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Stuffed with information

Website explains how everything works



**KEVIN
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InSites

Part of my job as an artist for The Times-Tribune involves creating information graphics. Sometimes these graphics need to show how a process, a system, or even a machine works. Over the years I've had to illustrate such varied subjects as how elevators work, how sprinklers in a building know when to go off during a fire and how windmills generate electricity.

In addition to talking to experts in the field I'm attempting to explain visually, I also do some online research. The first place I usually look is howstuffworks.com.

The site is a treasure trove of knowledge on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from animal training to zippers. The explanations are delivered via a combination of the written word, videos, animations and graphics.

When I use the site, I have a very specific subject in mind related to the graphic I'm designing. There's a search field at the top of the page where I'll type in the object of my desire. The site then takes me to a page with articles that explain how the stuff I'm looking for works.

In addition to the articles that show up on the search results page, there are also a handful of sponsored results — also known as ads — displayed at the top. There are also buttons in the left hand column for images, videos, expert reviews and Web results for

my search. Also in that column there's an area with links to related subjects, and an area listing your recent searches.

The articles are usually very clear and thorough. They are broken down into sequential sections spanning several pages. A table of contents at the beginning of the article allows you to jump to specific sections. Videos, photos, drawings and animations are scattered throughout, helping to clarify the explanations. There are hyperlinks on many of the technical terms that take you to articles explaining them.

Lots of stuff

There's much more to this site than just searching for specific subjects. Next to the search field are six links to different areas of the site:

- **Video:** These explanations are strictly video, without the written articles. There's a "Video of the Day," "Top Playlists," "Most Watched," "Recently Added," and a clickable list of categories and subcategories of all the videos on the site.
- **Podcasts:** Various categories are covered here, such as, "Stuff You Should Know," "BrainStuff," "TechStuff" and more.
- **Blogs:** Some of the "best brains on the Web" write about everything from cars to science to "The Coolest Stuff on the Planet."
- **Quizzes:** You can earn points, and compete with other users, while testing your knowledge of everything from surviving animal attacks to the joys of sex.
- **Games:** Dozens of games that can be played online or downloaded are available.
- **RSS:** You can subscribe to Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds on a variety of subjects, or have them sent to your e-mail.

Stuff for everybody

Back on the home page there's more stuff to explore. Under the search bar there are tabs listing the general categories the site covers. Clicking on "Adventure" for instance, will take you to a page that features "Diving with Sharks." Under the featured "Adventure" items there are subcategories including: "Air Sports," "Climbing," "Hunting" and more. Under the subcategories there are related videos and suggestions for other subjects you might like.

Below the tabs on the home page is a section with featured articles. As I write this, the featured subjects are "Crude Oil Market," "Other Universes," "Job Interview" and "Software Piracy."

Further down on the page are links to quizzes, top 10 lists, picture galleries, games, videos and a "Random Zone." You click a button in the "Random Zone" and the items are replaced with a selection of unrelated lists, quizzes, facts and articles. On the bottom of the page there are trivia questions, quotes, facts and a daily poll.

The site has a clean design with simple navigation. A few links take you away from the main template, causing you to lose the sitewide navigation buttons, which is a little frustrating. The ads are fairly unobtrusive, but there are some annoying pop-ups if you accidentally hover over an ad too long.

It's easy to spend a lot of time on the site exploring. One link leads to another and before you know it, an hour is gone. If you're doing research for school or work, just like learning about a particular subject, or if you're looking for an interesting way to kill time online, this is a good site to do it on.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.