

Judges' Report

CASE Awards of Excellence 2009: Category 10, Websites

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This year, judging for the Circle of Excellence Category 10: Web Sites was held at Roosevelt University, Chicago. We're grateful to Roosevelt for hosting this year's judging—and especially to Lisa Encarnacion, director of university outreach, who made all the arrangements for us, and to Lesley Slavitt, vice president, government relations and university outreach.

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, admissions, student recruitment, web technology, and marketing. We also had a number of consultants on the panel, one of whom spent years working as a high school counselor. More than half of the judges have won national CASE Awards of Excellence for their websites.

There were 56 complete institutional sites entered in Category 10A [Complete Institutional Websites] this year and 94 sites entered in Category 10B [Individual Sub-Websites]. This category includes special-purpose websites ranging from campaign sites to alumni sites, virtual tours, admissions sites, annual reports, search sites, and others. 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, we saw some excellent work, and we were pleased to award a Grand Gold and two Golds. In Category 10A, George School won a Gold for its redesigned site (www.GeorgeSchool.org). And in Category 10B, Xavier University won the Grand Gold for Road to Xavier (RoadTo.Xavier.edu) and Nazareth College took a Gold for FlightoftheFlyers.com.

What makes an award-winning institutional website? Since we have different people involved in this judging each year, we begin with a discussion of what makes a website worthy of a national award, especially one given by the preeminent professional organization in advancement. 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 and 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.

Trends

I'm sorry to report that the judges were underwhelmed at what we saw this year. One remarked, "I felt as if I was looking at websites from 1997. I was disappointed and surprised at how bad they were."

Some sites we explored are clearly reaching for "wow," but wow in and of itself isn't enough. Without functionality, wow quickly becomes annoying. We noticed a lot of gratuitous elements that had no purpose and/or were not useful; examples of bad design; and many generic websites. One judge remarked, "I don't see many best practices emerging this year."

It was particularly galling to see sites that completely lacked any sense of branding or even a sense of place: the institutions could have been anywhere. For example, we looked at one site from an institution on the California coast and couldn't find a single image that showed us where it was located.

And as important as authenticity is today, many of the sites we looked at seemed to lack authenticity. Authenticity was one of the elements that people liked about George School's site, as well as Northland's and Nazareth College's Flight of the Flyers.

Another shortcoming overall was a decided lack of great content—we saw very little excellent writing or video on any of the sites we viewed. Too much of the writing was characterized by the usual university-language clichés. Sites need to be edited—and not just for misspellings (we observed far too many). And, often, excellent content was buried deep inside the site: this is good content used poorly, where one had to stumble upon it in many cases. This is not only a waste of time (and/or money), but also attention: visitors want good content!

One judge observed, "When I'm looking at your site, all I have is what is on the page. Don't assume I know who you are; or where you are." [Note: one of the strengths of the award-winning site for the George School is that the site provides a sense of what George School is, in words, images, and video.]

There were a number of sites that did a nice job in tying real-world experiences into the web—particularly Nazareth University's Flight of the Flyers site. This site, McGill's Six Word Stories site, IUPUI's Events Calendar, and The Road to Xavier were particularly good at engaging visitors with the sites and encouraging them to share information in a variety of different ways and on different platforms, including social networking sites.

Some final comments:

- One judge noted, "What's with the small fonts?" It wasn't just older judges who complained about the lack of readability of small type on websites.
- We noted that a lot of sites used Flash and provided no alternatives, so they were inaccessible.
- We noted that many of the people who entered sites this year hadn't spent much time thinking about how to evaluate the results of the all the work that went into their site. There were some clear exceptions, two of them being George School and Xavier University. At Xavier, a robust analytics toolset allows people on campus to monitor how the site is being used and respond to groups or individuals appropriately. Bravo to these award winners—and to others who thought through this key step to making a site "effective."

- Many of the entries were a bit cagey about the use of consultants in the redesign process. Some of the winning sites were designed by on-campus teams; others were designed by consultants. We're not particularly focused on how much a site costs, but on how good it is and what kind of results it gets. Please credit consultants for their work and be transparent about the share of the costs allocated to consultant fees when you prepare your entries. We'll recommend that, next year, entries that reference consultants but don't break out their costs be eliminated.

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.

As in years past, 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.

How we manage conflicts of interest. Judging panels for other CASE Awards of Excellence categories top out at about six people. There are a number of reasons why we invite such a large number of people to participate in judging this category. First, building websites is a complicated undertaking and we want people with different kinds of 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 of people makes this process go faster. Third, having 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 Category 10, and several mStoner clients entered sites in this category. Judges with a relationship to a site being judged do not participate in viewing the site during the first "elimination" round; if the site survives this round, judges are expected to recuse themselves from judging the site, are not allowed to comment on it, and are asked to leave the room when the site is being discussed during the final round when awards are given.

Category 10A: Complete Institutional Websites

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.

GOLD

George School <www.GeorgeSchool.org>: This entry represents the total re-visioning and redesign of George School's web presence. The site is designed to help prospective students envision themselves at George School—conveying a sense of the institution, its people, and its culture was essential to the success of the project. Working with mStoner, the staff at George School spent 16 months redesigning the site. The results are impressive, with admission inquiries for boarding students up 20 percent and completed boarding applications up 53 percent; time spent on the site has also increased as visitors engage with the video and other content on the site. The judges believed that of all the sites viewed, George School did the best job of conveying a sense of the institution; one judge remarked, "I feel I know more about this school than any of the others." Another said, "I like the sense of traditionalism but at the same time using technology. It's clearly rooted in the traditions of the school itself." We noted that the writing was exceptional, the site was well-organized, it was consistent, and that there was a lot going on, but it wasn't cluttered or crowded. And aside from its impressive results, it met other objectives, including conveying the essence of the school to prospective students/parents (fit) while rekindling interest among alumni. And there were many great touches, such as showing results of career guidance by scrolling down images of students wearing college sweatshirts. While we saw many sites that were designed and built by consultants, this one was worth it.

SILVER

Northland College <www.northland.edu>: Northland College adopted an environmental mission in 1971 and, since it's facing greater competition now, redesigned its curriculum and its brand for 2009. This site was redeveloped to reflect that brand and to appeal to prospective students. And, we believed, they succeeded in creating a site that has tremendous appeal to prospectives and that showcases Northland effectively: "They aren't trying to be anybody but who they are," one judge said. There were many elements of this site that would speak directly to prospective students, and the design is open and appealing: the simplicity and openness of the site reflects the values of the college. If Northland had incorporated social networking or a Facebook presence into this site, it probably would have earned a Gold. Though Northland made enormous strides towards making the site SEO-friendly and is tracking analytics, there weren't many results to speak of yet.

SUNY-Potsdam <www.potsdam.edu>: This is the first phase of a web redevelopment project at SUNY-Potsdam, a partnership between university staff and idfive. A primary goal of the site was to increase visits to campus by prospective students (and visits were up by 20 percent)—and also to communicate one of the unique aspects of life in Potsdam, the weather, with a forecast featured on every page. The judges believed that while the design wasn't as elegant as Northland's, there were plenty of opportunities for engagement on the site and there was plenty of well-organized, engaging content hidden below a rather sparse design. A plus on this site: videos that are real, not too slick and overproduced.

BRONZE

University of Virginia <www.virginia.edu>: This site represents the ninth redesign of UVA's core website, and, for such a large institution, the site is remarkably consistent and well-organized. It's also up-to-date in terms of technology, using the latest advancements in CSS and Javascript 2.0, and features a lot of different content presented in video, text, and images. Some of it is available via RSS, and there are opportunities to customize your personal experience on the site. We also liked the social networking widget in the upper corner of the gray nav bar, which allows visitors to share the site with friends using a variety of social networking tools and platforms. Many innovative features on this site.

Georgia Tech Research Institute <www.gtri.gatech.edu>: The Georgia Tech Research Institute promises its customers innovative solutions to real-world problems; this redesigned site provides new messaging and tools that allow businesses to connect with Georgia Tech experts and researchers. One judge remarked, "I don't like the aesthetic, but they *are* designing for gearheads." And the truth is that the design is appropriate to the audience. The Expert-to-Expert feature is impressive, and the site is building connections and contracts. After the site launch, the total value of contracts at GTRI increased 44 percent and more than 200 new qualified business leads were submitted via this site.

Category 10B: Individual Sub-Websites

These sites—developed for special purposes for particular audiences such as prospective students, alumni, or others—allow institutions 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.

GRAND GOLD

The Road to Xavier <roadto.xavier.edu> [Username: hopsonk1, Password: Twitter1]: At this judging, there are sometimes sites that are such clear winners that there's almost no discussion about them. That was definitely the case with the latest generation of Xavier University's social networking space for accepted students. Designed to enhance Xavier's image, sense of affordability, and fun, the site utilizes Twitter, Flickr, and Google Maps, as well as Facebook-like social networking. In short, the site provides plenty of opportunities for students to connect with each other. And, indeed, that's working: the average student logs into the site more than 36 times from the time they're accepted to the day they set foot on campus to attend orientation. But beyond that, the site analytics tools give the Xavier staff plenty of insight into who's coming to campus and who isn't. An example: those who are *not* going to attend Xavier, visit the site only twice; so the admissions staff can watch who logs in—and who doesn't—and concentrate on those who are most likely to come to campus. Finally, aside from the well-integrated site and carefully planned assessment and management of the site, Xavier notes that it exemplifies a significant level of teamwork to produce and manage The Road to Xavier.

GOLD

Nazareth University Flight of the Flyers <www.flightoftheflyers.com>: This site is a microsite focused on fostering engagement with Nazareth College among alumni in preparation for Reunion 2009. What makes it so interesting is the way it links people using

Web 2.0 tools—plus the real-world experience involved in ordering a (stuffed) Golden Flyer mascot and sending it out to your friends. The trek involves logging in flyers on Google Maps and watching their travels; uploading photos to the website; and connecting with friends and other alumni in other ways. One judge remarked, “This is the coolest thing I’ve seen in this judging. A smart use of the web that promotes engagement and prompts action in the real world.” The site definitely exhibits a sense of humor—and appeal—given that 47 percent of visitors came back for two or more visits and pre-registration for Reunion is up 22 percent. Nevertheless, this is one of the sites that generated a lot of discussion among the judges. Some of the judges argued that the site deserved an award because of the way it linked the real world with the virtual one; others noted that it seemed a bit childish and its design is uninspiring. But, as one judge put it, “You can’t argue with success. That’s increased engagement in a time when perhaps people can’t afford to travel to reunions, or perhaps older people can’t travel to reunions but this is a way they can engage.”

SILVER

Boston University Annual Report <www.bu.edu/ar>: This site is Boston University’s Annual Report for 2008, a summary of the educational and financial life of the institution. Designed for the web, BU’s annual report includes print and financial information but also incorporates multimedia that could not be included in a print report. Some of these multimedia pieces were repurposed from media produced earlier in the year. The judges really liked the quality content, design, videos, and photos on the site: it’s really well done. One curmudgeon pointed out the opportunities that BU missed by not linking to additional resources (peer-reviewed studies, other websites, news articles, etc.) from this site to round out and underscore the university’s impact and reach.

Boston University Undergraduate Admissions Website:

<www.bu.edu/admissions>: BU’s new undergraduate admissions site provides prospective undergraduates with crucial information and a student’s-eye view of life on campus. The “You at BU” section provides slide shows and videos with a student-centered perspective; one of the judges commented, “These videos are really engaging—there’s lots of engaging stuff in this site.” But details are a problem, and we noted that some of the information that prospective students look for (like a list of “majors” and a class profile) are hard to find. The site launched recently, but the BU team has plans for analyzing results using Google Analytics and application and enrollment numbers.

BRONZE

Boston University, College of Fine Arts Website <www.bu.edu/cfa>: This site is the newly launched website of BU’s College of Fine Arts. It does a terrific job of pulling together the three schools in the college into one site and showcasing programs and student work using images and multimedia. The photography and multimedia on this site are striking; the writing not nearly as good; and the interface is clean and contemporary. We wanted to see the site go further to showcase even more student and faculty work, but BU did an excellent job on this site.

Cornell University Photography Image Library

<imagelibrary.photo.cornell.edu> [login: case; password: case1]: This site is a terrific model for categorizing and selling photo and image assets, built in-house at Cornell. It was developed to provide access to the images from Cornell’s commercial photography stu-

dio. The site makes a large body of high-quality images (more than 18,000) in a variety of formats available to people across a large institution, and makes it easy to find images for a project or personal use through category navigation, keyword searches, thumbnails, and other tools. Through the site, images are made available in print and digital versions to on- and off-campus constituencies, who can browse and buy images using a shopping cart. RSS feeds update regular customers on what's new and available on the site. Thus far, the site has yielded good results, with more than 12 percent of orders coming from the web.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges Daily Update <www.hws.edu/dailyupdate>:

Hobart and William Smith's Daily Update is a sophisticated and constantly updated news and feature site. The site was designed last year to create a visually compelling, better-organized, and more timely news presence for the college. There's a lot of content here (in some ways belying the fact that the college is relatively small); images; a calendar; and other news and features. Furthermore, college staff can tag news and repurpose it using RSS, which can then be displayed elsewhere on the college's websites. While the judges weren't wild about the design, we did appreciate the smart thinking that went into this project. One person remarked, "When I look at this, I see a website, not a print publication that's been thrown up on the web." To build the site, Hobart and William Smith staff pulled together a lot of information from different departments to create the second-most popular page on their site, next to the home page.

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Events Calendar

<events.iupui.edu>: This site doesn't sport the most elegant design, but wins hands-down for its impressive content and great functionality. This site is the central events calendar for IUPUI and (importantly) the community, and it facilitates event entry through a robust, completely rebuilt interface—and sharing through a variety of methods, including feeds, subsites, and social networking widgets. We particularly liked the fact that people outside the institution could add events to the calendar—and the event-sharing aspects of the site were impressive. We also really appreciated the maps feature, which shows where an event is located. The site is very well thought out: a smart concept, smart programming and many features that are not typically found in calendars. The site was designed and programmed entirely in-house.

McGill University <www.sixwords.mcgill.ca>: Ernest Hemingway once wrote, "For sale. Baby shoes, never worn." and called it a six word story. The form has persisted—there's even a website called Six Word Stories <www.sixwordstories.net>—and now McGill has adapted six-word stories for a graphically interesting website designed to enhance its brand and engage community members. Starting with six members of the McGill community (three professors, three students) and promoting the site in Toronto, McGill alumni and others have contributed more than 1500 of their own six-word stories. Some judges thought the site was too cerebral. The site is interesting and engaging, though not always easy to navigate: we wished the originality and idea were better reflected in the execution.

Virginia Military Institute Don't Do Ordinary Website

<www2.vmi.edu/dontdoordinary>: This site was created to complement a new suite of print materials for VMI that focused on the message "Don't do ordinary" in an attempt to convey the VMI experience. The website incorporates a large amount of video to provide student-centered insights about life at VMI and dispel myths about a military education. The site was built internally using a template purchased from a website. We believed that the site felt real and that the videos linked up nicely with sense of the institution. The campaign (including the enrollment publications, not just the website) is working, yielding good results. One judge asked, "Does this site represent the 'new' reality of military train-

ing or is it a slick sell of an old product?" Some of the judges were concerned about the use of the template for the site. And others wondered about how authentic the video was, though there was a great deal of it; in sum, we believed it represented the reality of life at VMI.