Spinning the Web: The Design of Yale’s Front Door

by Robert Callum

As time passes, the term “the Web” proves to be remarkably prescient terminology. The World Wide Web has infiltrated and entangled our lives much like its natural namesake. More noteworthy, however, is the way the Web has mimicked biological processes, showing the ability to metamorphose and evolve in a manner that would make Darwin proud. As the Web changes, the pages and people who are stuck to its digital threads must also evolve, or face the fate of those not “naturally selected.”

The story that follows will resonate with many readers. The same scenarios are currently present across campuses all over the world. Redesigning a college or university home page is both necessary and challenging—necessary because an epoch on the Web is six months, and stasis for much longer ensures that technological and design innovations have passed you by; and challenging because design choices are not science. Building consensus around one choice, especially at institutions that pride themselves on freedom of thought, is an unenviable task.

Early efforts at Yale

The history of the Web at Yale followed a familiar course. Scientists and programmers, the early adopters of any new technology, latched onto the Web and produced the first University “Front Door.” The results for the time (early 1993) were superb. Yale had a presence on the Web where the digital cognoscenti could “hang ten.”

By 1994, the world was markedly different. The early adopters had been joined by mainstream users, and recognition of the Web, both on and off campus, had grown dramatically. Academic Computing Services (ACS), fine purveyors of the Gopher-based campus information system since the early 1990s, realized that the Web was a mature information dissemination tool. The Front Door represented all of Yale, and required substantial managerial and technical attention. The Web was now a major responsibility, and it was time to move that responsibility to an institutional home. Day-to-day operations of the Front Door were transferred to ACS.

At the same time that ACS assumed custody of the Front Door, the Office of Public Affairs (OPA) became increasingly concerned about the Web’s public relations implications. The director of OPA convened a design group, and shepherded the creation of a new image (“the books”) to be the main graphical statement of the Front Door. The new image was grafted onto the pre-existing organizational structure, and the resulting Front Door served the University’s needs through 1994.

By early 1995, however, the organizational schema of that original Front Door, basically unchanged since 1993, was showing signs of wear. The arts of managing information, creating categories, and identifying audiences had matured along with the Web. Adding new links to the Front Door in an ad hoc manner quickly created a rambling litany of resources that daunted newcomers and created a skewed perception of the University’s offerings.

The maturation of information organization mirrored a greater appreciation of the Web’s importance by University officers. Through frequent use and conversations with sister institutions, Yale’s governance now understood that the Web was a new form of publication, the impact of which on the school’s image was equal to, if not greater than, standard paper fare. As such, any redesign of the Front Door needed University-wide approval. That approval would come straight from the top: the president.

In only two years, the Front Door had evolved from the exploratory musings of the technically enabled to an image-bearing tool that required the imprimatur of the chief executive officer. To garner that imprimatur in an effective manner brought other challenges, however.

Building consensus for a new design

A steering group large enough to accommodate key University decision-makers would be too large to actually create change. Large groups pontificate, while small groups get things done. The solution was to divide the redesign process by creating an advisory team and a design team.

The advisory team included members of the larger University community, including representatives from the Provost’s Office, the University...
The design team wanted a minimum of categories, clearly defined and organized, that would put each visitor immediately at ease.

The redesign complete, the new Front Door was released to the world, and specifically the hyper-critical campus and alumni populations. The teams were pleasantly surprised at the response. To date, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The new categories are intuitive, and the arduous process of information gathering has been made much easier. Certain users have bemoaned the lack of “glitz” that
accompanies many Web sites these days, but the majority has applauded the simple elegance of the redesign.

The Yale advisory and design teams have no illusions concerning the permanence of their work. While it is hoped that the organizational schema chosen will scale well, a life cycle of more than two or three epochs (18 months) is impractical. The Web will evolve further, and so will our understanding of it, so that what now feels visionary will soon look hackneyed.

What will have lasting value, we hope, is the process used to create the schema. Audience targeting, knowing who comes to your pages and why, is invaluable in the design process. So is keeping the design team small. Consensus building and participation from across the University is imperative for both the conceptual phase and the overall acceptance of a new Front Door, but that consensus cannot come at the cost of a bloated design force. With too many hands in the Web, process becomes hopelessly entangled.

The redesign of the Yale Front Door, here presented in a straightforward narrative, belies the difficulty that the design and advisory teams had in creating the new pages. Open discussion and debate, sometimes strenuous and heated, created a crucible that withered many lesser designs. Those that were “naturally selected” from the milieu showed both adaptability and vision, two qualities that will be indispensable for the continuing evolution of the Web. Darwin would indeed be proud.

The author would like to thank Phil Long and Matthew Beacom for their help in making high-quality web pages a reality at Yale.

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Frank Tierney, a graphic designer from Yale University Printing and Graphic Services, created “the books.” The image was based on a portion of Elihu Yale’s library, part of his original gift to the University. The different sizes and shapes of the original eleven books conspired to form a stunning graphical milieu, not unlike the “Manhattan Skyline,” in the words of Paul Mellon Professor of History of Art, Jules Prown. A distinctive identifier for Yale, “the books” were unlike anything then available on the Web.

While “the books” earned raves from the Internet community, they were subject to intense controversy among students, staff, and alumni. The image was “humanity-centric,” “scientifically bankrupt,” and “failed to show the beauty of New Haven.” One perturbed alumnus asked why we could not “…have a nice view of the Charles River, like Harvard.” He failed to provide relocation funds with his critique.

During the redesign process, both the design and advisory teams spent many sessions discussing changes to “the books.” Despite yeoman work by both Mr. Tierney and team members, in the end, no metaphor could be found that equaled the visual impact of the “Manhattan Skyline.” A campus scene, no matter how beautiful, cannot display the academic or cultural richness of Yale. The designers finally compromised on a revamped version of “the books,” whose original impact was somewhat dampened by the exigencies of the improved organizational format. The graphical issue has not been laid to rest, however, and even now the teams are planning additional image work in the near future.

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