

CASE Awards of Excellence 2010

Judges' Report: Category 11, Websites

BY MICHAEL STONER

PRESIDENT, mSTONER; CHAIR, AWARDS COMMITTEE

This year, judging for the Circle of Excellence Category 11: Websites was held at George School in Newtown, PA, in its brand new, LEED-certified library. We're grateful to George School for hosting this year's judging—and especially to Ari Betof, Odie LeFever, and Susan Quinn, who made the arrangements for the judging and even served as chauffeur to those of us staying off-site. Thanks for your wonderful hospitality!

For two days in April, fourteen judges convened for the judging. Judges represented American and Canadian colleges, schools, and universities, both public and private. The panel included people with experience in design, web strategy, web content development, admissions, fund-raising, student recruitment, social media, web technology, and marketing. We also had three people from an independent school, the web communications manager from a community college, and a number of consultants on the panel. Several of the judges work for institutions that have won national CASE Awards of Excellence for their websites. Two representatives from CASE attended the judging.

There were 54 complete institutional sites entered in Category 11A [Complete Institutional Websites] and 106 sites entered in Category 11B [Individual Sub-Websites].

We saw some excellent work this year and awarded three Gold and two Silver awards. But we also saw a lot of missed opportunities and cases where a little more thought or care would have earned a site a higher award.

We began our judging with a discussion of what makes an award-winning institutional website in 2010. All agreed that sites had to be strong on a range of attributes to be considered as a winner. The choices that website designers make in balancing them tip the scales as to whether a site earns an award.

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

- a sound strategy;
- sound information architecture, navigability, usability and search;
- valid, accurate, timely, and relevant content, effectively deployed across the site, including both text and images;
- the quality of resources—content assets, staff, and budgets—and how they were used on the site;

- a clear identity that is appropriate to the organization;
- an appropriate level of innovation—in other words, we want designers to push the envelope but we still expect 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 to award anything.
- standardization of interface across the site;
- accessibility of the code; appropriate use of technology and adherence to standards (We awarded extra points for sites that had considered how they would display on a mobile device.);
- metrics; evaluation plans; results
- and, new this year, a connection to the ecosystem of the web, which is particularly significant as the social web assumes a greater importance.

We asked ourselves repeatedly what each site does that's unusual or innovative. Though we are tasked with judging the sites that are entered in this category and, to some extent, we must compare them with each other, we can't ignore other sites we've seen. For example, we considered it legitimate to reject a site that was a collection of student blogs designed to recruit students. While it was well-designed, there was nothing about it that distinguished it from many similar sites nor did it do anything different than Ball State University's student blog site has been doing for five years.

One of the judges brought an iPad to the judging and we looked at some of the sites on it to see how they would render. Next year, we'll give a lot of weight to how sites render on the iPad and mobile devices.

As always, judges in this category are very picky. Competition is very rigorous and winning is difficult.

Trends

In last year's judges report, I began this section by writing, "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.'" The same was true this year. Another commented, "Could you please tell us where you are?"

Some trends we noticed this year:

- People are trying to break out of the mold of what a traditional site looks like and are trying some radically different things that don't seem to work or are very hard to understand from a user's point of view. If they've tested these innovations and found that they are working, they haven't shared any usability testing results or data that backs up the success of their risk taking.
- Perhaps because of a desire to be "different," 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 differentiated from its competitors—and, therefore, why anyone would want to go there. The winners all did this well.
- It's still hard to find calls to action on many websites. One judge recounted the difficulty of finding information about how to apply, much less an "apply now" button on a website he viewed.

- We saw many attempts to connect a website to the larger web through Facebook and Twitter badges and other devices, but often saw “share this” buttons in unexpected places where they appear 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 very confusing to navigate. This is particularly challenging on sites that don’t have a clear design hierarchy for pages or where choices are clearly dictated by internal politics rather than a sense of what a visitor to the site might want to do.
- On many sites, the space is just not well used. For example, pages about curriculum choices carried a big header and large images. What value does that have to a visitor to these pages? And related to this, while a big, splashy something *MAY* be suitable for a first-time visitor, what happens when repeated visitors tire of it and just want to reach the information they’re seeking?
- While we did see good content on some sites, some of it was buried on the site and hard to find. And some was good, but overused—like a site that featured profiles of six people that showed up everywhere. Another point that is often overlooked is that 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 and even links. I can’t stress too much how important the written submission for this category is—and how crucial it is to provide data about how effective the site is.

A last word about how important the written submissions are. 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.”

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

Finally, knowing that sites were created in-house or with in-house solutions was also a plus.

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 this category in two large groups: we viewed the institutional websites first and discussed them, determining a list of preliminary award winners. Then we moved on to the institutional subsites.

We start by dividing the judges into four groups, with balanced skill sets in each group [no group has two designers or two technical people, for instance]. Each group views one-quarter of

the entries and eliminate sites that violate one or more of the characteristics of award-winning sites that we determined. The goal was to end round one of viewing the 54 institutional sites with about 15 sites left; from these sites, we'll select five to six award winners. We aim to win now the 106 subsites to about 25-30, from which we'll select 10 award winners.

Judges make quick decisions as they view these sites in this first round. 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 or the site is just plain ugly (which is different from plain but highly functional!)—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 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.

This is very much an exercise in group process. Sites are eliminated from the list and reappear on it as we evaluate other sites. We get into heated arguments about the relative merits of one site over another, whether its branding is appropriate or not, or how accessible it is. Is a site with a large Flash animation front and center on the home page an award winner if its designers don't provide an alternative for mobile devices? [Answer: possibly in 2010, probably 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, 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 with a relationship to or interest in a site are expected to recuse themselves from judging the site, are not allowed to comment on it during discussions, and don't vote on it when awards are given.

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."

[www.case.org/coe-apply/description.cfm?id=4] There were 54 sites entered this year.

GOLD

Fashion Institute of Technology (fitnyc.edu): This is the redesigned site for Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. The site, which launched in August 2009, was completely reorganized and includes almost 2,000 pages of content, more than 50 new faculty, student and alumni profiles, and more than 500 images of student work. It's built on a content management system that is now used by more than 130 faculty and staff members for site updates. FIT's museum site (fitnyc.edu/museum) was part of this redesign, as were the websites for its majors (fitnyc.edu/fmm). The website underwent extensive usability and beta testing (in beta, a group of 14-18 year-olds rated the site a 7.3 out of 10). The judges believed the site was very much on-brand; we liked the sense of place provided by the New York skyline on the home page and elsewhere on the site, and the monochromatic color scheme; the strong content on the site; the consistency across the site; and the very effective, and pervasive, use of student work across the site. "It's a perfect site for an institution like this," one judge remarked. Another noted that the academic program pages were "great." The site might have earned a Grand Gold if it offered a Flash alternative that allowed it to render on an iPad or iPhone and/or if it had friendlier URLs (like fitnyc.edu/admissions).

SILVER

Northfield Mount Hermon School (NMHSchool.org): The site is an enrollment-focused redesign of this independent school's existing site as part of a campaign that included development of new identity materials, print, a DVD, and engagement of faculty, students, and staff. One of the most innovative features of the site is the incorporation of social media mashups within NMHSchool.org (nmhschool.org/nmhbook). "It's truly innovative," one judge remarked, "in that it makes the most significant attempt to integrate social media into the workings of the site." We liked the fact that the site put students out in front and were impressed with the Flickr gallery of more than 33,000 photos. One mark of success is that visitors are clearly engaging with the site: the length of the average visit on the site is about 3:31 minutes.

BRONZE

Duke University (Duke.edu): This redesign of the homepage and major sub-pages of Duke's website was designed to bring dynamic content front and center on the site—including news, videos and other rich media—and to sharpen university branding on the site. The University also implemented this site using Drupal. Duke has attempted to communicate its key messages visually here and, in a large part, we thought the university team that planned and implemented the site succeeded. While we appreciated the content on the site, some judges remarked that it was difficult to navigate (one remarked, "I went into financial aid and got stuck there").

University of Puget Sound (PugetSound.edu): The University of Puget Sound's site was extensively redesigned last year as part of a new admissions marketing campaign (it involved a change in URL from ups.edu to pugetsound.edu). It's energetic and vibrant in many places—but occasionally hard to navigate, which detracts from the overall experience on the site. We ap-

plauded Puget Sound's attempts to push the envelope and really liked how the site looked: it's dynamic and has a lot going for it. On the other hand, we observed some problems in actually using the site. In noting that Puget Sound has scheduled usability testing for the spring and that focus groups with students and parents were "underway," one judge remarked: "so they submitted an unimproved, untested site for an award?" The university reported some good results for its effort—though we noted that an increase in applications is probably not due *SOLELY* to the website but to other recruitment efforts, too

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] 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). There were 106 sites entered this year.

These sites can also be entered in other categories [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'll be judged against sites built for similar purposes. Here, while we consider how they stack up against like sites, we're thinking more broadly about how they compare to other websites, too.

GOLD

King's College London, Online Prospectus (www.kcl.ac.uk/prospectus): This is the course catalog for the College. In the UK, the online prospectus is a key decision-making tool for prospective students and it's an impressive example of how to design an online catalog that works well as an information-finding tool and as a branding and marketing tool. The new site incorporates video and multimedia in some places, but more importantly, its designers built a front-end to the database, which makes it accessible to mobile devices. It was built with careful thought to how the data could be updated and maintained; more than 220 users can (and do) update content for the database. The site was tested with focus groups and run through a variety of usability tests, and it shows. Comments from the judges included: "As a curriculum guide, it's exceptionally easy to use and very thoughtful." "About five ways to get to the information!" "Exceptional achievement!"

University of Michigan, University Housing (www.housing.umich.edu): This 500+ page website provides resources, service, and status information to the approximately 11,000 undergraduates and graduate students at the University of Michigan. The site is highly functional, well-thought out, and well-designed and aggregates a large amount of dynamic content within it. Built on the open source content management system Drupal, it's easy for staff to update and maintain. Equally as impressive to the judges, though, was "the effort it takes to put together, the political issues to be overcome in building a site like this, make it an enormous undertaking and it could be a mundane site. But it isn't." As one might expect given the goals for a site like this, usability testing and focus groups pay off. We thought that the site was very well organized and that information was very easy to find, and we were impressed that an internal team could accomplish a project of this scope and achieve these kinds of results. Not only is the site great for finding information and linking to resources, but the fact that it makes it so easy and trans-

parent is a great message for potential students and parents. As one judge observed: "This site makes it seem like the University of Michigan is a place you would feel comfortable going to."

SILVER

University of Toronto, *U of T Magazine* (www.magazine.utoronto.ca): Editors, take note: it's possible to create a great web companion for your print magazine, as the University of Toronto did with this site. This website is the online version of the university's alumni magazine; its print edition is sent quarterly to almost 300,00 friends and alumni of the U of T. While all the magazine's articles since 2000 and PDFs of each edition are maintained on this site, it's a lot more than an archive. In fact, the inclusion of so many interactive and proto-social features make this the apotheosis of web-based alumni "magazines." It incorporates three blogs updated bi-weekly; reader comments; stories ranked by popularity among readers; an online column by an undergraduate; pools; and a photo of the week chosen from the university's Flickr pool. There's a lot of content, and many ways to interact with the editors and with other visitors to the site, all packaged in a visually compelling way. And consider some statistics: 85% increase in monthly traffic; 100% increase in repeat visitors; 75% increase in average time on site by visitors. A truly impressive effort.

BRONZE

Boston University, 2009 Annual Report (www.bu.edu/ar): This year, as in the past several years, Boston University launched a website as a companion to the print version of their annual report. "Global outreach" is a major theme at BU—and in this report. This is an impressively designed site that incorporates profiles, stories, and videos that "tell the story of Boston University." Judges were impressed with the overall design of the site and with much of the content. Again, it's worth pointing out that the use of Flash in many places on this site renders elements unviewable on an iPad or mobile devices. This wasn't a big concern for us this year, but we expect it to be much more significant in 2011.

Columbia College Chicago, This is Columbia's Moment Media Production Center

(www.columbiasmoment.org): This site was built by students and staff at Columbia College to showcase the first new building in the institution's history. The MPC will enable the college to be a leader internationally in training students to use new media technologies of various kinds. The homepage uses a Flash player for the video, which loads quickly and is short and to the point—one judge remarked that "it was the best video we've seen." The static and dynamic media on the site are all well done, particularly the videos, which are clearly edited and optimized for viewing on the web. One judge noted, "As a package, the whole thing is extremely well-conceived and well-executed." It's even more impressive that an in-house team was able to achieve build this site given the political nature of some of the choices they made.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges, 3-D Web site (hws.edu/3D): This site was the most unusual site we viewed in that it can't really be appreciated without a pair of 3-D glasses. It was designed and built by HWS staff for prospective students, who were mailed a 4-panel brochure complete with a set of 3-D glasses for viewing the site. One judge remarked, "As a website it's not very good." But it is different, it is interactive—and it got results. About half of the students who received invitations viewed the site and users were 200 percent more likely to make an admissions inquiry or visit an academic department web page after viewing the 3-D site. More than 30 students who found the site on the web requested glasses so they could view it.

University of Iowa, Annual Report (www.uiowa.edu/annual-report-09/index.html): This is Iowa's Annual Report, which explores how the campus responded to—and how it has recovered from—the disastrous flood of 2008. The designers use images, text, and video in very compelling ways to remind visitors of what happened and how people at the university responded—and how things have changed. We had mixed reactions to the use of black and white imagery: some found it drab, others journalistic and compelling. We all agreed that it was distinctive. And we appreciated the fact that the designers of this site augmented their report of important happenings on campus with links to more information when appropriate. You'd think that this would be a best practice on any website, but it's not the norm in some of the other annual reports we saw.

HONORABLE MENTION

University of Missouri-Columbia, *Illumination* (illumination.missouri.edu): We decided to award this website, which is the online companion to Mizzou's research magazine, an "honorable mention," though technically this award doesn't exist in CASE's Awards of Excellence program. We spent a great deal of time talking about this site, which is impressively design—and, as an online "magazine," flawed. It's beautifully laid out, with pull quotes, great use of images, and articles that encourage reading. Still, it lacks interactive features; compare it with U of T's silver award winner, for example. One judge remarked "UT magazine provides a balance of long form magazine content with engaging interactive content, which *ILLUMINATION* doesn't." Or to quote another, "Some of the visuals and styling are so compelling it makes reading an enjoyable experience. But there are a couple of simple things they could do to make *ILLUMINATION* a better magazine on the web. The problem with their model is they are thinking as magazine editors, not web editors." But we agreed the editors deserve credit for what they have accomplished.