



DESIGN MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

ARTICLE REPRINT

**Design
Management
Journal**

From chaos to constellation: Creating better brand alignment on the Web

Eliot Phillips, Partner, Lippincott Mercer

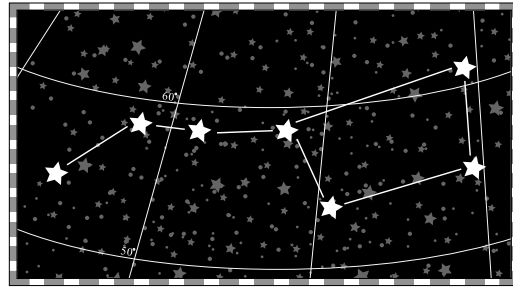
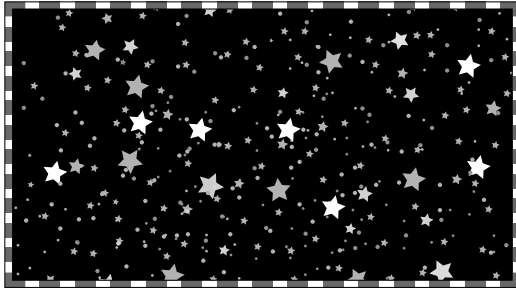
Reprint #03142PH142

**This article was first published in *Design Management Journal* Vol. 14, No. 2
Fusing Design, Strategy and Technology**

Copyright © Spring 2003 by the Design Management Institute, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission. To place an order or receive photocopy permission, contact DMI via phone at (617) 338-6380, Fax (617) 338-6570, or E-mail: dmistaff@dmf.org. The Design Management Institute, DMI, and the design mark are service marks of the Design Management Institute.

www.dmi.org

From chaos to constellation:



Creating better brand alignment on the Web

by Eliot Phillips

It's easy for an organization to put up a few Web sites. It's quite another feat, as Eliot Phillips makes clear, to ensure that they are brand-building, coherent, compelling, up-to-date, and easy to use. He offers a framework, criteria, and design options for building an effective multi-site Web presence, and amplifies critical issues with an in-depth case study.



Eliot Phillips, Partner,
Lippincott Mercer

GE has more than 45 public Web sites—in the US alone. MetLife, more than 35. ExxonMobil, more than 15.

For our purposes, the reasons these sites came into existence—business strategy, competitive necessity, mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, geographic expansion, new product launches, promotional campaigns, divisional entrepreneurialism, and so forth—are less important than the fact that they *do* exist. For it is what these sites collectively reveal—wittingly or not—about the organizations that stand behind them, their brands and communications practices, that corporate communications and branding executives need to do something about.

Experience teaches us that strong

brands and satisfying user experiences are the keys to winning hearts, minds, and revenues in the congested online marketplace. But for companies with complex, global Web presences composed of numerous sites, brands, audiences, purposes, and service offerings, the likelihood increases for brand dilution, mixed messages, and inconsistent user experiences. And this can lead to a range of perceptions—not all of them positive—about the flagship brand and parent organization.

This article and case study explore how one industry leader—a financial services information provider—is going through the process of organizing all its sites, around the world, into a rationalized, cohesive, rigorously

branded Web constellation featuring an impressive set of user experiences. Lippincott Mercer is serving in the role of brand and interactive counsel. Because the work is still under way, we have intentionally disguised some aspects of the case. We will refer to the company as Nugent.

The situation

A rapidly changing regulatory environment. Heightened competition. Continually increasing Web adoption rates. A volume of online user complaints. An overburdened call center. New corporate communications leadership. In 2001, these realities coalesced within the walls of Nugent. So it decided to strengthen its Web offerings and capabilities while ridding its Web presence of chaos, cacophony, and confusion. In seeking to transform it into a cohesive, comprehensible constellation, the corporation outlined long-term goals for its Web presence.

- Capitalize on the Web as an indispensable channel for global brand-building, communications, and commerce.
- Ensure an accurate and rich brand expression throughout and within all the sites, external and internal, in every country in which it conducts business.
- Create a plan to organize, optimize, and evolve a master-branded Web constellation while recognizing that intra- and inter-channel consistency and flexibility are both important.
- Develop and implement Web information strategies that balance audience and company needs.
- Create Web user experiences that foster customer loyalty while helping to bring to life its family of corporate, product, and service brands around the world.

The starting point

An audit of Nugent's loosely knit Web presence yielded these findings:

Scale

There were 45 sites in 26 countries, including:

- 1 US-based corporate portal
- 2 US-based corporate intranets
- 4 divisional marketing sites
- 4 extranets for sales representatives
- 4 types of client extranets containing key product applications

- 5 extranets for customer service representatives
- 25 native-language country sites, each reflecting the local product and service offerings, 18 with accompanying intranets

Consistency

Within and across site types—informational and transactional—there was a decided lack of consistency in application of the corporate identity, information architecture, navigation schemes, page layout, look and feel, imagery and graphic elements, interactivity, readability, and usability. Adding to the confusion, there was little rhyme or reason why some sites had linkages between them while others did not. And an examination of the divisional marketing sites pointed out that each was structured differently, even though they all served the same purpose and, to some extent, audiences.

Reach

From a communications standpoint, the corporate portal offered minimal explanation of the company's international presence or businesses. Most of the affiliates were not mentioned at all.

Personality

On the whole, the personality and tone of the sites were dry, distant, passive, and officious. This perception was underscored by the use and content of imagery, including photography, that was characterized by Nugent as unimaginative, trite, and stiff.

Content

Riddled with jargon and acronyms, site content assumed that prospects and customers had a deep understanding of the industry, products, and services. In addition, many sites featured content that had lingered unchanged for too long. There were few instances in which content was dynamic.

Usability

The most commonly performed user transactions took more than 15 clicks to complete. There was limited ability for prospects and customers to contact the company via the Web. There were cross-platform (PC and Mac) interface inconsistencies.

Visibility

As a dominant player in its industry, Nugent was astounded to discover that the company's name did not appear in the top 100 results in 24 out of 40 searches on generic descriptors of its products, services, solutions, and capabilities, in Altavista, Google, Lycos, and Yahoo!. Equally dismaying, there were a number of links, sites, and stories on the Web that threatened the integrity of the company and some of its brands; Web content about the industry's less-than-reputable players and practices was spilling over into Nugent's space.

Technology

The technology environment was a CIO's hell. There was no universal client database; there were few content management processes, resources, or technologies in place; and there were few CRM implementations, which was ironic in view of one of the company's key product offerings.

Management

Predictably, there was no one senior executive responsible for the company's entire Web presence, nor was there a corporate-wide Web steering committee.

Getting focused

Audit in hand, Nugent refined its initial goals and undertook a three-track approach to optimize its Web constellation. Certain activities within each track proceeded concurrently.

Track 1—Plan

In this track, Nugent confirmed each site's purpose, intended audiences, relevance, and value; clarified the relationships—identities, products/services, audiences, functions—between the sites, and determined the appropriate Web constellation model in view of the company's business strategy, brand architecture, and marketing plans.

Track 2—Develop

This track saw Nugent establishing criteria to ensure that each site would accurately reflect the attributes of the corporate, product, or service brands. Produced intuitive frameworks were to facilitate users' abilities to comprehend and navigate its informational and transactional sites. Standards were created for achieving consistency

and flexibility in content, functionality, and design across all the sites.

Track 3—Manage

Management activities included identifying and prioritizing sites that needed to be created, enhanced, pruned, or eliminated; establishing methods to optimize the company's visibility in search engines; and identifying resources—people, processes, knowledge, and tools—to support and evolve Nugent's Web constellation; and implementation oversight.

Defining the constellation

Based on Nugent's business strategy, brand architecture, and marketing plans, the company set out to determine the best model for its Web constellation—centralized, decentralized, or hybrid (figures 1, 2, and 3). The circles shown in the figures indicate unique sites.

Motivated to bring more visibility to the corporate brand, recognizing the equity in one of its B2B solutions, and based on emerging dynamics in the consumer market, the company explored two models—centralized and hybrid—in greater detail (figures 4 and 5). After further assessment of the benefits and drawbacks of each model, Nugent made the determination that the hybrid model would give it the flexibility it needed to compete aggressively. The company also created a US-centric relationship map (figure 6), indicating the links between all the primary and secondary sites in the US and internationally.

Understanding the audiences

In setting out to make sure it had an accurate picture of its audiences and their needs, Nugent analyzed its sites' traffic and usage patterns, fielded customer surveys, and conducted focus-group research.

The company also employed a technique known as mindset mapping (figure 7), which is based on the notion that all audiences—exter-

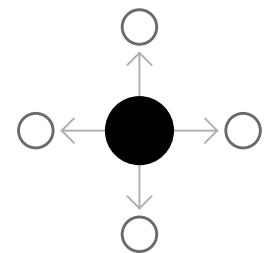


Figure 1. Centralized constellation. In the center is the branded corporate site, or portal, through which all users enter and can access other, secondary sites.

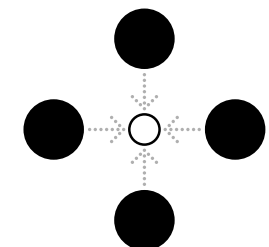


Figure 2. Decentralized constellation. This structure is employed by many holding companies, where the brands within the portfolio are the prominent sites.

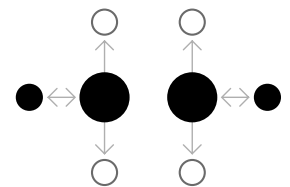


Figure 3. Hybrid constellation. Here, equal prominence is given to the corporate site and other select branded sites.

nal and internal—have ongoing, evolving informational and emotional needs that Web sites have to address in order for those audiences to keep “investing” in the site. This is the case whether the company’s goal is to attract and engage prospects and convert them into loyal, high-value customers, or whether it is to solicit and qualify the best employment candidates.

The goal of mindset mapping is to determine the spectrum of site content and features that will drive the most promising interactions for the purpose of building and sustaining relationships. Nugent created unique mindset maps for its corporate portal, corporate intranet, two divisional marketing sites, and one country site, for several audience types (see table 1).

Measuring value

During one of several mindset-mapping work sessions aimed at articulating the needs of Nugent’s executive management team, the notion of site value was raised. Surely, management needed to know whether a site was delivering value—in hard and soft terms—to the corporation and was worthy of continued investment. Consequently, the company identified a number of benchmarking studies aimed at measuring a range of dynamics, including:

- Brand awareness and favorability
- Traffic levels, drivers, and sources
- Conversion rates—that is, the percentage of prospects who become customers
- The most common pathways through the sites
- The points of high/low interest in the sites
- The points of high departure from the site
- The average account size of light/heavy online customers
- Up-sell and cross-sell behavior

The company is now developing its methods and plans for harvesting and analyzing the information.

Creating an intuitive user experience

Concurrent with the benchmarking studies, Nugent started working with a team of information architects to determine the most appropriate organizing principles for its informational

Figure 4. Centralized model. All Nugent content and sites would be accessed through its corporate portal. The consumer and business areas would not be stand-alone sites.

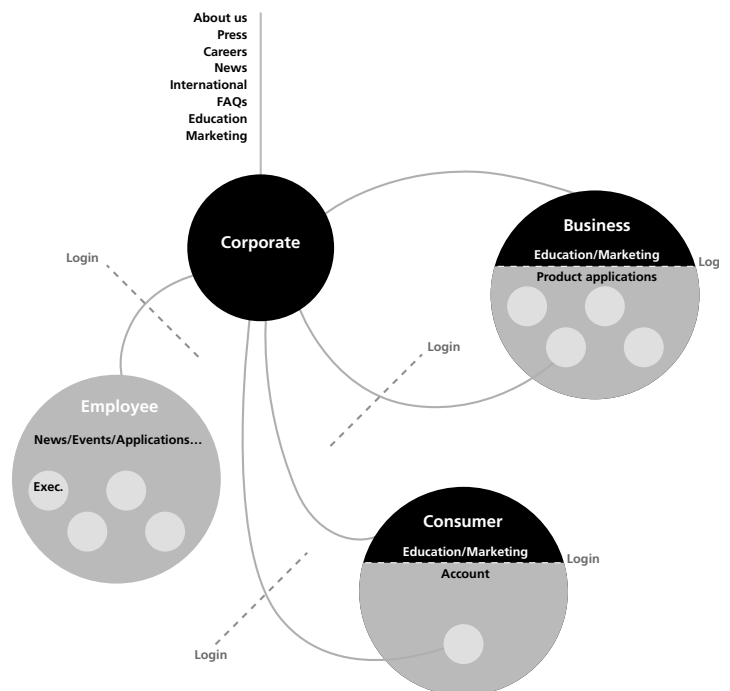
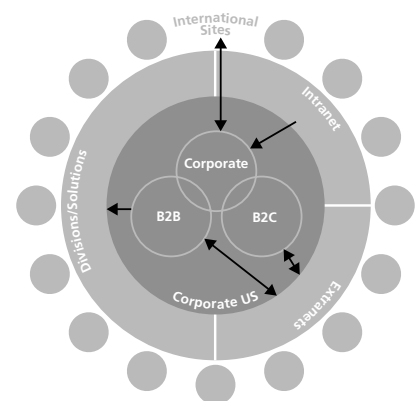


Figure 5. Hybrid model. Stand-alone sites would exist for corporate, consumer, business, and employee audiences. The corporate, consumer, business, and employee sites could also be accessed from the corporate site.

Figure 6. Nugent’s Constellation Relationship Map. This US-centric map codified the relationship of all Nugent site types to one another.



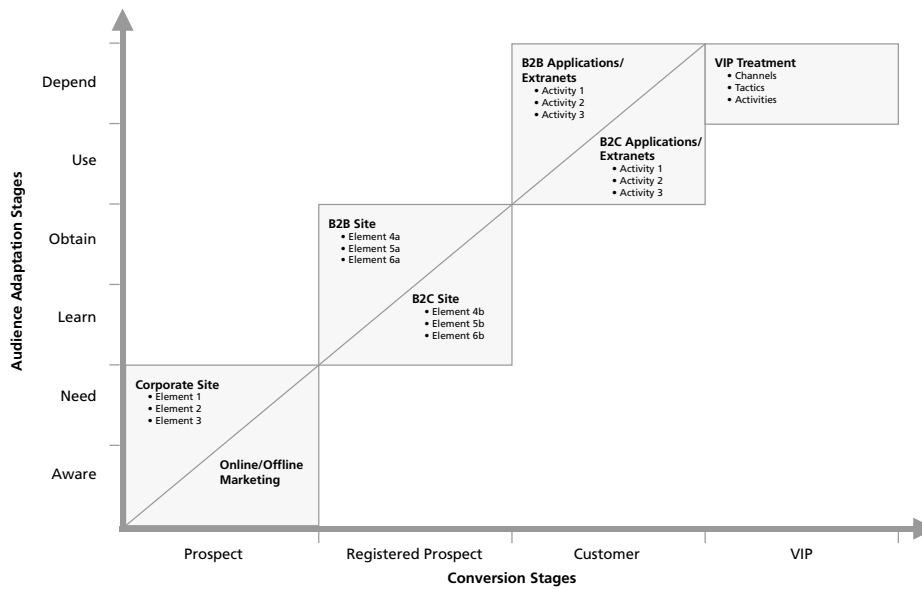


Figure 7. Nugent Mindset Map. The mindset map plots all site content and interactions that will be created to foster relationship building, purchase, and loyalty.

Prospects/Customers	Nugent	Influencers	Officials	Other
Business—Segment 1	Executives	Partners/affiliates	State regulators	Job seekers
Business—Segment 2	Management	Press	US govt.	Community
Consumer—Segment 1	Sales/account reps.	Industry analysts	International govts.	Competitors
Consumer—Segment 2	Customer service reps.			

Table 1. Nugent’s key audiences

and transactional sites. In seeking to lay the foundation for sites that would be as intuitive, as familiar, as understandable, and as usable as possible, the company considered a range of user experience frameworks, including physical, profile, and process models.

Physical models

This set of frameworks includes structures and objects that users encounter frequently in the “real world”: shopping malls, magazines, catalogs, and directories.

Profile models

These audience-specific gateways provide users with the ability to “see themselves” in the site and “enter” it by selecting a:

- Customer type or community (for example, large business, small business, individual)
- Competency level (novice, intermediate, advanced)
- Solution/value level (silver, gold, platinum)
- Product/service category (books, music, DVDs)

Process models

These models, which help users make sense of and act upon information as if it were a curriculum, include:

- Task-based: step 1 → step 2 → step 3
- Cognitive/transactional: learn → plan → do
- Temporal: today → tomorrow → beyond

For its corporate portal, Nugent considered two blended models, one along the lines of a curriculum, the other more like a directory (figures 8 and 9). As is often the case, Nugent found redeeming features in both models and created a way to combine them, in the form of a blueprint (figure 10).

The road well traveled

Committed to the creation, development, and implementation of a hybrid constellation, Nugent turned its attention to defining basic scenarios—user journeys—that it expected its various audience types would take when traversing the three primary, priority sites. These sites were the corporate information site, a B2C information/commerce site, and a B2B informa-



Figure 8. Curriculum. This curriculum model encourages the user to engage in a transactive process (learn, try, open an account)—that is, to cycle through the site’s content and features within an educational framework.

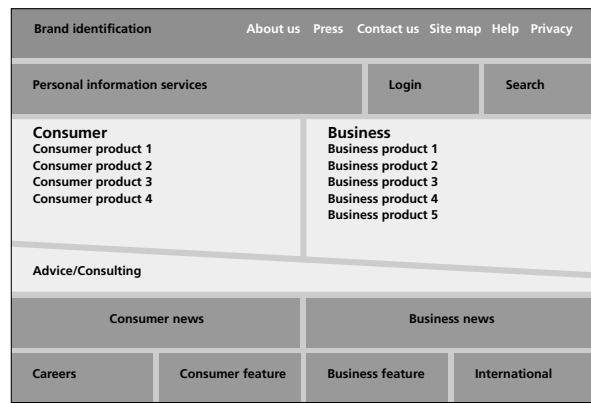


Figure 9. Directory. The directory model is like a menu or catalog in that the user is expected to be more self-directed in finding the desired information.

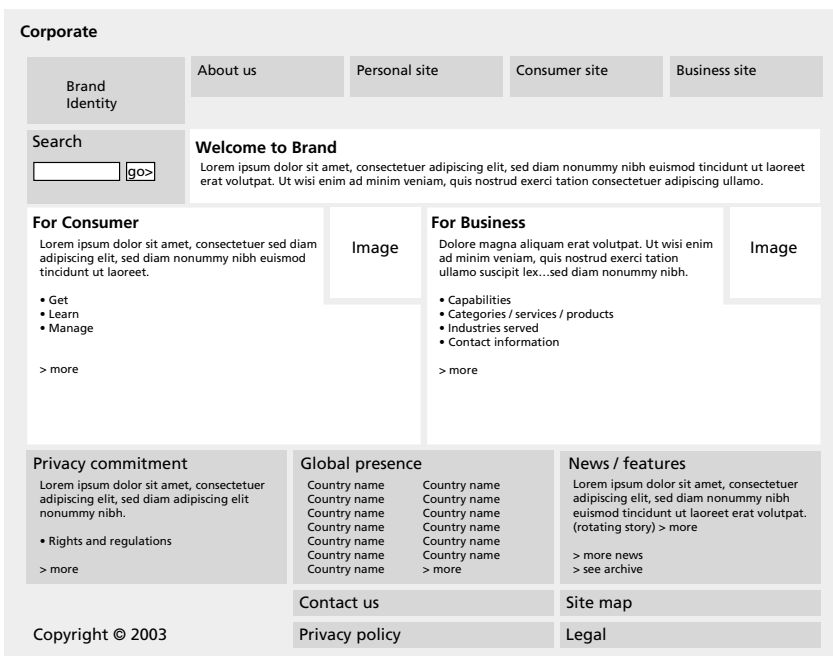


Figure 10. Blueprint of home page for Nugent’s corporate site.

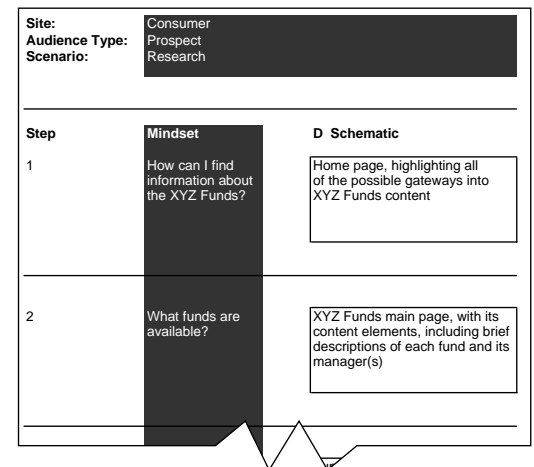


Figure 11. Detail from a Nugent user scenario.

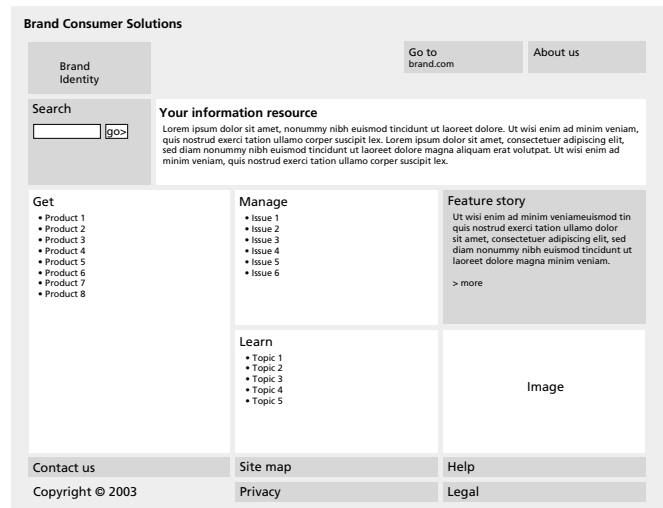
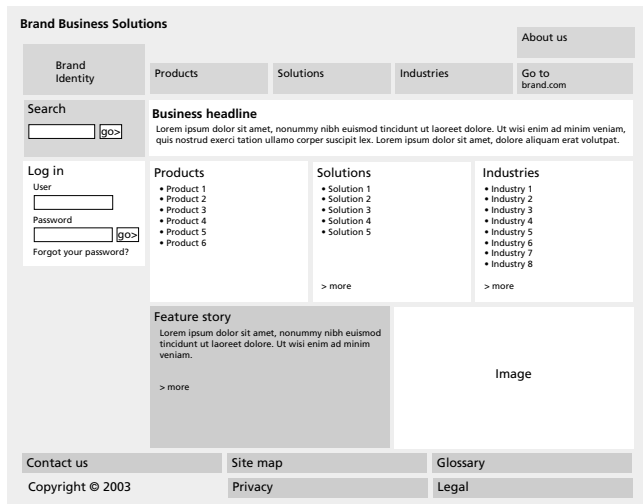
tion/commerce site.

Developed as storyboards (figure 11), these scenarios leveraged the mindset maps created earlier and yielded an indication of the key pages in each site that needed to be architected at the detail level.

Putting together the pieces

Based on the user scenarios for all key audiences, Nugent’s information architecture team developed the detailed schematic illustrations—the blueprints—for all the unique page types within each primary site.

In conjunction with site maps, the blueprints (figures 12 and 13) collectively delineated all informational and functional componentry, the hierarchy of the components, their relative importance and the relationships among them, and the common pathways through, and points of interaction with, site content and feature/functionality. This work would prove to be instrumental in usability testing and as the basis for ensuring an efficient user experience design process.



Figures 12 and 13. Blueprints of business home page and consumer home page. Detailed schematics indicate how, at the site and page level, content and features should be organized, layered, and linked to foster comprehension and usability.

**Content planning and management—
Delivering vitality and relevance**

Nugent recognized the importance that site content would play in signaling corporate vitality, maintaining relevance, conveying quality and, ultimately, differentiating its brands. So when the blueprints and site maps were nearing completion, Nugent started planning the content for the three primary sites. For each site, Nugent specified mixes of static and dynamic content, as seen in table 2.

For each of the three sites, detailed worksheets were created (figure 14) so that all content categories and elements could be specified. Specifications included subject, type, length, source, responsibility, and refresh rate.

The company sent a strong signal internally when it created a global editorial steering committee and local content development teams. It also implemented a five-stage content management workflow—plan, create, approve, implement, and wrap—with each stage consisting of several steps. For each step, details specify who’s involved, inputs, tasks, outputs, and facilitating

tools/technology. After studying its organizational readiness and scalability requirements, Nugent selected a content management technology and vendor.

Today—Creating the user experience

With blueprints done and content creation underway, Nugent’s interactive design team has begun creating the user experience for the company’s Web sites. As this goes to press, the design of all the key pages and components for the three primary sites in the US has been completed. Web design templates and guidelines for US sites have been produced. Nugent is now in the process of identifying three of its international sites for redesign.

The challenge for Nugent’s interactive designers stems from the recognition that Web users have virtually unlimited choice. Users look for relevance, control, simplicity, transparency, immediacy, responsiveness, and engagement. Nugent is after brand loyalty. The user experiences that are at the heart of today’s 20 to 30 million Web sites are all vying for an audience and attention. That is the competitive arena.

Part science, part art

For Nugent, optimizing and managing its branded Web constellation was, and continues to be, part science, part art. The *science* is rooted in Nugent’s development of a:

- Sound business plan
- Well-defined brand positioning

Categories	Types	Interactive Elements
About the company/division	Descriptive prose	Forms
News	Instructional	Surveys
Products, services, solutions	Teaser	Calculators
Case studies	Factoid	Contact/email
Utilities	Call to action	Help

Table 2. Nugent’s key content elements.

Corporate – Content Specifications

Content Category	Content Subcategory	Subject Matter	Structures				Responsibility/Comments	External Links
			Brief Description 5-15 words	Detailed Description 25-45 words	Article 200+ words	Application Instructions		
Portal Option	Consumer	Consumer-oriented capabilities/features					Manager A	
		Explanation and link to Consumer Solutions					Manager A	
	Business	Business-oriented capabilities/features		X			Manager B	Yes (list specifics)
		Explanation and link to Business Portal	X				Manager B	
About Us	Company Overview	Introduction to site		X			Writer A	
		Who we are		X			Writer A	
		Overview of capabilities		X			Writer A	
		Our history			X		Writer B	
		Global presence		X			Writer A	
		Privacy commitment			X		Writer B	
		Business partners		X			Writer C	Yes (list specifics)
		Affiliate program		X			Writer A	
		Awards/achievements				N/A		
		News (external - changes in the industry, legislation, trends, etc.)					News service	

Figure 14. Detail from Nugent content planning worksheet. Content was specified and delineated to manage the content creation effort and ensure that processes and tools were in place to publish as efficiently as possible.

- Rationalized brand architecture
- Keen understanding of its audiences
- Relevant product and service offerings
- Realistic set of expectations for its Web sites
- Mindset-driven information architecture
- Enabling technology environment
- Team of dedicated executives and staff

The *art* is in bringing Nugent’s strategic foundation and vision to life. The progress that it has achieved to date is based on its design team’s ability to:

- Employ a user-centered design approach
- Understand the company’s brand personality and culture
- Create interactive and engaging user experiences that reflect, differentiate, and bring new dimension to Nugent’s brands

Final word

Nugent is not unique. Most members of the *Fortune* 1000 have dozens of Web sites. With respect to optimizing our organizations’ Web constellations, it is up to us—as brand stewards and communications leaders—to shoulder the responsibility, enlighten our colleagues, and

drive the effort.

Nugent’s senior branding executives have expressed that they cannot tolerate the risk of a flagging Web presence; the Web is too inextricably woven into the business practices of its customers. Nugent is a multi-line, multi-geography company; there is competition everywhere. Its weakest site is its weakest link.

Welcome to the new brand management frontier—the Web constellation. ■

Reprint # 03142PHI42

Find related articles on www.dmi.org with these keywords: *brand, design management, digital brand, interactivity, Internet*