

March 14, 2006

Creating Global Web Site Standards That Work

by Ron Rogowski

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Effective global Web site standards can cut costs and strengthen brands, yet most global organizations' site standards are met with disdain or outright resistance. More than 75% of respondents to a recent Forrester survey receive complaints from local offices because their global Web standards are too rigid, poorly communicated, and lack local relevance. To create effective global site standards, firms should follow four steps to define, create, deploy, and enforce their standards.

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NOTES & RESOURCES

Forrester interviewed 12 vendor and user companies, including: Avenue A/Razorfish, BP, Capgemini, Dell, Hilton Hospitality, Hitachi, Hewlett-Packard, Modem Media, Sapient, Scient Japan, Singapore Airlines, and United Air Lines.

Related Research Documents

["Improve Global Sites With Cross-Cultural Collaboration"](#)

September 7, 2005, Best Practices

["Successful Global Web Standards Start With Research, Testing, And Brand Definition"](#)

September 7, 2005, Best Practices

["Managing International Sites"](#)

March 19, 2004, Best Practices

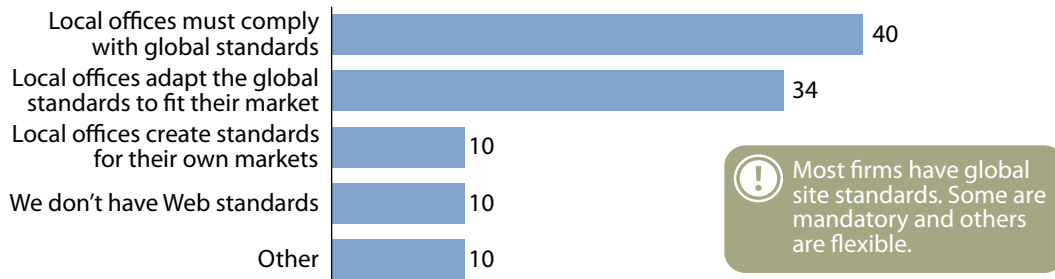
GLOBAL WEB STANDARDS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR LARGE ENTERPRISES

Large global firms maintain hundreds of individual Web sites for the products, brands, and countries that they serve. To maintain control of this sprawl of Web properties, most firms rely on global Web content, infrastructure, and design standards to (see Figure 1):

- **Ensure brand consistency.** Singapore Airlines’ brand is associated with superior customer service. But the airline found that its global Web sites undermined that brand image because they were replete with inconsistent interfaces and sparse in-language content. A single, global site standard, designed to improve customer experience — not just visual elements — across all of its sites, helped Singapore Airlines ensure its Web properties now enhance its valuable brand image.
- **Reduce overall site costs.** When firms let business units, product teams, and local offices design and run their own Web sites as islands, the result is redundant spending on infrastructure, design agency services, and content maintenance. For example, HP’s standards initiative uncovered redundant design agency expenses in separate Web property silos. Global site standards can help ensure that subsites share technical resources and outside services, minimizing global site costs.¹
- **Maximize revenues.** In a world of ever-shortening product life cycles and increased product updates, having the most current information available on sites around the globe is a must. Standardized site platforms and translation processes helped Philips cut months out of its product catalog update process. This streamlined approach not only saved internal costs, but it put current product information into the hands of potential buyers quicker than ever, increasing revenues from product launches.²

Figure 1 Most Firms Deploy Some Form Of Global Web Standards

“Which of the following statements best characterizes your firm’s approach to applying global Web standards to local customer-facing sites?”



Source: Forrester’s Customer Experience Peer Research Panel Survey, Q4 2005

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

- **Measure global performance.** Before its redesign, BP lacked a standard means to track and share key site and customer data on how its messages were being received around the globe. After a redesign that standardized its sites on a single platform, the firm now shares analytics data across the organization — data used to monitor relative site success and prioritize investments around the globe.

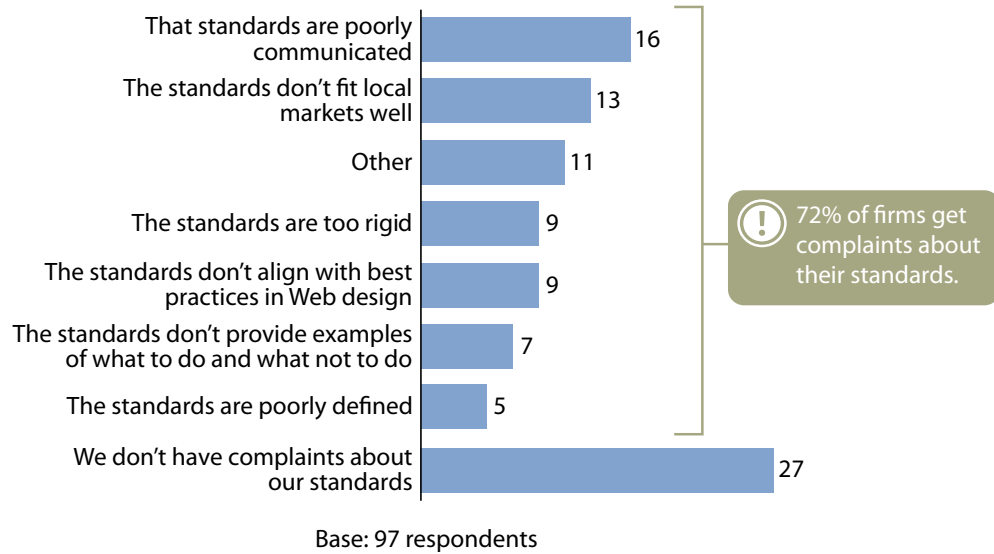
But Most Firms' Current Global Standards Are Flawed

In theory, global site standards help firms keep costs under control, police their brand image, and take some of the burden of site design and maintenance off of business units and local offices. But in practice, standards usually fail to achieve these goals. We recently surveyed 105 firms from our Customer Experience Peer Research Panel and found that more than 75% receive complaints about their standards from local offices (see Figure 2). Firms struggle to create standards that work around the globe because they:

- **Standardize the wrong things.** Many firms focus their standards on visual treatment of pages by fixating on a single front-end design (see Figure 3). But standardized page layouts only succeed when they are based on a strong foundation. Both Dell and BP started by instituting strict requirements for infrastructure, communication processes, and exception handling as a part of their Web standards. Once back-end standards were in place, Dell went with strict templates, while BP granted each of its brands the ability to create and govern their own visual design.³
- **Don't account for local variances in business and culture.** Brand interpretation, business models, and user behaviors differ vastly by market — especially by geography. A single standard can alienate local offices large and small because it may be too rigid for the former and not clear enough for the latter. One luxury automaker found that its detailed configurator was not relevant in markets like China, where configuration options are far more limited than they are in the home market. The company quickly scrapped its one-size-fits-all approach in favor of a separate standard tool for smaller markets.
- **Don't respect the Web's impact on brand.** Building a solid brand image online requires more than the consistent colors and images that most firms' global standards focus on. Content, function, language, typography, layout, and even site performance influence how users perceive a brand. Nike uses content like its race prep guide and function like pace calculators designed to help athletes perform at their best — key elements of its brand positioning.⁴

Figure 2 Local Site Owners Aren't Satisfied With Current Standards

“What is the most common complaint about your firm’s global customer-facing Web site standards?”

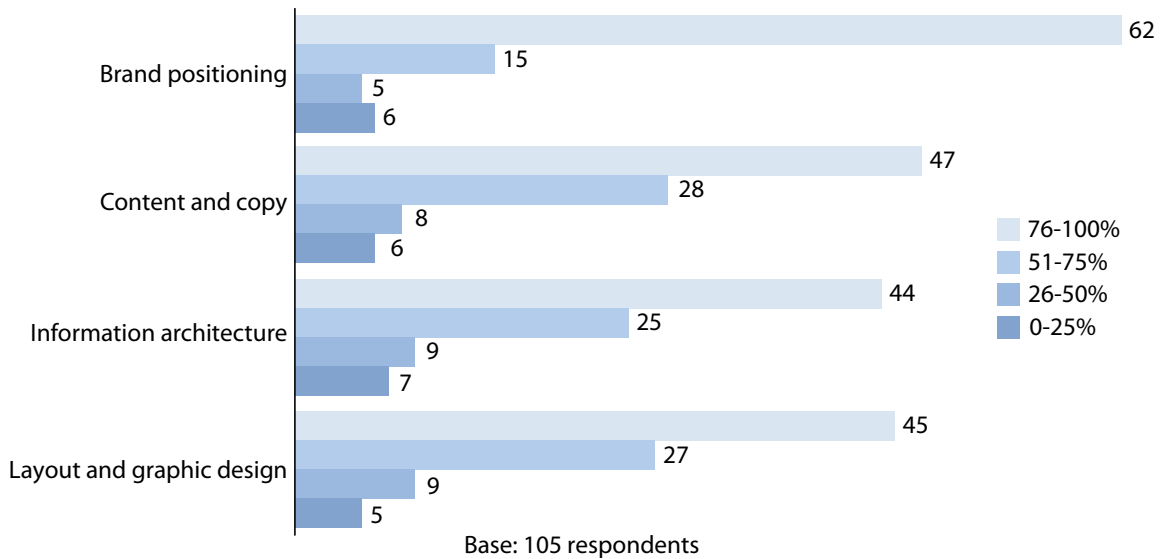


Source: Forrester’s Customer Experience Peer Research Panel Survey, Q4 2005

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 3 Current Global Web Standards Are Flawed

“Approximately what percentage of your firm’s Web pages follow standards your firm has created for the following aspects of global customer-facing Web site design and development?”



Source: Forrester’s Customer Experience Peer Research Panel Survey, Q4 2005

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

RETHINKING GLOBAL WEB STANDARDS

To create global Web standards that are understandable, practical, and enforceable, firms first need to define what the standards should be. Will they be detailed definitions that must be adhered to, or a broader list of requirements that accommodate corporate structure and local user needs? Whichever approach they choose, firms should think of their standards as rules that govern:

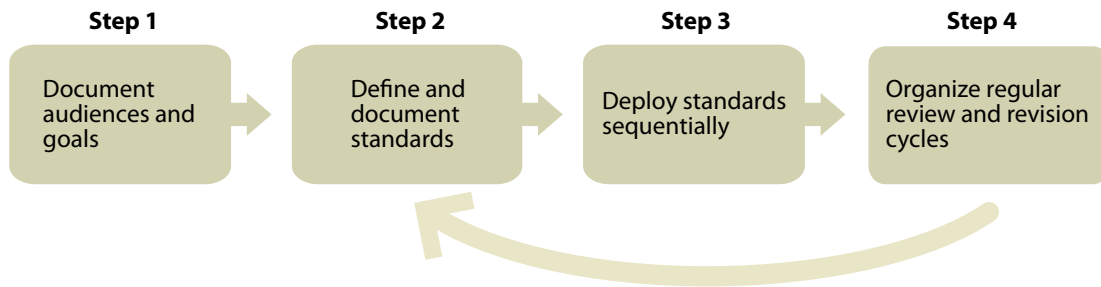
- **Technology.** Technology standards don't have to mean a dictated platform for all sites. Often, global tools may not suit a handful of countries, but central organizations don't have to either dictate which solutions get used or give up control entirely. Instead, firms should think of technology standards as requirements for performance and service — requirements that can be solved for most markets with globally-available tools.
- **Design.** Design standards should go far beyond stipulations for logos and colors. Design standards can be a strict set of templates like those in place at Oracle, or they can be more flexible, modular frameworks like BP's, which enables global brand sites to keep their own identity while providing common page structures across brands. Whatever the format, design standards should be rooted in sound, proven usability principles, aimed at providing a standard level of customer experience.⁵
- **Brand.** While many marketers think of brand as symbols, taglines, and images, brand is actually much more than that — especially on the Web. For users, brand is an experience. The ability to get information, complete a transaction, and get an answer to a product-related question are all critical to how users perceive a brand. Once key user goals are considered, firms can look to add the right image through content, function, and language that is consistent with brand positioning statements.
- **Governance.** Clearly documented rules for change notifications and exceptions should be part of a company's standards. Rules in place at HP provide for sign-off by a central team on any modifications that fall outside of the parameters of the stated standards. This enables the firm to monitor the effectiveness of changes and re-evaluate after a specified test period expires.

FOUR STEPS TO EFFECTIVE GLOBAL WEB STANDARDS

The content of effective Web site standards varies greatly from company to company — a single four-step process will help firms define, create, deploy, and enforce the standards that work best for their individual situations (see Figure 4).

Step 1: Document The Audiences And Goals That The Standards Must Satisfy

Before creating any binding standards, large organizations must clearly define what they hope to achieve through a set of global Web standards. To do this effectively, firms should:

Figure 4 Four Steps To Effective Global Web Standards

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

- **Define the experiences that the standards will support.** Smart companies let user goals drive their standards. For example, when HP found that lack of consistency between desktop-related Web pages and printer-related pages was making it difficult for consumers to purchase these devices in tandem (a key user goal), it responded with a global standard calling for a consistent design between the two lines of business to remove unnecessary barriers to purchase.
- **Make the corporate brand image explicit.** To drive standards that are tightly aligned with brand values, firms must first agree on exactly what those brand values are. Once strategists agree on a definition of the brand, site standards creators should formalize brand attributes in a simple document — a brand persona — and incorporate it into their draft standards.⁶
- **Consider differences in local expectations.** Users in different geographies have different behaviors and brand expectations. For example, Volkswagen is considered a youthful, fun brand in much of the world, but Japanese drivers view VW as a high-end luxury brand. Firms must identify these regional differences upfront and be ready to build the flexibility to deal with them into the standards they create.⁷

Step 2: Define And Document Standards

With clear, documented brand attributes, global objectives, and local considerations as a guide, firms should:

- **Finalize what gets standardized.** The degree to which sites can be standardized globally is a function of organizational structure, differences in user behaviors and local inputs (see Figure 5). The top-level standards that all sites adhere to should be created after carefully considering requirements of all local markets. But flagship brands and major markets should wield influence commensurate with their revenue generation and growth potential in the standards-creating process.⁸ Dell uses the 80/20 rule to guide decisions about what gets included in standards.⁹

Figure 5 How Detailed Should Your Standards Be?

Do local offices fund their own sites?	Siemens was only able to implement Web standards after centralizing its funding model.
Do you have multiple, completely separate brands or lines of business?	While Hitachi has strict rules for its branded sites, its unbranded sites don't have standards because they are outside of the corporate fold.
Are your products and brands positioned differently by country or region?	Volkswagen's brand is perceived as a high-end luxury brand in Japan, while it is more of a youthful, fun brand elsewhere.
Do your sites serve multiple countries or regions with substantial differences in user preferences and behaviors?	The Sports Authority created a completely different site for its mobile Japanese users.

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

- **Document standards.** Standards should clearly state their purpose and define organizational roles in designing, building, and operating sites. Ideally, standards should be available in both online and downloadable formats. BP's standards exist as PDF documents, but they have an intranet repository for the most up-to-date versions of the standards, including a communications narrative of how the standards contribute to the overall goals of the company.
- **Create multiple levels of standards where appropriate.** Operations at flagship brands and major country subsidiaries typically have more resources to put toward their sites than fringe brands or smaller markets. One major automaker has provisions for its US site to make modifications to specified areas of the site as it sees fit through a supplemental standards document. But smaller country sites, like those in South America, must follow a more strict set of rules that dictates more of the overall design and infrastructure — a move that gives the smaller sites the structure they need and the ability to channel their resources.

Step 3: Deploy Standards Sequentially

Rolling out standards is not as easy as blanketing the globe with documents attached to emails. The process of getting standards out to the field and getting them implemented requires a more methodical approach. Firms should:

- **Test standards on a live site.** To show the value of a standardized approach, BP first redesigned its corporate site based on its new standards. The effort allowed brand owners and local marketers to see the standards in action and allowed the corporate office to fix any unforeseen design flaws before standards were rolled out globally. The pilot site then became a pre-built template for local offices to become instantly compliant with new standards by simply plugging in local content.

- **Prioritize and phase-in standards.** For most firms, a shotgun launch of standards is not practical. Large firms like HP and Hitachi have adopted phased approaches. Because HP's top priority was its visual design, the firm began with visual standards before tackling its infrastructure specs. Hitachi's first priority was a comprehensive standard for its fully branded Hitachi sites. After achieving a target level of compliance, Hitachi then turned attention to a less detailed standard for its majority-owned businesses.
- **Set realistic goals and timelines for compliance.** To prevent disruption and ensure brand health, firms should consider standards projects as long-term undertakings. Companies with a single brand in a handful of countries, like United Air Lines, can be aggressive and roll out a single standard when launching a new design, while organizations with multiple brands or lines of business operating in scores of countries should not expect full compliance for three to five years.

Step 4: Organize Regular Review And Revision Cycles

Global standards can change frequently and too often local offices are unaware of what new standards they are supposed to adhere to. To hedge against long-term deviation and receive valuable feedback that will enhance the effectiveness of standards, firms should:

- **Establish regular communication processes.** One obligation of the standards setters is to provide and communicate updates to Web standards. Regular meetings of steering committees and global Web champions are part of ongoing feedback loops at companies like Dell, United Air Lines, and Hitachi. These groups enable local offices to voice their needs and provide a forum for the standards committee to keep participants apprised of pending changes.
- **Initiate a process for exceptions.** Even companies with the most rigid site standards have to allow for exceptions. HP employs a standard, documented process for exceptions that requires site owners to submit an application complete with evidence that is reviewed by a standards board — a process that forces local offices to only request essential changes that can be backed by research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

EFFECTIVE STANDARDS REQUIRE STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION

The biggest challenge that firms face in getting full compliance with their global Web standards is enforcing the rules they have so painstakingly created. The power doesn't just come from the top of the corporate pyramid — it needs to also come from below. To gain full support for standards efforts, companies should:

- **Make local trust a priority.** Local offices must be encouraged to be a part of the standards creation process for it to be effective. United Air Lines began its standards initiative by identifying local Web champions who participated throughout the standardization process. They were provided with budgets to do local testing — the results of which became the foundation for the global Web standards. The result is a consistent global experience that is based on the needs of all markets, not just one home country.
- **Establish regional and local committees with a voice.** To make sure that the needs of all organizations are met, a computer hardware manufacturer created cross-functional teams at different levels of the organization. These teams involved stakeholders from VPs to staff-level champions, and included representatives from corporate communications, marketing, and IT working together to solve local, regional, and global standards issues.¹⁰
- **Have a control mechanism for noncompliance.** When firms can't nudge local offices into compliance, they need a way to put pressure on markets that aren't in compliance. HP controls the gateway to all of its sites and can easily shut off a site until it becomes compliant (a measure that rarely occurs). Other companies, like Hilton, hedge against later policing by employing a standard publishing process that channels hotel-specific content through a central team that reviews and publishes updates.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL**Companies Interviewed For This Document**

Avenue A/Razorfish	Modem Media
BP	Sapient
Capgemini	Scient Japan
Dell	Singapore Airlines
Hewlett-Packard	United Air Lines
Hilton Hospitality	

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Consolidated infrastructure and common designs are key pursuits that can lead to significant cost savings. One company reported that its standardized approach to managing sites kept costs at one-third of estimates if it had not used a standard approach. See the March 19, 2004, Best Practices “[Managing International Sites](#).”
- ² By switching to centralized translation management, Philips drastically reduced its overall translation cost, got firm control of quality and consistency, and cut months out of the update process. See the September 14, 2005, Best Practices “[Philips Cut Costs By Centralizing Web Translation](#).”
- ³ For an example, note the difference between BP.com and Castrol.com. Both sites are built on the same infrastructure and use the same design framework, but they still maintain unique brand identities.
- ⁴ In a recent review of 16 online brands, Nike’s site was the only site all of Forrester’s Brand Image tests, getting a perfect mark in five of the six tests. Standout features include rich content and function that exceeds the offerings at many ad-supported media sites. But what’s truly differentiating is the way brand positioning permeates every part of the customer’s experience, from editorial content like the race prep guide to product shots and ads integrated into the online store. See the June 9, 2005, Best Practices “[How Brands Succeed Online](#).”
- ⁵ Forrester used its updated Web Site Review methodology to evaluate the customer experience offered on 20 major sites — five each in the auto, media, retail, and travel industries. We found basic design flaws on even the best sites we tested. To ensure that they get at least the basics right, firms need to add discipline to their design efforts. See the March 11, 2005, Best Practices “[Best And Worst Of Site Design, 2005](#).”
- ⁶ User personas — which represent a customer segment as a single human with a name, face, attitudes, and goals — make it easy for companies to focus on the most important needs of their most important customers. To help Web teams focus on the top aspects of their brand positioning, teams should create a parallel document summarizing the key image attributes they need to communicate online. This brand persona shouldn’t try to copy the user persona format by turning the brand into a faux human. Instead, it should borrow relevant elements like a narrative description of the firm’s mission, vision, and values to set context, a logo in lieu of a face, the tagline from the current campaign instead of a user quote, and bulleted

lists of the most important benefits, personality characteristics, and desired behaviors. See the June 9, 2005, Best Practices “[How Brands Succeed Online](#).”

- ⁷ To find out how their users in difficult-to-penetrate markets like those in Asia approach their sites, firms should gather data from these users directly. But before running out to test, firms need to first understand the implications of cultural differences on testing and make adjustments to their methods to get accurate results. See the September 22, 2005 Best Practices “[Tips For User Testing In Asia](#).”
- ⁸ At large multinational companies, many local site owners feel alienated. They want more control over the user experience but lack the tools to wrestle power from headquarters. But country managers can do something about it. By displaying rich knowledge of their target users’ experiences, they can win the trust of headquarters while perhaps teaching them a thing or two about their global design. See the May 24, 2004, Quick Take “[Local Site Owners Need A Stronger Voice](#).”
- ⁹ Dell’s top-tier sites only account for 20% of the number of global sites. But because they account for roughly 80% of the company’s revenue, their requirements are given precedence over those of smaller markets when necessary.
- ¹⁰ Despite advances in communication technologies, the job of incorporating all important local elements can be derailed by difficulties with language, logistics, and leveraging assets across the organization. To overcome the challenges of working in distributed environments, firms should create an internal culture of global understanding that encourages communication with corporate, regional, and local offices. See the September 7, 2005, Best Practices “[Improve Global Sites With Cross-Cultural Collaboration](#).”

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