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# Introducing Consistent Branding & Navigation to a Diverse Intranet

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**Abstract**

In this paper we offer a glimpse into the processes involved with introducing standards and guidelines for a well established and diverse intranet at a five thousand-plus person corporation. We offer rationale for our approach, along with user reaction and lessons learned.

**Keywords**

Intranet guidelines, standards, templates, consistent navigation, branding

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H5.2. User Interfaces: Standardization, Screen design, User-centered design

**Introduction**

For the past few years, we in the corporate User-Centered Design group at the MITRE Corporation have been studying Nielsen's Intranet Design Annual Report. In the 2002, standardization was mentioned as a design trend [1]. By the 2003 report, each submission was rated on standardization, including main navigation on every page, consistent/easy navigation, consistent style across the intranet, and consistently available search [2]. Consistency seemed to be catching on, and for good reason. Having a consistent design makes life easier for intranet users as well as intranet designers and developers. If intranet pages are consistent, users

only have to learn how things work once [3] and designers and developers do not have to reinvent the wheel every time they build a new site or application. We were sold on the benefits of making our intranet more consistent. We just needed to sell the idea to the rest of the corporation, and come up with a plan to gradually make our enormous intranet more consistent.

To give you some context, MITRE is a not-for-profit organization chartered to work in the public interest. The company has a diverse work program, since its more than 5,000 employees world-wide work closely with many different sponsors to meet their varying needs. As a result, the internal corporate structure is composed of six different operating centers, each with its own management, work program, sponsors, web masters (also known as “stewards”), and homepages. We work in corporate IT, but there are HCI specialists dispersed throughout the other operating centers as well.

### **Why Implement Standards at MITRE?**

When we first started thinking about introducing intranet design standards at MITRE, our intranet which we refer to as the MII (MITRE Information Intranet), contained over 200 collections and over a million individual pages. Each collection and application had its own look and feel, branding and navigation, with over 155 individual web stewards maintaining content on many different servers.

Users were sending feedback via a link on the homepage asking if it would be possible “to have the MII home logo in the same spot with the same graphic on each page of the MII” because they felt it was as if it were “a game to hunt for where the MII home [link] is, when it should be intuitive.” Managers were complaining that every web site and application looked and acted differently. Designers required over twenty hours of design time for each new collection, and

developers were telling us that they did not want to have to think about page design and navigation as they built each new application. They were doing it because they had to, but they would prefer having something to start with, like a template.

From both the external research and internal feedback, we learned that standard templates would save designers and developers time, and therefore save the corporation money. Likewise, having navigational elements in the same place on every intranet page would save time for intranet users because they would not have to search all over each page for things like the intranet home link. Finally, having a standard header at the top of every page could help strengthen MITRE’s spirit de corps, by ensuring that employees feel connected to a single brand, and providing a visual cue to let employees know when they are on the MITRE intranet.

So, we came up with a three-part solution. We would create an enterprise brand complete with templates, to make corporate pages and applications more consistent. In parallel, we would build a collection of slightly more general guidelines and best practices for all MITRE web stewards, so that stewards and developers in all of the operating centers could also benefit from using templates as a starting point when they created new pages or applications. Lastly, in what turned out to be the most challenging piece of our solution, we would introduce consistent navigation and branding across diverse sites with varying owners, by proposing a standard intranet toolbar for the top of every page.

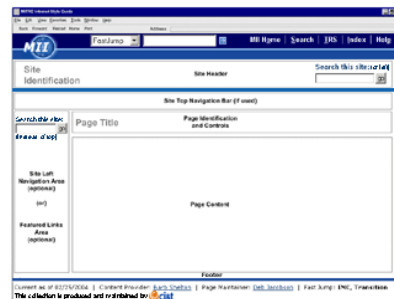
### **The Enterprise Brand**

In June of 2004, we launched an effort to create page templates; outlines that stewards could use as a starting point when building new web pages. Using the general page templates as a starting point, we applied

additional CSS styles to create a special “Enterprise” template for MITRE-wide (as opposed to Center-specific) collections and applications. Our goals in creating enterprise-branded pages (which have a similar look to the intranet homepage) were to:

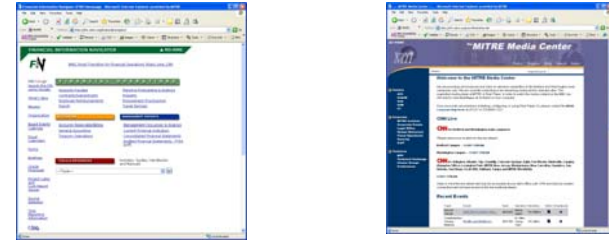
- Create a unified corporate identity to convey authority of corporate information and robustness of corporate applications.
- Offer a consistent general page layout, navigational structure and behavior across corporate applications and collections.
- Prevent corporate stewards and developers from having to start from scratch each time a new collection or application is created.

The enterprise brand was designed to be flexible enough to give designers room to be creative, while detailed enough that stewards could have a fully functional web page by just plugging in their content. The enterprise template (which was coded in XHTML and CSS) included a header and footer, along with suggested placement for site identification and an awareness graphic, top and/or left navigation, search within this site, page identification and controls, and body content.



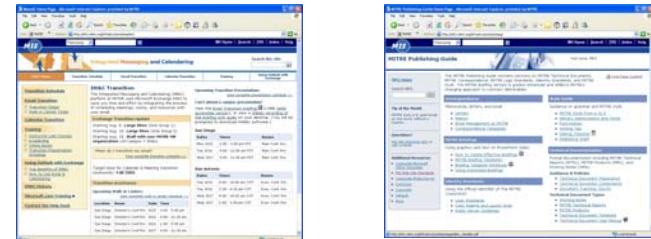
**Figure 1.** The basic outline for how enterprise-branded pages were laid out.

Before the introduction of the enterprise brand, corporate sites were as disparate as sites from any other steward across the corporation.



**Figure 2.** Two sample corporate collections produced before the introduction of the enterprise brand template.

With the introduction of the enterprise brand, consistency emerged while still leaving room for creativity.



**Figure 3.** Two sample sites designed using the enterprise brand template.

The Enterprise templates are in use and have been well received by the corporate stewards, developers and management. The standard intranet toolbar turned out to be a much larger battle.

### A Standard Intranet Toolbar

While we worked on creating an enterprise brand to get the corporate content in order, we were equally

concerned with the diverse center collections, many of which focused on promoting only their own unique brand, rather than showing how they were part of the larger company whole. In some cases, center homepages did not even offer their users the ability to search across the intranet, limiting their search scope instead to only content within that center. Links to the intranet (MII) homepage looked different and were located in different places on each page. All of the homepages offered similar functionality (often including search, fast jump, phonebook and a link to the employee's timecard), but the functions looked and behaved differently on different pages. On some sites, search had an input box with a button, sometimes a link to a different page. Pressing the enter key would sometimes submit a query but on other pages, users had to click on the button with their mouse. All in all, things were very inconsistent.

After reviewing intranets from other companies and noticing a trend towards consistent branding and navigation often at the top of each page, we proposed adding a small (30 pixel) toolbar across the top of every intranet page. That way, stewards would have complete flexibility to maintain their own unique brand below the toolbar, while users could enjoy the benefits of having some consistent branding and navigation across the intranet. If center stewards later chose to use the general page templates in combination with the standard toolbar, then the user experience would be even better, but we started with the toolbar.

We worked with graphic designers to come up with some preliminary mockups, and in January of 2004, presented the idea to a management policy council who supported the concept of a standard toolbar and approved further work on the project.

From January to June (2004), we collected feedback on mockups, iterated the design, worked with a developer to implement the toolbar using CSS and XHTML, and then performance tested the code to make sure implementing the toolbar as an include file did not impact page render times (which was especially important for remote users). Version 1 of the toolbar (see Figure 4 below) was unveiled as a small include file that could be added to and automatically updated (as it evolved) on all pages on the main intranet server. A registration process was put in place for stewards of other servers to register before taking a local copy of the toolbar, so we could notify them as changes were made so they could maintain an up-to-date local version.



**Figure 4.** Standard intranet toolbar, version 1

### Collecting User Feedback

In June of 2004 we pilot tested the toolbar on one application. By March of 2005, the toolbar was being used by many collections and two applications, all under the control of corporate stewards and developers. Informal user feedback was positive with comments like, "Now I don't have to go home to Fast Jump to another page" [Fast Jump is similar to AOL keywords] and "I miss it when it's not on a page," but we wanted to conduct some formal testing as well, to fine-tune the design before introducing the toolbar as an intranet standard. So, by June of 2005 we had mocked up a few alternate versions of the toolbar and conducted usability tests to compare both efficiency and user preference.



**Figure 5.** Alternate designs for the toolbar.

From testing we learned that participants took the most time working with version C (our initial implementation). Version A resulted in slightly fewer errors and averaged slightly fewer seconds less than version B but version B seemed to be preferred by most users. We therefore proposed evolving the toolbar to the version B design. However, while one member of our project team was collecting usability data from users of the toolbar, another team member was gathering concerns and suggestions from center stewards.

### Collecting Steward Feedback

Stewards in some of the operating centers who were in charge of their own center homepages did not seem to agree on the need for consistent navigation and persistent corporate branding. Center stewards said they would prefer guidelines (instead of a toolbar) for flexibility, where everyone could put a search box 10 pixels from the top and 30 pixels from the right, but each steward could decide what search to put there (to offer for example, a center specific search instead of an intranet search).

After collecting concerns and suggestions from as many stewards as possible, we created a revised proposal. While we felt it was important to maintain the toolbar approach for consistency and to give users a visual cue as to when they are on the intranet, we decided to offer two versions (light and dark, see Figure 6) to address concerns about the color being distracting or not blending with certain pages. Similarly, since an

alternate employee lookup offering additional functionality to the corporate phonebook was popular, we decided to add it to the toolbar temporarily, until we are able to return to one enterprise phonebook that meets everyone's needs, hopefully in fiscal year 2006. Of course, offering two phonebooks meant we would have to stick with the less efficient and less well-liked drop-down version of the toolbar in the short-term, as it would be nearly impossible to have two meaningful but distinct phonebook icons in such a small space. However, publicizing the version 2 design showed that we have concrete plans to evolve the toolbar, which was encouraging to some stakeholders.



**Figure 6.** Updated toolbar proposal offers two colors to choose from.

While we think that users will quickly learn that the toolbar is for global functions and will be able to distinguish its elements from elements with the page they are on, we decided for the first release of the toolbar, to remove the Help link and clearly label the intranet-wide search as "MIT Search" to avoid any potential confusion. We also recommended that collection stewards clearly label their search as to its scope (e.g., "Search this site").

### Status of the Toolbar & Standards Collection

While we started this work in July of 2003, at the writing of this paper in September of 2005 the proposed intranet toolbar is not yet a corporate standard. We would like the toolbar to be a mandatory part of every intranet page, but in the meantime, we feel that we've raised important issues to a level of consciousness where discussions can continue, and thought provoking ideas may evolve.

For now, the toolbar is spreading via word-of-mouth and some people are adding it to their pages voluntarily. One center steward said, "With a toolbar like this, I can spend less time maintaining our department site and more time supporting my sponsors." As the standards web site rolls out this fall, we hope that the rest of guidelines and templates continue to help even more developers and stewards save time, allowing them additional time to support their sponsors as well.

We still have much work to do promoting standards and branding across MITRE, but we have learned many valuable lessons over the past two years; lessons that will likely be helpful to us in the future, and may help other people embarking on a standards initiative as well.

### Overall Lessons Learned

- At the beginning of your project, be clear about your goals and document them with supporting research. We have had to point to our original objectives and research countless times over the past two years. Having something to look back at has also helped us to focus our efforts and decide when to compromise on an issue and when to hold firm.
- Have support from high-level managers. Explain your goals and objectives to them early on and make sure they are on board. Implementing standards on a diverse intranet is not an easy task. You may face more obstacles than you expect, and if the obstacles are above you, you'll need management support to get over the hurdle.
- Actively seek and listen to the concerns or suggestions of stewards and developers early in the process of creating standards or templates. As soon as you have mockups or wireframes, share them and coax specific likes, dislikes and concerns from folks who both agree and disagree with the concept. Such discussions

may help you flesh out your plan or design in ways you had not imagined, giving you a much stronger product in the end.

- Accommodate flexibility within reason. Carefully balance your goals for the end users with developer/steward feedback. Try to look at things from their perspective and offer solutions to their challenges. Compromise where possible, but refer back to the initial objectives to make sure your compromises do not omit any of the original goals.
- Never underestimate the grassroots approach. Even if you are facing an uphill battle to implement something as a corporate-wide standard, use the feedback and suggestions you receive to design what you consider to be the "best" solution and then make it available for people who want it use it. In our case, once a few sites added the toolbar, users started to notice when it was missing and asked to put it on other collections.

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