

Portals – It's All About The User Experience

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In determining the return on investment and user adoption goals for corporate portal strategies, it is useful to look back at the last era of destination portals – back in the days of the dot com industry where portals brought major multiples in stock offerings and start-ups aspired to be your default home page. Lycos, Netscape, Yahoo, MSN, are some of the examples of generic destination portals with Techtargent, iVillage, Techweb and others specializing in industry and demographic segments. They all wanted your eyeballs.

Organizations now are in the same battle for those eyeballs – from employees, customers, partners and other constituencies. It perhaps is a good thing to take a lesson from those headier days. Some of these companies are still thriving – and user adoption is the major determinant of that success since visits bring advertisers and revenue.

In general terms, the biggest difference between corporate portals and these destination portals is the ownership of the data or content. Most destination portals derive a large part of their content from other partners and information sources – news, weather, movie times, directions, stock listings, etc. Corporate portals primarily present their own data from departmental content and transaction systems. And this difference has led to very very different behaviors – and design starting points.

Destination portals spend enormous resources on the user experience. Their sites are based on major research on the content that they need, the ability to navigate that content, and even the tools to customize the user experience. Content sources are then integrated into that design architecture.

On the other hand, most corporate portals are designed from the data source out to the user. Why? Most of the IT resources are spent on collecting, managing, organizing, storing, and reporting on the data supporting the systems that run the business. And the knowledge base of what that data looks like and how to retrieve it is stored primarily in the IT department. Most portal software today competes based on how many information sources and application systems they can interface to. And this is hard work. Data comes in a myriad of formats and has different meanings to various departments that use the data.

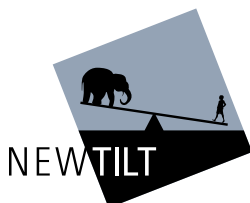
The challenges of data management are no secret. Executive Information Systems and Data Warehouse projects all have had the same sets of issues for 20 years or more. Data is designed to support the transaction systems and secondarily is utilized by various organizations to make better business decisions.

The way to create successful corporate portals is to take a lesson from the destination portals that work out on the web. Here are a few radical suggestions.

1. Portal Management should not report to the IT Department

Why do most corporate websites report to marketing departments and not the IT organization? Websites are a window to the world for organizations, a tool for marketing, just like collateral, PR, trade shows and other marketing programs. Since corporate websites need to be updated in real time and are a competitive edge for most organizations, marketing needs to drive the requirements and the implementation. IT may own the technical resources in many cases, but they do not own the strategy or the content implementation.

In the case of destination portals on the web, these sites in most cases do not own the data they display to their visitors. Therefore their goals are to discover what content their users want to see



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and in what form they want to see it. A perspective like that for an organization might be just the basis for a successful portal strategy.

Where should the portal director report? Many places, but it must be high enough in the organization to be able to interact with decision makers, and to gain the resources that are needed – particularly from the IT department.

2. Collect requirements for information from the end users, not from the data that exists.

It is a lot easier to build an interface to the data that exists. Not that it is easy – just that it's a good starting place. What is really needed is an investigation on how different users do their jobs, how they make decisions, and what information they use – and could use – in their daily activities. The goal is to make their jobs easier, not to add “using the corporate portal” as a new activity.

The next step is to then find the sources for the information. In many cases, the information that does exist today in systems does not match how the information is needed to be used by other departments. In addition, different departments may actually have different information requirements from the same systems – or even the same data, whether by time period, sorting requirements, or other factors. How many times have we seen finance and sales looking at the same data and calculating different results? Customers and partners have different requirements as well. This is a challenge that the data warehouse movement has been addressing for years. But if the information is not presented in the way it is needed, then it will not be used and the investment in a portal strategy will not yield an acceptable return.

3. Invest in a good portal design.

While portal software has come a great long way, their interfaces are geared for quickly getting vast amounts of data up and running in a portal environment. These products by necessity are “data out” formatters. But most of these portal products can be customized to look like almost anything you want – all it takes is ingenuity and investment. And IT departments in general do not have user interface design specialists – they are usually in other organizations building products that represent the corporate brand. There is an argument to be made that representing the corporate brand is just as important for these portals.

4. Learn from the destination portals experience

Destination portals have evolved as the web has grown and matured. In many cases the battle for the home page is over. Computers come installed with browsers set up by the manufacturer or the IT department and many people do not even change (or know how to change) their homepage default. Today, most people do not go to destination portals daily to check on current content. Nowadays, that information comes to them via email. On a regular basis, emails

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provide highlighted current content so when an end user is interested, all they have to do is click on the link. Use the “pull” approach for your portals. Have your users subscribe to email newsletters that let them know daily, weekly, monthly what has changed on the portal. It's a good way to also continue to keep the portal out in front.

In summary, a commitment to portals is not just an investment in technology. It is a commitment to a new way of doing business internally and with your customers, partners, and other constituencies. It is more than a reformatting of your information systems. Treating it like a business with goals, objectives, and resource commitments is the only way to achieve successful implementations. Look to those companies that actually successfully built destination portals for the general internet population to gain ideas and ways to “look outside the box” of portal software.

As senior consultant, Jeanne is responsible for business process and content strategy for New Tilt projects. A high tech marketing executive for over 15 years, Jeanne is a strong advocate for ensuring that internet strategies are backed by a solid foundation of organization and systems processes.

As VP of marketing for a number of technology companies, her responsibilities included product marketing, marketing communications, branding, lead generation and web development. She has worked for TidalWire Inc. (acquired by Network Engines), Vality Technology, Intelligent Environments, Logica Inc., Computer Corporation of America, and Wang Laboratories.

Working with New Tilt, as one of the initial TidalWire employees, she created a web portal for storage networking professionals that had over 6000 registered users at its peak. She began her IT career in programming and database consulting, and co-authored a book with William H. Inmon, “Design Review for a Database Environment,” published by Prentice-Hall. Jeanne has an MBA from Harvard University and has a BA from Brandeis University.