Paul Nixon: It's Paul Nixon from Corporate Eye and today I'm down at The Group interviewing Mark Hill and Frank Harkin, so let's start Mark with a little introduction, do you want to tell us about the company, your focus, your market, what makes you different?

Mark Hill: Okay first of all thank you for inviting us to speak, we're flattered and didn’t realise that anybody was really that interested in hearing what we had to say - so thank you. The Group is - we design and build, host, manage, develop if you like, large corporate websites, that's our game. We've been doing it for a long time so we started in 95 and things have changed a bit since then so we know a little bit about what we're doing and we try to stick at it, and I guess the difference between us and other agencies is pretty small to be honest with you, but we just work hard at what we're trying to do which is to specialise in this particular area.

Paul Nixon: But you do have some of the top sites in terms of the ones that you've built, and so your “working a little harder” has been, I think, quite successful to be honest in terms of the results, the end results that we see.

Mark Hill: Yes but there are a lot of good agencies and yes we happen to specialise in it and we've got a long track record and yes we have done well but there are also a lot of good sites out there, a lot of good sites done by in-house teams, which people tend to overlook. So there are a lot of high quality corporate sites and we have got some good ones yes, but there are lots out there.

Paul Nixon: Okay so let's then start off initially talking about the shortfalls that you see in terms of the key areas where people could generally develop a lot better sections on their site or do a lot more.

Mark Hill: Well there are quite a lot of ideas about where corporate websites will go, the most obvious one is that eventually corporates will get social and Frank has published some research on social media in terms of its take up by FTSE 100 companies, do you want to have a little - do you just want to give some top line?

Frank Harkin: Yes well we had a look, we've been doing this for a year actually and we started off last year, we've been looking at the FTSE 100 and how they're using Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and corporate blogging, and we found that there's been an upward trend generally with all of these channels over the last year, particularly Twitter, I think that makes sense, Twitter is easy to use and it's a pretty foolproof way of getting your message out there and it's easy to set up, we have about 45% FTSE 100 are using Twitter at the moment.

Paul Nixon: Did you look at what way they're using Twitter, whether it's just broadcasting or whether they're actually interacting?

Frank Harkin: Yes, yes we did and actually we're blogging more about - I mean the first set of research was very much raw numbers but we will be looking at best practice, but yes there's a huge discrepancy actually across those companies that are using Twitter and the other channels, and who's doing it well, who's not doing it well. There is a tendency for companies to feel like all they need to do is set something up and send out the press releases but others can see an opportunity to kind of talk to people, BA have a very good Twitter account for example and responded very well during the snowpocalypse to people's questions.

And I think it's a nice way to talk to people, it's very quick, it's very easy, and if you put - I think ultimately you get out of it what you put into it, and I think BA put a lot into it and get a lot out of it.

Paul Nixon: We're seeing a few companies like Sainsbury's and so on who are starting to make the effort to outreach to the bloggers, to interact with them more as well. And so the initial use of social media and starting to see who has influence and so on, starting to make people see opportunities whereas I think maybe before they didn’t see, just saying you could Tweet but didn’t necessarily see what the opportunity was.

Mark Hill: Yes well we follow a model which is integrate social media into your corporate site, monitor it and then engage. And a couple of our clients have been very successful at it, so Centrica have got a big corporate blog, SABMiller have got a big corporate blog and SABMiller used their corporate blog very effectively in December to discuss if you like the issues that were being put to them by an organisation called ActionAid, They were accusing SABMiller of dodging tax. So SABMiller had the platform to respond and did and articulated the case very powerfully and they also used actually social media widely because they've got a Facebook account and they've got Twitter and they've got a YouTube channel.

That's, if you like, a living breathing example of a corporate that's successfully used social media in a communication sense in a crisis. Now as things go forward there will be more and more of these types of events where crisis communications requires a social media communication strategy. So corporates are going to have to get used to it, a lot of them are, but not enough, and not quickly enough. And people forget the big numbers here. You've got two billion internet users globally, you've got 600 million of them on Facebook, you've got another 600 million of them on 10cent which is the Chinese equivalent of Facebook.

You know the world expects corporates to have conversations online and they're not ready to go there yet to be honest with you.

Paul Nixon: Why, what's holding them back do you think?

Frank Harkin: Well they're big companies, they're - by definition change is something they don't particularly like, they haven’t got where they have today by jumping on every bandwagon - change in big companies is quite a difficult thing to happen, but I think it will.

Mark Hill: They're also worried, naturally enough, about compliance, and they're worried about governance, they don’t understand how these mediums work. In a broad sense they're on a big learning curve and some of them are reaching for it quite quickly and some of them just say, "No we're not interested." And in some cases it's completely appropriate not to be too aggressive here, but we do want people to get hold of these four main mediums, their own corporate blog, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, that's the big four, they need to organise themselves around that.

For some people it's purely about getting hold of their URL's, so if I'm a large corporate and I haven’t grabbed and controlled my Facebook space, at least controlled it, no need to…

Paul Nixon: Yes otherwise here comes brandjacking and away we go.

Mark Hill: Exactly, that's exactly right, so they do need to control these spaces even if they don't use them very much, if at all. So that's our approach, you need to get hold of these things, you need to monitor what's happening, and we do monitoring for our clients and the stuff that you find is truly staggering. Corporates don't realise how many conversations are going on about them in the world, they just have no vision of it whatsoever is my gut feeling and until you show it to them they don't get it.

Paul Nixon: And what sort of tools do you use for that?

Mark Hill: We use a tool that's built by Alterian it's called SM2. It's very good. It's got seven years worth of data in it, it collects a lot of stuff, it's a very intelligent search engine. We back it up with our own because we use some other search engines, for example we take stuff from Daylife and we're interested in complementing the SM2 data. So there are tools out there and we put the stuff in front of our clients and they can react. The last part of it is where you choose whether or not to engage. SABMiller chose to engage, did it very effectively and they did it on their own platform.

Doing it on their own platform, not out there in the wild on somebody else's platform is very important; it stops people from impersonating you for example. So there we are - that's our model for social media, will corporates get it? Yes they will. Will they get it quickly? No they won't but it's coming whether they like it or not.

Paul Nixon: And do you think - I mean is it the combination of success stories and the scare stories that will move them on or... I don’t know if you saw the problems that Vodafone had with their hash tag and then it was well meant, well thought through, but suddenly this issue rose up where people wanted to throw mud at them. And the cautionary tales are useful so long as they happen to everyone else, to help guide people, how to use it, how to exploit it, as well as obviously needing the positive tales.

Frank Harkin: I don’t think social media irons those things out. It's just a medium, it doesn’t stop people doing things you don’t want them to do. So I think social media reflects business, it doesn’t change it, you know, so…

Paul Nixon: I would probably challenge that, I think the way that it can - you know you look at BP, what happened around the Gulf of Mexico and the speed with which campaigns developed. I think that does force changes back on the organisation in terms of the ability to, or the need to make decisions and respond quickly.

Frank Harkin: No I understand that, what I mean is it doesn’t change people, you still need people responding, you still need people making the right decisions, doing sensible things, doing clever things. Social media gives them - it makes a big difference in terms of speed, it makes a big difference in terms of the amount of people you can reach, but it doesn’t - you still need people, you still need that basis, you still need to be a well run company, you still need to have people making clever good decisions.

Mark Hill: But your point is well made that corporates are sitting there having to invent new processes, new governance models, find people who know about social media, somehow put them into their comms departments and figure out how to use all this sort of stuff. Not easy, not easy at all, and certainly not easy to do quickly. But that's what we're seeing, we're seeing communications teams changing and people are bringing in people who have experience of social media and that's what we expect to evolve. And the other thing that will happen is it will be a little bit of a generational thing, there are no two ways about that.

There are some old dogs and you're not going to teach them new tricks, that's just the way it is, that's the way of the world. (Laughter) However related to this whole issue of blogging and social media is another, if you like, hurdle for corporate sites, and that is around transparency. And transparency is, as Mark Hynes was very articulate in pointing out in your [recent interview](http://www.corporate-eye.com/blog/2011/02/transparency-matters/), is a big issue for corporates and this is the age of WikiLeaks and you have a lot of people out there who have got agendas, whether they're trusting of corporates is a question that I have.

However I look at social media and corporate blogging as a way in which to bring transparency and if you like authenticity to corporate communications, and I think that there will be a demand for this and people will want to see chief executives blogging, telling their story personally. And they will want the sort of authenticity. And one of the challenges if you like is that corporate websites do need to help bring this idea to the fore, but they also need to wrap around that all sorts of other tools that help to bring transparency to everything they do. And Mark Hynes was talking about XBRL, that is what I call a transparency tool, that's a very important step.

Bring it on quickly please, that would be great. I'm also looking at integrated reporting, integrated reporting is a transparency tool. It's about showing, if you like, the world that you're real about these things. Transparency is a challenge.

Paul Nixon: Do you think that with that integrated reporting thing that it will give a model that people will genuinely be able to give more detail and be more open? Or is it something where people will take it as another formula like the Combined Code to go through the tick list going, "Yes we've now done integrated reporting. Here's our bit of stuff on risk and governance for each section and so on" or will they actually genuinely embrace it?

Mark Hill: There's a spectrum of responses, so some companies are very good at explaining what they do and why; their vision for the world, their values, what they're doing in a sustainability sense, in a corporate responsibility sense, some companies are very good at it and it is part of their DNA.

Paul Nixon: And who would you pick out as…

Mark Hill: Oh I guess SABMiller again, I keep giving them a name check but I mean they - you know just look at the way that sustainability is built into their business model, and their brand. You can take it from me they're very good at it. So I'm interested in integrated reporting not per se but because when you have a good company that has a good story to tell and uses that, it will bring power to that communication, that's all. That's the way I look at it. Will it be taken up quickly by a lot of people? No I don’t think it will be and I think there are a lot of people who are still stuck in the Stone Age and only use sustainability reporting as - they pay lip service to it. But it's a tick box approach and there's a lot of that stuff, but that's not going to live forever.

Reality is in this age of WikiLeaks and this age of people who have very little trust in institutions of any sort, government, corporations, the media, it doesn’t matter, just sustainability transparency will be absolutely crucial to the way in which you build your brand equity with all these audiences.

Paul Nixon: And how would you make it real? In this age of spin, where you have nicely crafted welcomes or bits of texts ‘from the chairman’, which may have been written for them, how do you actually then get it so that people make the site, make the content, get the message so that people actually believe in it and believe that the company is living its words, is being transparent, is being open and honest?

Mark Hill: Well their actions have to reflect their words, that's the first thing, if you don't behave in a way in which you're representing yourself then that's it, you've broken credibility. How do companies do it? I wish I knew, but there are some companies that are very good at it and where authenticity is natural. I personally think that successful corporate websites in the future will have many voices and they will have many voices in terms of conversations that go on through blogs. They'll have many voices in terms of people, customers, people who have experience of this business talking about it on the site or in the ether.

And I do believe that you're going to see, if you like, word of mouth become digital, and that's it, it will become real. But that's a wee way off for people to either be able to measure or articulate well I would say, but that's where this would go.

Paul Nixon: And following on from that, one of the key areas which I think is one probably the least popular, inspires you to lose the will to live the most quickly, the corporate governance area is one where it has come from a history of tick boxing saying, "Here's our standard stuff". Aand yet over the last three years through all the soul-searching, through what went wrong, through the economic crisis and what triggered it; governance issues, ethics issues, risk issues and so on, I don’t see them changing, the governance sections changing that fast.

I see there are some companies who have hit real crises, like Siemens with their fraud issue with their directors, really responded very, very well in the way that they talk about how they've now embedded ethics through their culture. UBS are very, very good on the executive remuneration side, the tone they've set through successive years, having had a bit of a spanking (laughter) through what went wrong. And to my mind I see the need to actually, in something like the Combined Code and now the new governance code, people to actually embrace the real spirit of it.

So with non-exec skills being able to demonstrate the aggregate skills they've got, the specific skills, the specialist skills, and demonstrate they genuinely can connect and give oversight to the business and the risks through that, but I think that is still a little way off. Any thoughts?

Mark Hill: Well I think risk, you're really talking about risk; risk in communication. My take on governance, my take on corporate responsibility should I say in the content that's in there, there are many issues about this. The way we look at it is there are many companies who treat this as a silo, so when you're talking about governance or risk or sustainability or responsibility they will have a section. It's not part of the DNA of the rest of the site for example, so when people talk about process, about risk, about sustainability they have to talk about it everywhere, so it does have to be part of the fabric of the site and the content.

I think, when I look around at the good corporate sites, more and more corporates are looking at the sustainability angle, if you like, of their comms as part of their brand. And this is the challenge, I think this is the problem; an issue that many corporates face is that they're having to figure out where this responsibility stuff fits, and how it should be articulated as part of their story. And some companies are successful at it and some companies are struggling but that's where we see problems if you like. As far as the processes that go to put together, good governance models, good risk management models, I see that kind of content being very, very important in terms of the investor relations area for example. Many investors are looking around now and saying to themselves, "Okay we've got many ways in which we're exposed to risk, how does this company mitigate it? How does it control it? Who is responsible for it?" I do see a clear articulation of these areas being more important than necessarily the need to report against regulation, but however it's an area where companies are patchy in terms of what they talk about.

Frank Harkin: And I think in terms of how you present that on a corporate website and I think governance is quite an interesting one. One of the buzzwords of 2010 in content, that's what I do, has been content curation and this idea that there is tons of content out there and part of a content strategists job is to kind of curate that, and people often use a museum metaphor but I think it rings true. And I think an area like corporate governance is probably right for that because often this stuff is on one page, on an investor page, investor relations section is one page and they just chuck it on and very carelessly done.

Actually on your site there was a very good example, I think it was a Chinese export company and they'd actually done that but they'd just chucked everything on one paper. What they'd done was they'd given so much information that if you delved into it, in terms of transparency, in terms of finding out how the company deals with governance issues, it was all in there but it just wasn’t curated, it wasn’t brilliantly presented. So how you present this information, I think you need to have a depth of information, but you need to present it to people properly.

There is also third party stuff you can pull in, you could have somebody from Transparency Matters, for example talking about your governance, giving contextual information about how you present governance. You could post stuff in from Twitter. You could really think about your corporate governance section and curate the content in a way that gives you credibility.

Paul Nixon: I guess having looked at the BP thing where before Gulf of Mexico, some of the features they had and how they explained risk were very good, visual - but actually the base risk management section hadn’t really changed year on year. So there's a time element, but I think there's also an element of looking at your worst case scenarios and what's the worst that could happen and linking it to crisis management and crisis readiness and so on. There's a whole set of things that actually mean it's not just about communications but it actually also changes the business. But there is a demand created by crises and events that are played out in public like Gulf of Mexico, which then makes you think, "Well they should be talking about this, this and this."

Mark Hill: Well crisis communications online has to be absolutely perfect these days and BP was a classic example, Companies have to be prepared now with very short notice to be able to launch either sections or micro sites that deal with powerful issues that they face, whether they're accidents or events or disasters or acquisitions or whatever it turns out to be. And that's, if you like, an area where we're seeing companies spend a lot of time and effort, crisis comms and the use of the online medium is absolutely knitted together.

Paul Nixon: And how would you say BP did, performed?

Mark Hill: Not fantastically to be honest with you.

Paul Nixon: I'm talking from an online perspective as opposed to - I mean obviously we can talk a lot about the whole background.

Mark Hill: There's nothing that the online world can do for you if at the top people make tactical or strategic errors about leading the comms message. I don’t look at the BP situation as a good or a bad online experience, I look at it as a comms experience and in my view anyway there were errors made very early on about how to respond to that crisis and that really affected everything that flowed. It was just made very early on. In terms of just talking about content just for a second, one of the things that people don't think about enough is the use of video online and in these days of many words and short attention spans. the power of video is immense on corporate sites.

And not enough corporates are looking at their sites and saying to themselves, "We're kind of a mini TV channel" and they need to think about themselves like that. This will be - you know across our sites video is very, very popular, you only have to look around you, YouTube, you're looking at 35 hours of video being loaded up every minute, so this is a video generation, corporates have to get there, and they have to figure out how to get the stuff curated, as Frank points out, and put it onsite and do it quickly and reasonably cost effectively.

Paul Nixon: Because that's one of the things I think, having started off, their introduction to video was probably through Cantos, or someone like that, a very well rehearsed, produced…

Mark Hill: Highly produced.

Paul Nixon: Very high quality, but then they had that price point stuck in their heads I think, and I think that's what's kind of held them back. Whereas you see some companies now with their own in-house video departments, you can do great things by crowd sourcing with the employees to come up with actually very good stuff and get them to vote on it, on what's most popular and so on.

Mark Hill: The use of video will grow and grow and grow, and I personally don't think that corporates are relaxed enough about the need for a high quality production finish to a video. Would I value authentic communications from the project manager who's sitting in Iraq digging gold out of the ground and talking about how he is helping to build a village school? Yes I would. Do I want to have that authentic feel come through from on the ground communications from your suppliers, from your customers, from your own people? Yes I do. Does that have to be highly finished? No it doesn’t.

I think that's a losing battle everybody wants to have highly finished stuff; I'm just hoping that gradually fades. Because speed and cost would just mean that’s impossible. So give people, teach them how to use the video camera, teach them how to frame things, use training but don't expect to fly a video crew to Iraq once every three months and film something that's just out of the - completely impossible. So that's where we see things going and we also see it as a very powerful tool for senior management to give their vision of the business and where it's going. And that's not done nearly enough. What's your strategy? Where are you going? How are you going to get there?

Those kinds of things always come best personally in video, you should be videoing this Paul.

Paul Nixon: Absolutely.

Mark Hill: But to see the whites of their eyes, that's what video does and it's extremely popular across our site, so we just seek time, when you find the average user spends 12 minutes on a corporate site. Corporate sites are not a bundle of laughs, you're not going there for the entertainment, but video keeps people there and it retains their attention and they get more - they definitely get a very clear idea of who you are and what you stand for through video.

Paul Nixon: And the stats for reuse of video, and the likelihood of people actually writing about the key message you want to give, is far higher in the stats we've seen for video, when you've got video that can be embedded elsewhere. So thinking about making sure that the content or the ‘info snacks’ that you put in or the video chunks can be reused and can be referenced or shared, is as important, I think, as just getting it on there.

Mark Hill: Yes and that's why people need to control their YouTube space, it's about reusing the videos they already have and sticking them there. And it helps, if you like, to bring awareness of your message to those people on YouTube, but also it will bring traffic back to the site, so all that stuff is good. Video is going to be big.

Paul Nixon: Big. Note to self; get video camera. (Laughter) We actually have got some videoing scheduled but only of me. But I'll invite you along next time.

Let's talk a little bit about the annual report and the CR report and how they - you see those evolving in terms of their usage and relative importance.

Mark Hill: This is an easy one, I know all the arguments about print and full online HTML and flash based and image based and all that kind of stuff. Dominic Jones is very perceptive in his writings about this kind of stuff.

Park Nixon: He doesn’t like the image based ones. (Laughter)

Mark Hill: Well you know I don’t either.

Paul Nixon: I don’t think I've actually encountered one that I've enjoyed reading.

Mark Hill: No, I try and put - the simplest way of looking at it is that I want the story telling aspect, if you like, of the report to come to the fore, and to do that you do it best online when you can use powerful graphics or video or you've got a million and one tools to make things engaging and compelling. Now if I turn around and look at an annual report printed and I compare the book and the movie if you like, there's no way that I'm going to sit there and say, "Yes show me the book please." No. I'm an analyst, I want to download Excel spreadsheets, I want to use the tools that are sitting in this thing. Show me the print did you say? I mean it's just ridiculous.

My job, I have been hammering on this since 2000 or something like this because the economics of it are just dreadful. My gut feeling is that 2,500 professional investors here in the UK cost us hundreds of millions of pounds in terms of the print costs for these annual reports, and the sooner they are pushed online and told to print their own thing off from a PDF the better. Economically just dreadful. So storytelling definitely has to go online... is that enough of a rant?

Paul Nixon: You can rant some more, but also you see a lot of ... more different ways that people are starting to integrate them into the site, so if you look at the BP site, you can go into transition into the annual report in a number of different ways, so through the risk section, through governance without actually necessarily noticing, or it not being that obvious that you've then gone into the report, which I think is a good thing in terms of reuse of material, so that you can get the - if you've gone in you want to learn about their risk management or whatever.

You can then do that without having to go and say, "Oh I've remembered there's probably going to be another bit in the annual report therefore I've got to go there as well." So you're making some great expressions there. I must get a video next time.

Mark Hill: Yes you must.

Paul Nixon: So what are your thoughts on that?

Mark Hill: Okay we always want the user to know where they are, so if they're in an annual report they're in an annual report, if they're on a website they're on the website. Are you really telling me that BP couldn’t be bothered to take the content from the annual report and put it into the website, which is very common. The website should actually be the main storytelling mechanism if you like, of course the annual report has got a role to play and it does - there's a lot of historical backward looking stuff often in these annual reports and yes you can make the information available within the site, but I just think that's just laziness.

Paul Nixon: So you think you should - your view would be to give the full story on the site and the annual report is an end of term report. It's basically saying, "Here's the story, at this point in time let's by the board”

Mark Hill: It is at the moment an end of term report but remember we're going to move gradually, slowly but surely towards some form of pretty continuous reporting is my guess. And how corporates handle that I haven’t got my head around that at all but my take on it is you can't be sitting there with this historical record and saying to people, yes it should be a natural part of the corporate website experience. Take the content from that report, put it into the website itself and make it real and make it integrated and seamless, but don't go shooting them off to the annual report and slightly confusing them.

Is this the risk policy this year or last year? Or where am I? I mean why would you raise those questions, that's not on the users mind, so…

Paul Nixon: Because it was an interesting discussion that I had with Ben Eavis from Sainsbury's about their CR report and how initially they created their online CR report and had that as their CR section. And then as they themselves have started to - obviously a lot of those stories get updated through the year, people want to know, "Well what's happened to your initiative on this, that and the other." And also they’ve moved to quarterly reporting of their sustainability stats. So that has been an interesting journey for them as they realise that you need to have ongoing news about sustainability. Yes, you can have your end of term report but you've got to make it a lot more living and breathing part of the site.

Mark Hill: And this is the issue that many corporates are grappling with is in fact they're doing tons of stuff, each quarter, each six months that needs to flow into the website. In the CSR stuff there are all sorts of activities, people want the news, they want to know what's going on, they want the - it’s not a matter of building a CSR section and saying, "Here are our policies, here's how we have a go at things, and by the way you can pop off over here and see the report". No, it's a continuous reporting of your activities, so that for me is a no-brainer and people should be doing it.

In a related sense to this, investor relations areas of corporate sites are also in need of, if you like, an injection of thought, and by that I mean too many corporate sites have investor relation sections which are anaemic collections of historical documentation and presentations and regulatory filings and news and the share price and that's it. I'm quite interested in corporates that take the investment case and make it very, very easy to understand for investors, and who present that in a way in which is engaging, compelling and complete and which uses - brings together resources that the investor or the analyst wouldn’t be able to easily find themselves.

The number of companies that do not present their investment case online is truly staggering, and this is the lost opportunity, in terms of having a proper valuation of your company, to me is breathtaking. Why would you have all the stuff there and then say, "You Mr investor, put that all together yourself, good luck"?

Paul Nixon: Indeed.

Mark Hill: It's just mind boggling, and then they don't bother to actually even say, or, if you like, put the chief executive front and centre expressing this in a video in a simple way, "This is where we're going, this is how we're going to get there, by the way we have a strategy." So to me there are a lot of companies that are cheaper than they should be because people are not bothering to communicate this.

Paul Nixon: Well we saw a great example which wasn’t an explicit investment case but it was an American industrial property company ProLogis. And they went through a very bad patch having over-extended themselves in investment in terms of risk. When the economic downturn came they were left exposed. And 18 months on from this problem period, from when the share price collapsed and they had had to raise more money and so on, they were between annual reports and they made the effort to feed back to investors what they had achieved of their action plan to solve the problem.

And they had a piece, they put an extra section on the front of the website, they had a piece from the CEO. They had mapped out all the industry trends that let the indicators that showed they were improving and the ones that the fortunes of the company generally followed. They had analyst quotes saying, "The management have got it, they've understood what the problems were and they've reacted." They explained how they'd set themselves targets and had exceeded them for the recovery plan, and as a piece of communication it was really good.

And to my mind, one of the easiest investment cases, is if you've seen that something has been very well valued before and then it's gone through a problem and then fixed those problems and the share price is way down, and you then see all the evidence behind, then that's a great way of saying, "Here is an investment case". And in The States obviously they're not allowed to incite people to invest but it was a pretty good model and we've done a bit of a study on that. So I totally agree with you, it is about the story, and the story is lacking.

I see a lot of investor sections just coming up to that sort of level - everyone is the same and they're all fairly generic, and it's going to be - the thing that's going to make it stand out is the story, it's that personal connection and so on.

Mark Hill: Yes the story is definitely ‘it’, without which nothing, that's where it starts. But we can go back on those issues of transparency, and we can go back and say to ourselves, "Okay let's put tools here that help people to put together this information and look at our performance over a period of time." Charting tools are quite simple ways of doing this, but there are lots and lots of ways in which people should be using and bringing innovation if you like into these corporate sites, and that, for example, the experience that most people have online with, say retail sites, lots and lots of them are very fun, they're easy to use and they have a little level of excitement.

You know you have location services, or flash sales or all these kinds of - and people have got this use, if you've got used to this idea in fact websites should be a bit of fun, they should be easy to use, they should be, if you like, a lot better than they are now. And so corporate sites in effect are a little bit like country cousins, because they're sitting there, people are comparing corporate sites with their other experiences and corporate sites don't come off very well. So, for me anyway is this going to gradually… will people have to make these corporate sites more engaging, more fun, simpler, easier to use with better tools? Yes they will.

It's one of the reasons why we put personalisation into our sites, it's because people are coming to these sites, they're coming to them once or twice a month, why would you have to learn how to run, how to find your way through a big corporate site even though it's got clear navigation you have to find your way through it and find stuff. So personalisation is the way of saying I'm going to save that journey, I'm going to keep it, I'm going to come back to it, next time just makes it easier.

And all of a sudden you've got a user who not only thinks you’ve thought about them (no bad thing) but who would find fewer barriers to coming back again, so they become more loyal, they get more of your messages, they actually perceive of you as if you like a much more enjoyable and authentic experience, reflects well on the brand. So for me anyway, innovation is going to become particularly to make things fun, easy and simple - its something the corporate websites need to learn.

Paul Nixon: And what do you think about the impact of increased use of mobiles and mobile sites and as you have - I know there was an article about how a third of online retail sales were done through a mobile. It's a bit of an amazing stat, how do you think that will impact?

Mark Hill: Okay there are a lot of smartphones now and you've seen the take off of the iPhone and the iPad, the famous third device. What people forget, I think, is that there are a lot of Android phones, so the Android marketshare is about 25%, the iPhones is about 17%, Blackberry about 15%. So when people come along and say, "Let's build an iPhone app" they're actually picking on a very small part of the population. So people do need to think about mobile sites. They need to think about things that aren’t specific to any one platform. And you can build mobile sites that are light, that look and feel like applications and that will do a good job there for the users, so that's just one element of this.

The flipside to all this mobile is that many, many people, many corporate sites have audiences that will use the mobile phone, and simple ones; career seekers, customers. People expect now with these smartphones to be able to come to your site and find everything. And they expect it to behave gracefully. They expect the experience that they get on the mobile phone to be the same one that they would on a PC, so that's a challenge for a lot of sites because they haven’t been built with modern technologies.

The issues about, if you like, mobile in the long run, I can see that corporates are going to have to put some effort into the mobile experience, and yes it's a no-brainer they will have to have the same experience in both places so it's a coming thing.

Paul Nixon: And everyone is going to need to get better eyesight.

Mark Hill: That's true, that's absolutely true. But we can raise the font size on these things; they're pretty good. But choose a platform that's neutral, don’t just jump on the iPhone app bandwagon because you think it's the thing to do.

Paul Nixon: And do you see much demand for clients saying, "Oh we've got to have an app" and what sort of things are they asking for?

Mark Hill: Oh yes quite a lot of people are asking for apps or things like apps to do specific jobs, and there are a few out there and we're starting to build some - actually we've built a lot of mobile sites. But we've built mobile sites specifically to sit around things to do with the annual report, believe it or not. That's an interesting development for us. But yes, clients are much more aware. They know what they can get on an iPhone or a Blackberry or an Android phone, so they - and it's very, very front of mind, everybody is talking about apps and how they're doing stuff. So…

Paul Nixon: Any examples you can give us of…?

Mark Hill: There are some good ones out there, funnily enough there's a good one by I think Audi, have got a corporate iPhone app but they haven’t got one for an Android.

Frank Harkin: GM have an app as well, it's just basically videos actually. So they've put in corporate videos and created an app which I imagine was quite easy. I don’t know how well used it's been. I think people want apps but I think you also don’t want to just have an app for the sake of an app. There has to be a reason, so I think we're quite aware of that as well. I think people can - if you've got an annual report you can browse that fairly easily on your iPhone or your Android, you don’t necessarily need an app to go and browse that and it seems a little bit pointless really.

Paul Nixon: What was the annual report site that you did - mobile site?

Mark Hill: I'd have to shoot you if I told you that.

Paul Nixon: The pleasures of the interview.

Mark Hill: It'll be going live in about two months.

Paul Nixon: Oh do let us know when it goes out and we'll talk about it.

Mark Hill: Consider it a deal.

Paul Nixon: One other aspect which I kind of feel has gone off the boil is around things like accessibility where when I talk to clients it doesn’t - they just want to be kind of better than those people down the road, but the importance of it seems to have, as a priority seems to have gone down compared to a couple of years ago. Do you think that's fair or is that isolated stuff that I'm picking up?

Frank Harkin: I think it might be an indication, I don’t know, this is anecdotal but an indication that it's embedded more, I think accessibility was a big deal a couple of years - three years ago because the web was so inaccessible. I'm not saying things are brilliant now but I think you've got the code and certainly all of our sites are as accessible as they can be. I think we don't think massively about accessibility with - we don't - it's so embedded in what we do, it's part of the process, like the content is part of the process, so it's not such a big deal but only because it's embedded in what we do, and I think that's probably something that I feel is true.

Paul Nixon: But I certainly think that most sites degrade unless they're using very good tools very regularly. You'll see a degradation in how accessible the site is because to make truly accessible PDFs, to make sure your content is structured in the right way and that your people who are producing that base content are doing it to standards is a hard ask.

Mark Hill: Well it's expensive too is the other thing. And you're absolutely right that cost has been an issue for some people. However I do think that accessibility practices have improved remarkably over the last couple of years and that people are aware that some simple things should work easily. You should be able to tab through the site. You should be able to download text versions of videos, all sorts of just natural normal things are done quite widely now, there are still some areas where people are pretty sloppy but do I see it changing?

I just see it as part of - it's just about being, as Frank said, it's embedded in everybody's processes now. And clients know that they potentially stand the chance of legal challenge so they're pretty interested in it, let's put it that way.

Paul Nixon: Let's talk about - as we move towards the end you'll be pleased to know - around people's appetite for rebuilding, redesigning sites in light of the current economic climate and whether they see the importance of online comms going up or down or how they react; what sort of changes you're seeing in companies behaviours as a result of that.

Mark Hill: There's no doubt about it that rebuilds are being delayed. They are, and this economic climate, if you like, has made companies that didn’t have a rigorous approach to the strategy that launched their site originally. So if you didn’t have a very good architecture, and you hadn’t thought through perhaps how the site might evolve or grow then some people have been forced to rebuild because those issues weren’t addressed right at the beginning. So companies that are if you like slowing down their development phase or redevelopment phase can't do it for very long.

You're still looking at the average age of a corporate site probably is three to four years and if you can get it to last for four years you really did do a very, very good job right at the beginning. That's a hard ask. So many things happen to companies: they have new products, new management, new companies get acquired, divested, all those kind of things. So there's a lot of movement so to make the thing hang in there and stand up is pretty tough. And corporates now are pretty aware I think of the importance of creating a site that can grow and can evolve and can last for three or four years without, as you put it so eloquently before, without degrading, and that's pretty tricky but it can be done.

Paul Nixon: And how, I guess does that - do you think that changes the way that companies work with their agencies at all in that if those agencies that are sort of build once and then leave the client alone until the next rebuild comes along versus those that work closely with them and look to develop an ongoing strategy about telling a story. Those are two very different approaches, and I think the way that companies need to work with their agencies and absorb all the new challenge that's going on needs to be much more proactive, I mean do you - I would imagine you'd go, "Yes I agree with that." (Laughter)

But are there any sort of aspects of that about how you work with the clients or the demands they're making on you, how those demands are changing or things like that?

Mark Hill: We bring a lot of research to our clients, at least annually, where we do if you like a review of their web analytics, their social media, we do content design, brand audits, we bring all this stuff together, compare it with their peers, look at best practice. And from that you annually come up with a roadmap for the next 12 months. Sometimes it's for the next 12 months, 24, 48, whatever it turns out to be. So I think for us anyway we only work to the future, so being part of - having a long-term strategic view for these corporate sites is absolutely required.

How should agencies and companies work together? I only know our model so I can't really comment, and remember there are some very good in-house corporates, in-house teams, and they know their stuff. There are a lot of good ones. So the world isn’t just about agencies and there's a spectrum of the way in which people deal with these things and some of them are really good at it, so they're the ones we watch.

Paul Nixon: Well I think that just about wraps it up, so Mark, Frank, thank you very much for your time.

Frank Harkin: Thank you.

Mark Hill: Thank you, and can I leave one plug with you?

Paul Nixon: You can.

Mark Hill: Which is, we've got a [blogging directory](http://www.the-group.net/230-blog-directory) and we’ve got an online [annual reports directory, CR directory](http://www.the-group.net/index.asp?pageid=240), and of course we've got a [blogging platform](http://www.the-group.net/blog/) there. We'd like people to engage in these resources and we'd like to engage in conversations with people who are interested in these areas of online corporate communications, that's our game. We want to share our knowledge and learn from other people, so bring on - come and knock on our door.

Paul Nixon: Virtually and quickly. Thanks very much.

Mark Hill: Thank you very much.