by Makovsky & Company, a leading New York business communications firm, which provided financial and editorial support. "The Stanford - Makovsky study emphasizes the importance for organizations of embracing their Web sites as an integral element of their communications with different constituencies, one that can either enhance or detract from its reputation overall," said Ken Makovsky, President of Makovsky & Company.

The study highlighted various factors that determined why certain Web sites enjoy greater levels of credibility than others:

- Study participants listed respect for the organization that created the Web site, quick responses to customer service questions, an online mention of the organization's address, the timeliness of site content, and a contact phone number as important characteristics of a credible site in addition to its overall usefulness.
- The same group reacted unfavorably to sites that use pop-up advertisements or fail to update copy. Broken links, poor site navigation, and links to sites perceived to be non-credible were also among the highest negative influences.
- Americans appear to place greater trust in sites that provide valid content and respect privacy than their Europeans counterparts. Americans gave much higher credibility rankings to Web sites that offered privacy statements, sent e-mails to confirm transactions, indicated the source of site content or provided credentials for its authors.
- Women attached greater credibility to Web sites with privacy policies, e-mail confirmations of transactions and contact phone numbers than men.

"If Web sites were cars, it would be the trusty Toyota not the flashy Ferrari that would win the Web credibility race," says Stanford consulting faculty member BJ Fogg, who runs the Persuasive Technology Lab. "This study confirms previous research we've done, but in many ways it expands our understanding about what leads people to believe – or not believe – what they find online."

The Web sites of non-profit organizations enjoyed greater credibility than commercial operations, but in general, how an organization made a profit or accomplished its mission seemed less important than how they presented and managed the information contained within their Internet properties. That's why Makovsky Executive Vice President Robbin Goodman suggests that companies retain a high degree of control over their online reputations.

"Certainly it helps to start with a company that enjoys a strong standing in the real world, yet this study indicates you can improve an organization's online reputation with a series of simple actions," says Goodman, who supervises the agency's technology and interactive practices. "Keep content current and free of advertising influences. Design your site so your audiences can easily find the information and features they want. Make sure everything is spelled correctly and that the site links work."

The Stanford-Makovsky team developed 55 observations to describe a Web site's design, content, performance and ownership, and asked study participants to indicate how each statement affected believability from a score of 3 (high) to -3 (low). The study then ranked the average scores for each statement to highlight the various factors that determined why certain Web sites enjoy greater levels of credibility than others.

While a company's existing reputation played a factor, the highest scores emphasized a Web site's usefulness and features:

- The site has proven useful to you before (2.02)
- The site is by an organization that is well-respected (1.97)
- The site provides a quick response to your customer service questions (1.83)
- The site lists the organization's physical address (1.67)
- The site has been updated since your last visit (1.65)
- The site gives a contact phone number (1.56)
- The site looks professionally designed (1.54)

The lowest ranking scores emphasized the factors that detract from credibility:

- The site makes it hard to distinguish ads from content (-1.9)
- The site is rarely updated with new content (-1.65)
- The site automatically pops up new windows with ads (-1.64)
- The site has a link that doesn't work (-1.42)
- The site is difficult to navigate (-1.38)
- The site links to a site you think is not credible (-1.38)

The study encompassed 1,649 online users (with a 55/45 male to female ratio), primarily from the United States and Finland. The average participant was a college-educated person in his early 30s with an annual income of \$50,000. Almost two-thirds have been on the Web for five years or more and averaged 10 hours of Internet usage each week. The study was conducted through an online survey between December, 2001 and February 2002. Fogg's team conducted a similar global study on Web site credibility in 1999.

You can find a complete report on the Stanford-Makovsky Web Credibility Study 2002 at <http://www.makovsky.com> or <http://www.webcredibility.org>.

## About MAKOVSKY + COMPANY

Makovsky has been among the top 25 independent agencies for most of the past 10 years. It has been a consistent award winner; clients' campaigns have been singled out with PRSA Silver Anvils, CIPRAs, PRSA-NY Big Apples and IABC recognition. The Agency Report Card of The Holmes Report named Makovsky one of the top agencies for "Business-to-Business Marketing" and "Investor Relations" in the United States. The magazine described the company as follows: *"It is an agency that does almost all the little things right. There is an emphasis on research and planning, on understanding the industries in which it works and the challenges facing its clients...That's why the Makovsky brand stands for excellence in client service."* Previously, the magazine also named Makovsky "Best Managed in the U.S." and one of the "Top 12 Strategic Agencies." The firm was also cited by Crain's as one of the "Top Ten Technology Firms" in New York.

## About THE PERSUASIVE COMPUTING LABORATORY AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

The Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab researches and designs interactive technologies that motivate and influence users. Like human persuaders, persuasive computing technologies can bring about positive changes in many domains, including health, business, safety, and education. With such ends in mind, the Lab created a body of expertise in the design, theory, and analysis of persuasive technologies that it calls "captology." Because captology expertise can enhance interactive technologies outside the world of academia, its research often involves collaborations with industrial partners, clients, and affiliates. The Lab also focuses on developing the best methods for designing and prototyping new persuasive technologies.