

Judges' Report

CASE Awards of Excellence 2008: Category 10, Web Sites

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This year, judging for the Circle of Excellence Category 10: Web Sites was held at Princeton University. We're grateful to Princeton for hosting this year's judging—and especially to Nancy Costa, associate CIO, and the Office of Information Technology at Princeton, our hosts.

This year, fifteen judges convened for two days in March for the judging. Judges represented American and Canadian colleges, schools, and universities—public and private. The panel included people with experience in design, web strategy, web content development, web technology, and marketing. More than half of the judges have won national CASE Awards of Excellence for their websites.

The entry form for the category states:

Grand Gold, Gold, Silver, and Bronze medal awards may be given for innovative Web sites or pages developed for any institutional use. Do not enter only your homepage for evaluation. Judges will only be looking at multi-page/layered sites or pages.

Indeed, we look deep within the site and consider many aspects of how it is designed and built. And we're tough: this year, there were no Grand Gold awards given, and no Golds among the 33 sites entered in Category 10-A [Complete Institutional Web Sites], though there were Golds in Category 10B (Individual Sub-Web Sites). This category comprised 99 entries of special-purpose websites ranging from campaign sites to alumni sites, virtual tours, admissions sites, annual reports, search sites, and others. In each case, we judged types against each other, so we weren't judging a website for a college against an admissions or alumni site.

Trends

What makes an award-winning institutional website?

Each year's group of judges is different. Even though some members have participated in this judging before, others haven't. So each year we begin with a discussion of what makes a website worthy of a national award. Here were some of the important elements we identified this year:

- **a sound strategy**
- **sound information architecture, navigability, usability and search**
- **good content, effectively deployed across the site**
- **effective management of the site**
- **appropriate look and feel, distinctive to the purpose of the site and consistent within the site**
- **appropriate use of technology; adherence to standards;**
- **evaluation plan; appropriate results**

We also ask whether the site does something particularly interesting or unusual. We're not very interested in sites that merely look good. It's easy to make a site look good, but is the site great at what it's designed to do? If a site looks good but isn't well organized or lacks coherent messaging, it won't get an award. Competition in this category is very rigorous, and winning is difficult.

This year, we saw that the apparent web-wide absorption with video has reached colleges, universities, and schools. We viewed a significant amount of video on the websites we judged. One reaction to this plethora

of video is: so what? Too much writing on college and university web pages seems uninspired; and too many of the videos we saw started to look the same: badly lit and badly shot talking heads. This is really the first efflorescence of video on college and university sites; I expect that we'll see changes in the years to come.

In addition to the increased use of video, we saw an increased awareness of accessibility, with institutions providing transcripts for video and generally paying greater attention to standards across the board. In contrast, we didn't see many sites that used Web 2.0 features such as social networks. We did see a significant amount of good still photography this year.

Some sites we explored are clearly reaching for "wow," but wow in and of itself isn't enough. Without functionality, wow quickly becomes annoying. Another shortcoming overall was a decided lack of great content—we saw very little great writing or video on any of the sites we viewed. Too much of the writing was characterized by the usual university-language clichés. And, often, excellent content was buried deep inside the site.

In all, we agreed that, while institutional web design has come a long way, there's still a long way to go. In general, sites are better organized and there's more consistency in interface and navigation across a given site, making it easier for visitors to navigate around it. Still, we saw some sites with confusing menus (or too many of them)—a clear step backwards.

We'd like to see more evidence that institutions are considering results when they begin to redesign and launch a site and more evidence that they have established a rigorous tracking program.

Here's an observation from the 2006 judges' report that (*still!*) bears repeating:

... we still don't see enough serious attempts at assessing how effective websites are. How can an institution justify spending hundreds of hours of staff time—and thousands or tens of thousands of dollars—on a website and not know how effective it is? Honestly, we don't care if your site has won other awards or if people say they like it. [Which is not to say that we don't pay attention to comments and results from usability testing when they make a point relevant to your award entry.] What's important is that you can demonstrate that you set measurable goals and that your site has met or exceeded them.

We also saw increased evidence that websites are being developed as part of an integrated institutional marketing and communications strategy. Both of the University at Buffalo's award winners are great examples of that and demonstrate best practices.

The Process

This year, we used a process that has evolved over the past ten years of judging websites in this competition and that seems to work well.

The judges were divided into four groups, with balanced skill sets in each group so that no single group had two designers or two technical people, for instance. Each group began by viewing one-quarter of the entries. During this stage, the judges eliminated sites that clearly violated one or more of the characteristics of award-winning sites. The goal was to end this round with about 15 sites left.

Judges often make quick decisions as they view these sites, and there's a good reason for this: if a website doesn't communicate quickly—if its purpose isn't clear or the judges can't figure out where to click—there's a good chance that other visitors will have the same problem. If there's weak content on the home page, why should any visitor look further? In other words, judges apply the same tests as visitors coming to the site under real-world conditions.

During the next round, judges look carefully at each remaining site, taking notes and evaluating the site to see how effectively its creators have met standards for technology, design, navigation, and content—and whether they can demonstrate some results. Then we discuss each of the remaining finalists, often sharing

our own particular area of web expertise. Initially, each judge has his or her favorites for an award, but some of these selections don't stand up to the scrutiny of the group as we collectively explore the sites—and argue about their strengths and weaknesses.

We judged the websites in Category A this way, determined the winners, and then judged the sites in Category B.

Note that our host, Princeton University, earned an award for its Undergraduate Admissions/Financial Aid website. We did not allow judges from Princeton to participate in the initial groups that viewed the sites the University entered, and we asked them to leave the room when the rest of the judges discussed the eventual award-winning site.

If I were the sole judge of this category, my list would be different from the list below. And each judge could make the same statement. But all of us stand by this list of award winners as the best of the entries that we viewed this year.

Category 10A: Complete Institutional Web Sites

This category included sites designed to represent an entire institution, from the home page down. In the past, we've noted that it's difficult to have all the parts of a great site come together at once at an institutional level, and this year was no exception. You'd think that a small institution—a school or a college—would have an advantage here because the scope of work is narrower than that of a large university. But the highest award won in this category—a Silver, and the only one awarded—went to Ball State University for the redesign of its site.

SILVER

Ball State University <cms.bsu.edu>: This entry represents a total redesign of Ball State's main website. It was clear to the judges that the primary target audiences for this site were prospective undergraduates and their parents and that the University had focused its message on these audiences. A judge remarked that the site was "thoughtfully put together." It was praised for being "inviting, balanced, beautiful, and a nice experience"; for having a "wow factor that was refreshing to see"; and for having strong writing and exceptional photography. The University had a strong assessment plan that included on-campus focus groups and various types of usability testing and that showed an increase in applications of five percent. Negatives for the site included the fact that news and most events got lost "below the fold" and that headers on subpages were inconsistent. The site launched too recently to show significant results, but Ball State's plans for evaluating results include (1) tracking increases in online and overall inquiries and applications and (2) setting up focus groups with incoming first-year students and parents this summer. The University is already tracking a five percent increase in applications this year, though it does not attribute that solely to BSU.edu.

BRONZE

Concordia University <www.concordia.ca>: This redesign of Concordia University's main website was coordinated with the design of templates for other key University sites, moving toward a unified University web presence. Among other goals, the redesign was planned to accommodate marketing messages, to allow visitors to the site to conduct business with the University more effectively, and to make the site more navigable. The new design was created and launched internally and informed by usability testing. The judges pointed to the fresh approach embodied in this design and the intuitive navigation that one judge termed "brilliant." We also appreciated the well-written content and compelling messaging. Negatives included a perceived disconnect between the design of the home page and some of the subpages and a perception that the home page was perhaps a little too busy.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges <www.hws.edu>: This redesign embodies messaging and research developed by the colleges around the organizing principle "Worlds of Experience, Lives of Consequence." The design relies on a device the designers call "experience maps," an intriguing and nonlinear representation of the multiple learning pathways HWS students follow. Judges noted that this site was very well done

by an on-campus team. In general, the judges appreciated the work that the HWS team did, though we thought that the high expectations set by the quirky home page were dashed once we navigated within the site. The experience maps on the home page provided unique click-throughs to content deeper in the site and the “easter eggs,” hidden in triangles on the graphics, were a pleasant bonus. Weaknesses included a huge logo, laundry-list navigation, and few measurable objectives or results for the redesign. We also noted that new photos for the “Photo of the Week,” one of the main features, were in short supply. Evaluation included user-group testing. The redesign is ADA-compliant and relies on CSS and XHTML, with few tables, thereby increasing its search engine ranking.

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis <www.iupui.edu>: This redesign of the University’s website was done by an in-house team and focused on differentiating IUPUI from other institutions in the region and providing a framework for more powerful messaging about the University. One of the judges, who lives in Indiana, noted that the University is hailed as a “savior” of Indianapolis; this site skillfully uses the city as a backdrop, as is appropriate considering the role that IUPUI has played in the renaissance in Indianapolis. We noted that there was no problem figuring out where we wanted to go on the site. We also praised the extensive use of video and the site’s search feature. Among the weaknesses of the site were the confusing left-side navigation on the second-level pages and the general busyness of the home page. Also, results for and evaluation of the site were weak.

Category 10B: Individual Sub-Web Sites

These sites—developed for special purposes for particular audiences such as prospective students, alumni, or others—allow an institution to develop a coherent, deep web experience for visitors. It’s often easier to build a special-purpose site: there are usually fewer political issues, a clearer purpose, and more of an opportunity to measure results—assuming, of course, that there is a plan in place to do so.

It’s not surprising to us that the two Gold award winners are aimed at student recruitment, since there is ample opportunity in student recruitment to reach a web-savvy audience that can benefit from a highly interactive, content-rich, well-designed web presence. That said, however, we were surprised at the lack of originality among these entries. It should be easy to build a special-purpose website, but it apparently isn’t easy to make it compelling enough to be an award winner.

GOLD

University at Buffalo, Greener Shade of Blue <www.buffalo.edu/greener_ub>: This site served as a showcase for a semester-long campaign to tell the story of UB’s environmental leadership, a decade-long effort that heretofore had only a small public presence. UB’s Public Affairs Office seized an opportunity to link a series of happy accidents (including a visit by Al Gore) to research, on-campus conservation activities, and other environmental accomplishments. One key flash of understanding at UB was that, without this website, there would have been no GSOB campaign because the site brought it all together and provided a way to tell a broad story. The judges were in general agreement that this site was the best overall site that we experienced during the two days of the judging. It is a beautifully designed site, and it stood out from that standpoint. But it typifies best practices in a variety of other ways as well. For one, it brings together and provides access to a range of resources and programs that would be difficult, if not impossible, to aggregate in any other way. The site also uses a range of technologies, from video to RSS. It is linked to a variety of other media, including events. And it gets results: UB thought carefully about what they wanted out of this site before it was built, and they shared two pages of results with us. A minor quibble is that there is too much hard-to-read vertical text on the site. The award entry for this site is a model of thoughtful explanation.

University of California-Berkeley, UC Berkeley Events Calendar <events.berkeley.edu>: An events calendar wins a gold? Absolutely, and when you learn about this site, you’ll see why. Before March 2007, Berkeley had some 60 independent online events calendars. Now, the Berkeley Calendar Network—some 40 events sponsors, including the major events producers on campus—uses a common events calendar. Many of the judges have attempted to solve the problem of calendaring for their own campus and know how difficult it is. Berkeley provides a model for process and solution. The home-built calendar sets a new standard, allowing people from all over campus to add a calendar of their events to their site with their own distinctive look and feel, and allowing other calendar users across campus to add that event to their own calendar.

This fine example of in-house development of a customized web application for University events appears to solve the problem that many of us face as we try to standardize one event calendar solution that is flexible enough for our campuses. In addition, the event can be rolled up with others into a University-wide calendar. It demonstrates sophisticated thinking about the needs of events management staff on a campus and builds in plenty of incentives for use. In short, this is a product that was greeted by a collective “wow” among the judges.

SILVER

Rochester Institute of Technology, RIT-University News <www.rit.edu/news>: We explored a number of news sites among the entries this year, and this site exemplifies best practices among the entries we viewed. RIT’s news site is doing an exceptional job at informing the University’s various publics about research, events, and other significant news at RIT. As opposed to its former news site, targeted to journalists, this site seeks a much broader audience and uses text, images, blogs, video, RSS, and podcasts to tell numerous stories about RIT. Some basic data among other significant results: blog traffic grew from 358 unique visitors per month in mid-2006 to more than 15,000 page views per month in third-quarter 2007, while the podcast RSS feed grew to more than 20,000 a month. But media also find the new site valuable: AP, for one, mined it for a news story that was published in more than 100 newspapers.

University at Buffalo, YourUB: <www.buffalo.edu/community/>: YYourUB is the University at Buffalo’s “virtual front door” through which community members can access information and services about UB’s research, community programs and facilities, continuing education and events, and other services. The site is also intended to shape perceptions among visitors and lead to further interaction and involvement. This is a comprehensive site, but it all hangs together, and UB’s results indicate that it’s doing its job. There are features within the site and strategic use of media such as RSS. The site averages 12,000 unique visitors a month, 83% of them from off campus. While UB doesn’t attribute its success at raising its profile in Western New York to this website, the site is part of an integrated campaign to do just that. And it’s worked, as indicated by market research in the local market—a great example of best practices in demonstrating community impact.

University of Pittsburgh, Cool Pittsburgh Recruitment Web Site <www.coolpgh.pitt.edu>: This site takes on the challenge of presenting Pittsburgh to graduate students in a way that dispels myths they might have about the city—and presents it as an interesting and affordable place to study and a realistic alternative to New York, Boston, or Washington. The site uses purpose-written content, Flash, and high-quality photography, together with a hip and appealing design. The judges remarked that this site exemplified best practices and was “impressive.” Plus, it demonstrated a smart use of resources, as some of those great photos were taken for various Western Pennsylvania tourism purposes and used here to great effect. Not to mention smart features like “A Saturday in Pittsburgh for free, \$10, \$20 and \$50” <www.coolpgh.pitt.edu/entertainment/things-to-do.php>. The only shortcoming we observed was the lack of a clear link to the University’s graduate studies site.

University of South Carolina, Innovista Research <innovista.sc.edu>: This interesting and well-designed site showcases a research and lifestyle neighborhood development that is a partnership between the University of South Carolina, government, real estate developers, nonprofits, and the business community. Using a variety of media, the Innovista site is intended to demonstrate the many facets of life at this high-tech research center. Indeed, it’s a compelling mix of content, including a terrific Flash-based map, video, and other content elements. And, typical of the site’s attention to detail, the map’s developers created an accessible, non-Flash-based version. The site is well organized, content-rich and easy to use; and there are visits to the site from around the globe.

BRONZE

Baldwin-Wallace College, BWC Be That <www.bw.edu/bethat/>: During the judging of this category, there is usually one site that sparks particularly heated discussion among the judges, and this was it this year. Some judges thought the site was terrific. One judge’s teenage daughter was contacted by Baldwin-

Wallace College and spent five minutes on this site. Her mother reported that such involvement was unprecedented and indicated that the site was clearly oriented to its audience. Another judge observed that he learned nothing about BWC from the site other than that it could hire a clever Flash programmer, suggesting that the site could work for almost any liberal arts college. Nevertheless, the judges believed that the site deserved recognition because it was so clearly focused on its audience and so successful at conveying an experience in a way that no other site did this year. One judge remarked that the site showed that BWC cared about prospective students enough to speak to them in “their language.” Others noted that it was creative; that it used Flash well; and that, as BWC pointed out, visitors to the site spent 4.5 minutes engaging with it. Detractors noted that the site was inaccessible, that calls to action were buried and therefore weak, and that the site was poorly integrated into BWC’s admissions site. These were clearly missed opportunities. More information in the entry about testing and results would have helped overcome some of the concerns among the judges and might have earned the site a higher award.

Princeton University, Undergraduate Admission/Aid Website <www.princeton.edu/admission/>: This site represents a complete redesign of Princeton’s web presence for undergraduate student recruitment and financial aid. It was designed to promote Princeton’s excellence and dispel time-worn myths; to ease the online application process; to employ the University’s content management system for content updates; and to showcase the University’s no-loan student aid program. The profile-rich site relies heavily on photography taken by Princeton’s staff photographer. This design was extensively tested (22 sessions over five days in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York) and refined based on comments from user research such as this and focus groups. The judges commented on the “stunning, evocative photos” on the site. The navigation is clean, intelligent, and well-written, as is the copy generally. On the other hand, some judges commented that there was too much text, that the site lacked multimedia, and that it was difficult to find links to academic majors and degrees.

Virginia Tech, April 16—We Remember website, <www.vt.edu/remember/>: Because of the tragedy on its campus, Virginia Tech has been forced to blaze new trails in many areas. This website was created to serve as an ongoing memorial to the 32 students and faculty who lost their lives in the worst mass shooting in U.S. history. The site is an evolution of the initial home page constructed to commemorate the campus tragedy. Created by the Web Communications team in Virginia Tech’s University Relations office, the site was entirely internally produced. It’s a “remarkable achievement,” considering the circumstances, one judge noted.