

## CASE Circle of Excellence Awards 2011

### Judges' Report: Category 11, Websites

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Judging for the 2011 CASE Circle of Excellence Awards, Category 11: Websites, was held at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, for two days in April. We're grateful to the university for hosting this year's judging—and especially to Shelagh Pedeon and Laurie Zack for their excellent hospitality. Laurie has served as a judge for these awards for nearly a decade. This was his last judging: he retired in May. I will miss his insights and his contributions to future discussions about the websites we've viewed.

This year, the panel of judges included representatives of American and Canadian colleges, schools, and universities, both public and private. Half of the judges had never participated in one of these panels before. Three work for institutions that won national CASE Circle of Excellence Awards for their websites—and headed the teams that built the award-winning sites. Several are well known in the .edu blogosphere. The panel included people with experience in design, web strategy, web content development, admissions, student recruitment, social media, web technology, and marketing.

There are two subcategories in this category:

- In subcategory a, **COMPLETE INSTITUTIONAL WEBSITES**, there were 35 entries; we awarded a silver and two bronzes.
- In subcategory b, **INDIVIDUAL SUB-WEBSITES**, there were 89 entries and we awarded 2 golds, 3 silvers, 4 bronzes, and an honorable mention. (Note: Although honorable mention recipients do not win an official CASE award, the distinction is our way to acknowledge interesting ideas and novel implementations.)

We did see some good, even ingenious, sites this year. But our overall impression was that quality of sites was down and that there were many, many missed opportunities.

#### **WHAT MAKES A WEBSITE AN AWARD WINNER IN 2011?**

We began our judging with a discussion of what makes a national, CASE award-winning institutional website in 2011. One of the interesting aspects of designing and building websites is how complex they are. A site can do many things very well, but can miss the mark totally if its creators fail on small, but significant, details. For example, a site may be beautifully designed, but implemented entirely in Flash with no alternative for viewing. Small choices such as this can often make the difference between a good site and an award winner.

Here were some of the important elements the winning sites we identified this year:

- a sound strategy
- sound information architecture, navigability, usability and search;
- interesting, fresh design
- valid, accurate, timely, and relevant content, effectively deployed across the site, including both text and images
- evaluation plans
- clear calls to action and results
- the quality of resources—content assets, staff, and budgets—and how they were used on the site
- a clear brand identity with a distinct voice
- an appropriate level of innovation—in other words, we wanted designers to push the envelope, but still expected information to be findable, content to be readable (or viewable), and the site to be well designed. Cutting-edge for the sake of being cutting-edge didn't persuade the judges.
- accessibility of the code; appropriate use of technology and adherence to standards; accessibility; acknowledgement of the importance of mobile devices (while we didn't expect a mobile website, we checked to see how sites looked on a phone).

We asked ourselves repeatedly what each site did that was unusual or innovative. Though our task was limited to judging the sites entered in this category against each other, it was impossible to ignore other sites we had seen. As always, judges in this category are picky. Competition is rigorous and winning is difficult.

## **TRENDS**

During the judging, we often remarked at how underwhelmed we were by what we viewed, but I note in reviewing past judging reports that this complaint seems to be a trend over (at least) the past three years. In fact, this section of the 2010 judges' report begins with a comment about how disappointed we were with what we saw in 2009!

So perhaps it's time to acknowledge that there is a certain sameness that's the state of the art for school, college, and university websites. It's not that sites can't be striking in their own right: it's possible to create a beautiful, functional website that reflects well on an institution, attracts prospective students, and engages alumni. But now that many of the standards have been set, innovation occurs within a much narrower range than it did a decade ago. Maybe we can expect to see fewer sites that elicit a "wow" at first sight—but we see many more that we will appreciate the more we use them because their designers have attended to the many important usability details and populated the site with compelling stories, powerful images, and amazing video.

The most innovative sites we saw this year—those for Biola and ASU—were designed for prospective students. One could argue that sites focused on particular audience segments (prospective students, alumni, and others) can take more risks. If the sites are compelling enough—and their audience dedicated enough—they can use nonstandard navigation, offer up interactive Easter eggs, and break other rules. An institutional website has too many demands on it in

terms of making its information findable to serve the needs of many different audiences to break too many rules or push too many boundaries.

Some trends we noticed this year:

- If you ever needed evidence of the international nature of CASE, take a look at this year's entries. Among the award winners are three institutions in the UK.
- Whatever happened to editing? We saw many instances of sites trying to do way too much and not succeeding at much of anything. And we gave awards to sites that were powerful precisely because they represented a compelling concept, simply implemented. Take a look at the University of Toronto's alumni reunion sign-up: the designers of this site edited it down into a clean, simple interface that made it extremely easy to sign up for a very complex series of events.
- Perhaps it's a sign of the economic times, but most of the sites we saw were homegrown and few were produced by external agencies. Some of this homegrown work was excellent and innovative—the sites by Biola and ASU, for example, arose out of a desire to be “different,” but the sites are easy to use and navigate nonetheless.
- Many sites had identity issues and did not provide us with a strong sense of what the institution was, what it stood for, or how it was truly different from its competitors. Take a look at the ASU site or Biola's site to see examples of a strong brand, one that couldn't easily transfer to another institution.
- It's still hard to find calls to action on many websites. One judge recounted difficulty finding information about how to apply—much less an “apply now” button—on a website he viewed. We consider calls to action to be a basic feature of a .edu website.
- We saw many attempts to connect a website to the social web through Facebook and Twitter badges and other devices, but often saw “share this” buttons in unexpected places where they appeared to have been added as an afterthought, not baked into the design of the site.
- While .edu websites are much better organized and easier to navigate than they used to be, we still saw sites with “layers and layers of navigation all over the place,” which made them confusing to navigate. This is particularly challenging on sites that don't have a clear design hierarchy for pages or where choices appear to have been dictated by internal politics rather than respect for what a visitor to the site might want to do. In contrast, the best sites represent a lot of thinking and hard work about their target audiences before design begins. King's College is a great example of this. Their innovative nav bar was only possible because they had streamlined and cleaned up their site first.
- Sad to say, we still see plenty of evidence that institutions still don't appear to start projects by thinking about how they're going to measure outcomes and determine how they will know if their site is successful. They may have some general goals in mind, but they aren't doing the hard work necessary to close the loop. We observed few examples of institutions using web dashboards or metrics to iterate and change based on traffic patterns or user behavior. It's difficult to tweak a site after launch without clear metrics. One of the judges observed, “One of the reasons we see this disconnect is that communications/marketing leaders aren't at the table when strategic decisions are made and, hence, communication and marketing teams are not feeling accountable to those conversations.”

- On many sites, screen space is not well used. For example, we saw pages about curriculum choices that carried a big header and large images. What value does that have to a visitor looking for the content below? And while a big, splashy homepage may impress a first-time visitor, what happens when repeat visitors tire of it and just want to reach the information they're seeking? Does the great moving image on your homepage load so slowly that visitors leave before they see it?
- While we did see good content on some sites, some of it was buried on the site and hard to find. And some good content was overused—a in a site that featured profiles of the same six people everywhere. Images, too, need to be refreshed and updated, especially when they depict events that happened some time ago.
- Some of the special-purpose sites, especially annual reports and some of the magazines, were totally devoid of interactivity, including basic links.

A word about the importance of written submissions. Comments in the submissions that outlined how much testing had been done or how successful the sites were convinced us to give awards to several sites that we might otherwise have passed over.

Likewise, some sites might have fared better if they had demonstrated that the unorthodox choices made by their designers were supported by usability testing rather than whim. One of the judges remarked: "It's not just about the numbers, even if you have them. It's about providing context for your content and trying to serve your customers. Posting content is no longer enough—you have to think about providing a service and include a task-based perspective; that's where analytics shine."

To understand that context, we paid attention to the organizational work and cross-campus cooperation that went into building the backbone of some of these sites.

## **THE PROCESS**

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

We judged the sites in two large groups by subcategory, viewing and discussing the institutional websites first to determine a list of preliminary award winners. Then we moved on to the institutional subsites.

We started by dividing the judges into four groups, with balanced skill sets in each group (no group had two designers or two technical people, for instance). Each group viewed one quarter of the entries and eliminated sites that violated one or more of the characteristics of award-winning sites that we had collectively determined. Our goal was to end round one of viewing the 35 institutional sites with about 10 sites left; from these sites, we selected 3 to 5 award winners. We winnowed the 89 subsites to about 20, from which we selected up to 9 to 10 award winners.

In the first round, judges made quick decisions. If a website didn't communicate quickly—if its purpose wasn't clear, or the judges couldn't figure out where to click, or the site was just plain ugly (which is different from plain but highly functional!)—we assumed that other visitors will have the same problem. If there's weak content on the homepage, why should any visitor look further? In other words, judges tried to apply the same tests as visitors coming to the site under real-world conditions.

During the next round, judges looked carefully at each remaining site, taking notes and evaluating the site to see how effectively its creators met standards for technology, design, navigation, and content—and whether they could demonstrate results. Then we discussed each of the finalists, sharing our own particular area of web expertise. Initially, each judge had his or her favorites for an award, but some of these selections didn't stand up to the scrutiny of the group as we collectively explored the sites and argued about their strengths and weaknesses.

This was very much an exercise in group process. Sites were eliminated from the list and reappeared on it as we evaluated other sites. We got into heated arguments about the relative merits of one site over another, whether its branding was appropriate or not, or how accessible it was. Was a site with a large Flash animation front and center on the homepage an award winner if its designers didn't provide an alternative for mobile devices? (Answer: not in 2011.)

And as in the past, if I were the sole judge of this category, my list would be different from the list below, and I know each of the other judges could make the same statement. However, we all stand by this list of award winners as the best of the entries that we viewed this year.

### **HOW WE MANAGE CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

Judging panels for other CASE Circle Excellence Award categories often top out at about six people. There are a number of reasons why we invite a dozen or more people to participate in judging this category. First, building websites is a complicated undertaking and we want people with different expertise in the room to comment on issues such as audience appropriateness, usability, design, and other issues as they came up. Second, we have a lot of sites to review and having a large group makes this process go faster. Third, a large group of experienced people with strong opinions ensures that a broad range of opinions is heard. Finally, the large group ensures that conflicts of interest do not emerge in this judging.

We take conflicts of interest extremely seriously. Several of the judges represented institutions that had websites entered in this category—and several mStoner clients entered their sites. Judges with a relationship to a site being judged did not participate in viewing the site during the first elimination round; if the site survived this round, judges with a relationship to or interest in a site were expected to recuse themselves from judging the site, were not allowed to comment on it during discussions, and didn't vote on it when awards were decided.

### **CATEGORY 11A: COMPLETE INSTITUTIONAL WEBSITES**

According to the description on CASE.org, in this category, "Grand Gold, Gold, Silver, and Bronze awards may be given for innovative Web sites or pages developed for any institutional use . . . Judges will only be looking at multi-page/layered sites or pages."  
[apps.case.org/coe-apply/description.cfm?id=3]

#### **SILVER**

**University of California, Riverside: Riverside Extension ([www.extension.ucr.edu](http://www.extension.ucr.edu)):** The UC Riverside Extension program serves nearly 70,000 people a year. In their site redesign, the designers wanted to improve usability, support brand strategy, and incorporate a new identity system. But, more importantly, they wanted to increase online enrollments. The new site incorporates a new search and a shopping cart that is not only easy to modify on the back end, but much easier for

students to use. The designers used a series of really beautiful illustrations that tie the site to print pieces that the Extension is using—a clever way to supplement photography. They also made effective use of the photos they do have. The site also uses color in an appealing way that is both businesslike and has a “California” feel. The site is easy to explore and has well-labeled calls to action.

#### **BRONZE**

**Guildhall School of Music and Drama ([www.gsmd.ac.uk](http://www.gsmd.ac.uk)):** This is the newly redesigned site of a performing arts school in the UK. One of the challenges of redesigning the site was to create a thorough and appealing recruitment site—and to present the institution’s public performances in a way that made them easy to search for community members who wanted to attend an event. The result is a site that blends the two functions in a subtle way. We were very impressed with the calendar implementation: “It’s great!” one judge commented. The new website included a virtual tour that presented some navigation challenges. We also observed missed opportunities in their spotlighting of well-known alumni. On the other hand, the videos on the site are very well done: authentic but well-produced, with good sound, providing a good sense of the students and the place. Guildhall developed a multi-phase evaluation plan, including the use of surveys with auditioning students, who noted improved usability on the site. In addition, they noted an immediate decrease in phone calls to the school asking routine questions about admissions, which were now easier to answer by consulting the website.

**King’s College London ([www.kcl.ac.uk](http://www.kcl.ac.uk)):** The new King’s College site is the result of a lengthy redesign and implementation process that includes a new CMS and is projected to be fully implemented this fall. It includes many striking details. One of our favorites is the innovative and useful mouse-over function of the navigation at the top of the screen. When a visitor hovers over Study, Campus Life, Research & Innovation, etc., in the nav, the large feature element slides down the screen, exposing additional navigation. The judges noted many other well-planned details on the site: “gorgeous photography”; many links to social media; color changes when a visitor mouses over certain navigation elements. We were less enamored of the length of the homepage, which ends with a list of academic units, complete with full subnavigation. Perhaps this was politically necessary, but it clutters what is otherwise a thoughtfully designed page. The redesign enabled King’s to look to the future, adding design elements and technology specifically created to be more usable on touch-screen devices.

#### **CATEGORY 11B: INDIVIDUAL SUB-WEBSITES**

In this category, institutions can enter, “...innovative Web sites or pages developed for any institutional use . . . Judges will only be looking at multi-page/layered sites or pages.”

[[www.case.org/coe-apply/description.cfm?id=4](http://www.case.org/coe-apply/description.cfm?id=4)] This includes sites created for a special purpose (such as annual reports, fundraising, or news) or directed toward a well-defined audience (alumni, prospective students, current students, parents).

These sites can be entered in multiple categories (including Alumni Relations Programs: Creative use of Technology and New Media; Fundraising Programs: Technology Applications and Creative Use of New Media; Independent School Web-Based or Electronic HTML External Audience Periodicals; Web-Based or Electronic HTML External Audience Tabloids and Newsletters; or Web-Based or Electronic HTML Internal Audience Periodicals), where they are judged

against sites built for similar purposes. Here, while we do consider how they stack up against like sites, we're thinking more broadly about how they compare to other websites, too.

#### **GOLD**

**Arizona State University: Online Viewbook [[www.asu.edu/myfuture](http://www.asu.edu/myfuture)]:** In 2010, ASU shifted its recruitment strategy from printing a single viewbook to printing multiple, magazine-style viewbooks that directed readers to a newly redesigned recruitment website. This striking site was designed by a team consisting of staff and students who successfully set out to create a media-rich interactive experience. This is a very impressive site, featuring well-written, tightly edited content; rich video; and an immersive experience. There are three different ways to interact with the site—by following a path, by scrolling, and by menu—but it's hard to get lost, no matter which you choose. "It would be brilliant on an iPad," one judge observed. Indeed, it is. Unlike many sites that invite the visitor to "choose your own adventure," this site offers meaningful questions and meaningful content, not fluffy or goofy questions. And the designers embedded Google Analytics code on every single link in every section, so every action can be measured. We did notice a few navigational anomalies (some of the circles used for navigation and graphical elements are not clickable, and some apparently interactive elements are not interactive) but these were minor. Not surprisingly, feedback from prospective students has been excellent.

**Boston University: International Programs Site [[www.bu.edu/abroad](http://www.bu.edu/abroad)]:** Boston University has a terrific in-house creative services team that has won previous awards for outstanding websites. This site is a complete redesign of the University's International Programs website, with the goal of stimulating enrollment in these programs. It is an impressive achievement, incorporating program information, marketing information, images, and video into a rich experience that suggests the incredible breadth of opportunity for learning in other places. Yet everything is easy to find: "The 'whiz bang' doesn't get in the way of navigating and getting to the meat of the info," one judge noted. Another said, "This site takes a lot of complex information and simplifies it in a very accessible and exceptional way." The information on the site is tagged, so it's easy to discover information in different ways (by destination, language, semester, etc.), and its WordPress platform is easy to maintain. Though newly launched, the site has attracted an impressive increase in traffic, and time spent on the site has increased from 53 seconds to 3 minutes and 28 seconds.

#### **SILVER**

**Biola University: Undergrad Site [[undergrad.biola.edu](http://undergrad.biola.edu)]:** This Biola website is part of a multichannel student recruitment campaign that's targeted toward students ages 15 to 50 who seek a rigorous education in a university where spiritual growth and a biblically centered education are a priority. The website is totally unlike most .edu websites. It's the result of a collaborative effort that spanned multiple Biola departments and involved construction of elaborate papercraft letters and blueberry pie, tiltshift photography, and production from a rented studio space. The resulting website is unusual, highly textured, and innovative, without feeling intimidating. Look for Easter eggs buried all over the site and note how the site's background changes as you widen the window on your screen. "It works well because it's different," one judge remarked. "Nothing feels canned," someone else observed. We noted that you can find the bread-and-butter admissions information quickly, and that there are plenty of calls to action. The creators report that anecdotal feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and results so far are good: web visits are up 34% over 2010 (a record year), as are inquiries and applications: a testament

to the strength of the new undergraduate campaign. One of the judges observed, “I also embraced their site for its authenticity to the brand of education that it offers—it’s unique and its authenticity will be hard for others to copy simply because this approach works for a very narrow brand type of institutions. That to me is part of its brilliance.” Another wrote: “Providing everything on a handful of really long pages—as opposed to a more conventional approach of breaking out content and then providing additional links to lots of shorter pages—really works here because the content is beautiful, scannable, and useful. The approach also feels like a step in a new direction, perhaps dictated by touch-screen devices like the iPad.”

**Roosevelt University: Online Housewarming: Furniture & Fixtures Registry for New Building [to access this site, go to [www.roosevelt.edu/Wabash/Registry.aspx](http://www.roosevelt.edu/Wabash/Registry.aspx); use the “gift registry” text]:** Roosevelt University is preparing for a comprehensive campaign that includes building a new 32-story facility in Chicago’s Loop that combines classroom space, retail, and much-needed student living space. Taking inspiration from websites like Create & Barrel, Roosevelt launched this innovative “Wabash Project” gift registry site that allows donors to “shop” for furnishings for the offices and living spaces of the new building. This is an innovative twist on giving: the site makes the point that even small purchases (a wastebasket for \$8) help toward the goal of furnishing the building. And the site makes shopping/giving fun and effortless: an original idea that we’ve not seen before in education. We wished we had more data on how effective the site is in raising money, but we appreciated its brilliant simplicity and the clever and effective metaphor. Plus, Roosevelt used a piece of software that the university already owned as the foundation for the site.

**University of Toronto: Spring Reunion [[springreunion.utoronto.ca](http://springreunion.utoronto.ca)]:** Making sense out of a complicated program featuring multiple events across several days in multiple venues on a sprawling campus is difficult for any organization. The University of Toronto’s advancement team broke down barriers on campus to create a comprehensive, easy-to-use tool to allow Reunion attendees to select events and register and pay for Reunions. We appreciated how thoughtfully this site had been designed and implemented: the UofT staff made many difficult choices to deliver a highly usable website. The site is clean and simple; the design doesn’t detract from its real purpose. The university staff exceeded their goals for the project, registering a record number of attendees under 45 and a record number of attendees in general for more than 100 events across campus, generating more than 5,000 individual event registrations.

#### **BRONZE**

**Cornell University: CALS Green [site: [cornell.stepgreen.org](http://cornell.stepgreen.org); reporting tool: [CALSGreenGuest/Corn3II](http://CALSGreenGuest/Corn3II)]:** This site and reporting tool is a pilot project in Cornell’s effort to use social media to promote environmentally conscious behavior. As part of CALS Green, the college is sponsoring a year-long pilot program/competition amongst six mixed-use buildings (classroom and lab space) to see which building can maximize participation in the program and minimize energy consumption. The site provides an effective balance of content and social features, bringing together resources and social sharing. At the time of entry (about nine months before the pilot project is scheduled to end), about 15 percent of building residents were participating through this website.

**Cornell University: Cornell Lab of Ornithology [www.birds.cornell.edu]:** Because of its narrow focus, we moved this site, which was entered in 11a, to 11b. The redesign of Cornell Lab of Ornithology's website simplifies and unites the Lab's complex programs, provides better search and RSS capabilities, and differentiates the site from its companion website, "All About Birds." The site must satisfy a diverse range of audiences: scientists, the general public, and amateur birders who participate in the Lab's citizen science programs. While we noted some inconsistency in the design as one gets deeper into the site, we were impressed by how accessible the site made the scientific mission of the Lab. "The site has deep content—and a great search," one judge remarked. It also has amazing photography.

**Denison University: TheDEN [denison.edu/theden]:** You could call TheDen Denison University's 2.0 news website. It was conceived as the online source for Denison's news, stories, images, and ideas. Built on WordPress, the site is well designed and thought out. Instead of repurposing press releases into news stories, TheDen offers quick, blog-style content augmented by thorough tagging, which makes content easy to find. It's all bolstered by commenting and other social networking-style features. Denison's staff has a well-thought-out plan to maintain the site and curate its content, and TheDEN has proved popular with a range of audiences from the president to students and prospective students. Though the site was newly launched at the time we judged it, Denison reports that traffic has exceeded its expectations and that qualitative comments are off the charts. While the site contains a lot of content, it is relatively uncluttered in appearance. We saw few or no comments on some of the stories that were more popular, causing us to wonder how invested the Denison community was in the site. But it's well done and, as a bonus for us, the entry for TheDEN was well-written and engaging.

**University of Rochester, Memorial Art Gallery website [mag.rochester.edu]:** This complex and engaging site not only markets programs at the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery, but also displays artwork and artifacts that aren't on exhibit or can't be exhibited. The site is visually attractive, and easy to navigate for a site that's so rich in content. We had a few reservations about the main feature "slider," which wasn't always utilized as well as it could be, and we noticed a bit of inconsistency when the site was viewed in different browsers. We would have liked the site to go just a bit further in connecting us to the museum itself: what about webcam in the galleries, or a virtual visit? But for its rich content and clear navigation, the MAG site is a winner.

#### **HONORABLE MENTION**

**Stanford University School of Medicine: Employee Recognition**

**[med.stanford.edu/employeerecognition2009]:** CASE doesn't really have an "honorable mention" in its Awards of Excellence program. But in this category we occasionally want to honor a site that has unique merit but for which we can't justify an award. This site honoring staff members who have reached various milestones in their career, as well as those earned the Dean's Spirit Awards, is an example: it's built in Flash, which is inaccessible and doesn't display on mobile devices. Still, the concept of the site is appealing to all of us who have struggled with how to recognize people who have made real contributions to our organizations in a time when budgets for gifts and high-profile events have been cut. Stanford's School of Medicine came up with a unique solution in this site, which is an innovative way to recognize its employees who contributed to the School's research and teaching missions.