DEPARTMENT OF SMOOTH RECOVERIES

"Dear ——

"Let me once again congratulate you on your admission to Brown University. I cannot begin to tell you how impressed the Board of Admission was with your application, and how excited we are when we think about the wonderful contribution you could make to our community. We were so excited, in fact, that in our rush to provide you with your acceptance letter we neglected to include the pre-addressed return envelope to be used when mailing the response card.

"Please let us know if we may be of assistance in the coming weeks and we do hope that you will choose to join us as a member of the Class of 2005."

Letter received by
a prospective student,
April 2001

IMAGE WATCH

A Watched Pot Bails

IT'S TIME TO SAY GOOD-BYE TO AN INTERNET LEGend. This fall, when computer scientists at **Cambridge University** move into new digs, they will pull the plug on one of the most famous Web sites in history. Begun as a high-tech solution to an everyday problem, it evolved as the Web evolved—first into an object of technological curiosity, and later into a cyber tourist attraction. And though it became something of a star, the site never lost track of its first and only function: to tell anyone who wanted to know just how much coffee was in the pot in the Trojan Room, Cambridge's computer lab.



The coffeepot cam (www.cl.cam.ac.uk/coffee/coffee.html) began in 1991 as a way to save weary computer science students the disappointment of trekking up- and downstairs for a cup of coffee only to find the pot empty. "This has often been reported as some of us being extremely lazy and not wanting to go look at the coffeepot," says Quentin Stafford-Fraser, one of the site's creators. "That isn't true. It was actually the people who sat beside the pot who wrote the system in the first place. It was out of benevolence to our fellow man."

The cam originally ran over a local network. But two years later, when the first Web browser made it practical to display images on the Internet, the Cambridge hackers were quick to take advantage of the new technology. "We realized something that seems obvious now: When the browser connects to the server and asks for images, the image that it gives back doesn't have to be the same every time. So we thought, 'Where do we have a source of images that's constantly changing? Oh, the coffeepot cam.'"

One of the world's most famous Web sites had just one function: To keep an eye on how much coffee was left in a computer lab's pot.

The Web allowed people in the computer lab to look at the pot without using special code. But it also had an unintended side effect: Suddenly, a worldwide audience could monitor the Trojan Room coffeepot, too.

AND MONITOR IT THEY DID. SINCE ITS DEBUT ON the World Wide Web in 1993, the site has received 2.4 million hits, representing hundreds of thousands of individuals. In its first three years, more people visited the site than went to Kings College Chapel, Cambridge's major brick-and-mortar tourist attraction.

All of which was a great surprise to Cambridge's computer scientists. To them the coffeepot cam was just a toy; they never intended it to attract visitors or profits. "If we had," says Stafford-Fraser, "it would look very different than it does today."

Nor did it occur to the founders to capitalize on the site's popularity: "We could have easily gotten sponsorships so we wouldn't have had to buy our own coffee. But we never even did that."

Maybe that's part of the appeal. In these days of "viral marketing," companies spend huge sums to develop Web sites to appeal to fickle consumers, while proliferating Web cams promise an intimacy and voyeuristic thrill that they never seem to deliver. Maybe there's a place in the public's heart for a site that in clunky, functional graphics does one thing and does it with unabashed adequacy.

Why shut down a winner? There are many reasons, says Stafford-Fraser. Most of the original programmers have moved on, leaving fewer and fewer people who know how to operate the system. The old equipment is unreliable and difficult to maintain. "For instance, if the machine should fail to boot up," he says, "I probably can't remember the hieroglyphics needed to make it work—and there are only a couple of people left who can."

In its last months, the cam continues to generate publicity. Following the announcement of shutdown earlier this year, both the *Washington Post* and the *Times* of London ran obits. "There are people who would kill for that kind of coverage," says Stafford-Fraser with a chuckle.

"I guess the key to publicity is to just do something unusual," he says. "People don't expect you to point cameras at coffeepots, and people don't expect you to turn off highly successful Web sites. Maybe the next thing will be switching off your Web cam." U **—Belinda Lanks**