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Why Shell's Global Web Standards Work

Communication, Support, And Transparency Protect Shell's Global Brand

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Companies strive to create and enforce a single set of global Web standards that ensures an appropriately branded experience for their customers worldwide. While most companies fail, Shell succeeds in this effort because it supports a well-documented set of standards with a central organization that actively communicates, provides strong educational support, and is transparent about standards development and compliance. In order to create successful global Web standards, customer experience executives should develop internal centers of excellence and look outside their firms to co-opt best practices.

SHELL MANAGES ITS GLOBAL WEB PRESENCE TRANSPARENTLY

Global companies often have hundreds of sites around the world that they try to manage with a single set of Web site standards — an approach that often fails.¹ But Shell bucks that trend and successfully operates 212 Web sites around the globe. To understand how the energy company manages its global Web standards, we spoke with Dana Poole, who works with Shell's Global Web Communications online policy and standards team. Ms. Poole told us that Shell maintains its brand integrity across sites with a set of global Web standards that are:

- **Focused on a clear mission.** Shell's global standards target three things: brand, usability, and accessibility. In 2003 when Shell redesigned its Web presence, the global team committed internal resources to defining linguistic style, imagery, and colors that needed to be consistent on all of its sites within three months — an effort that required cooperation from Webmasters worldwide. The team also redefined brand, usability, and accessibility standards together with the design agency at the time and enlisted the help of the Royal National Institute For The Blind in the UK to ensure that the site's architecture is in compliance with accessibility requirements.
- **Well documented.** Shell compiles its standards on a site that serves as a hub for all communications among global site owners (see Figure 1). This central repository has a detailed account of standards complete with rationale and examples that explain and show the standards at work. It gives real examples on how to maintain an accessible Web site and provides how-to guides that help site owners with ongoing compliance.
- **Managed by a small global team.** Shell has three full-time staffers who advise local site owners on how to put the Web standards to work to support their local businesses. They are also the approval committee that decides when new sites can be launched, what new content is acceptable, and what

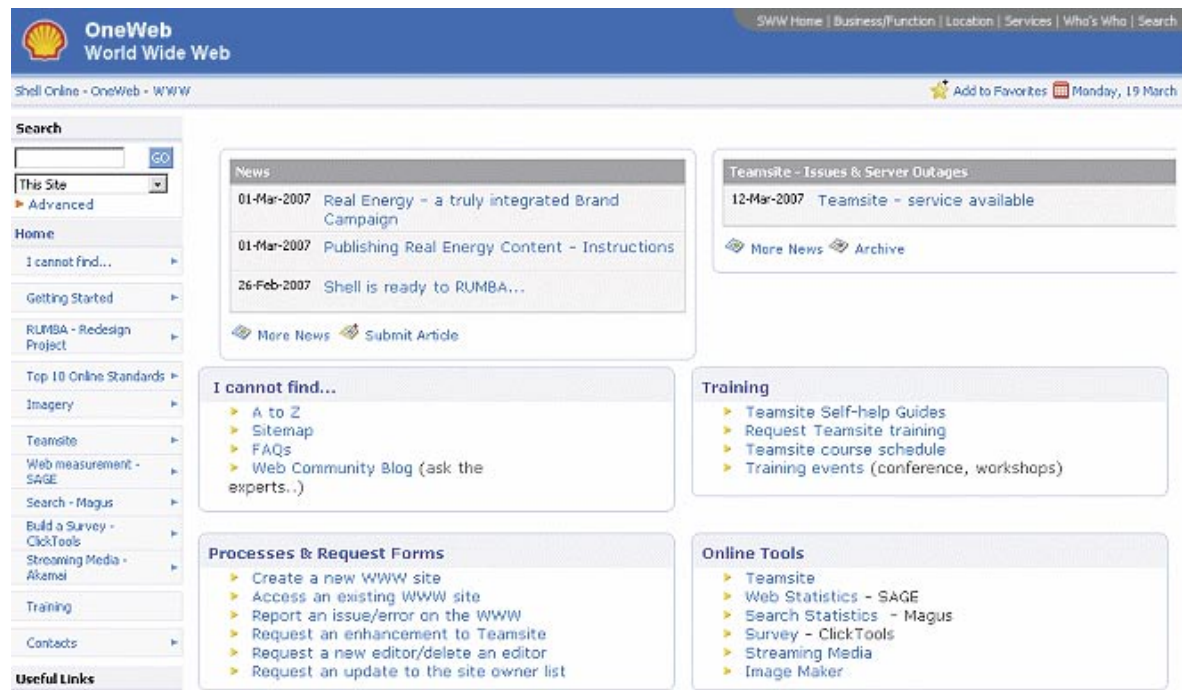
deviations from standards are acceptable. But perhaps their biggest challenge is training. The team runs global and regional workshops and conferences for internal users and sets the overall direction for the global Web presence.

Shell's Global Site Committee Organizes For Success

While many firms use global Web groups to strong-arm local offices into using a centrally created design framework that has little or no global input, Shell's team embraces input.² The key attributes of Shell's committee that make it effective are:

- **Support.** The global team provides tools and education for building sites, measuring traffic, crafting search optimization plans, and conducting local surveys — all free of charge to local site owners. And when there are changes to the standards, the global committee ratchets up its training efforts to ensure that local site owners can make any necessary site changes with little or no disruption to end users by communicating updates via newsletters and the intranet.
- **Communication.** The single biggest barrier to effectively deploying site standards is poor communication.³ The intranet site that houses the Web standards is more than just a static representation of standards. Instead, the site is a communications hub where local site owners can get tutorials and contact information for who within the company can help them with a specific need like search optimization strategies.⁴ The committee also sends out biweekly emails to the 600-plus Shell employees with Web responsibilities to keep them abreast of new support content, local training sessions, and any proposed changes to standards.
- **Transparency.** Shell's standards were created through a dialogue with local site owners, conducting joint research, benchmarking, and usability studies. And while not all of the company's Web contributors have a direct say, a cascading network of accountability uses regional organizations to help keep everyone informed and aggregate feedback to the global team.⁵ For the strategic corporate, business, and country Web sites, the company provides access to ActiveStandards, an externally managed compliance-tracking tool, with full rollout scheduled for 2008.⁶ By publicizing the results of compliance checks, the global team has found an effective means to motivate local sites to reduce errors.

Figure 1 OneWeb Is Shell's Hub For Global Communications



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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

DON'T BUILD STANDARDS IN A VACUUM

Many standards efforts fail because they are created by a small internal team and then thrust upon global site owners. Rather than thinking about forcing standards from a centralized group, customer experience executives should:

- **Develop centers of excellence.** Companies want to keep global costs down by reusing content and function in multiple geographies. But when assets are created centrally, they typically don't incorporate the insights and expertise of people around the world. In contrast, Shell uses virtual centers of excellence that enlist expertise from within its global ranks to help guide and shape its standards. For example, Shell's global team didn't have the knowledge or expertise to create a global search marketing strategy. But some site owners from across different regions did. The global team identified the experts and formed a committee that implemented the project. The global team turned the lessons learned into best practice standards and established a virtual center of excellence to track leading-edge developments in search marketing.

- **Look for best practices outside their company.** Sometimes the best methodologies for conducting user research or tracking metrics are difficult to devise from within. That's why Shell's global committee engages in regular dialogue with other large multinational companies that face similar problems. When faced with decisions like choosing a content management solution or standards compliance tracking tool, Shell engages in benchmarking projects to determine what firms have been most successful. Through a formal network of global contacts, they engage other companies like BP, Glaxo Smith Kline, and Nokia in two-way dialogues to uncover the pros and cons of different approaches and vendors. From these companies they devise the right methodologies to suit Shell's needs and create shortlists of vendors for key projects.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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. But these standards don't often work because they 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. See the March 14, 2006, "[Creating Global Web Site Standards That Work](#)" report.
- ² Global site committees are trustees of a company's global online presence. But these committees are ineffective when they concentrate power at headquarters, lack stakeholder representation, and don't encourage peer-to-peer communication. To be effective, global site committees need regional communication structures, distributed decision-making, and accountability in proportion to responsibility. See the June 2, 2006, "[Make Your Global Site Committee More Effective](#)" report.
- ³ We asked Forrester's Customer Experience Peer Research Panel "What is the most common complaint about your firm's customer facing global Web site standards" and found that poor communication was the biggest problem — outweighing lack of local relevance. See the March 14, 2006, "[Creating Global Web Site Standards That Work](#)" report.
- ⁴ Some local offices have skilled design personnel, while others have better IT capabilities, and most have some skill gaps in one area or another. To fill these skill gaps, firms should follow the lead of a manufacturer that created global centers of excellence for capabilities like design, translation, and measurement. These groups consist of experts from across regions; some are physically located in a single office, while others are distributed and work as "virtual" teams that combine relevant skills. These teams provide specialized skills and a global perspective to help local offices solve problems and create their sites. See the December 28, 2006, "[Five Ways To Improve Your Global Web Presence](#)" report.
- ⁵ 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, "[Improve Global Sites With Cross-Cultural Collaboration](#)" report.

- ⁶ Magus ActiveStandards is a compliance-tracking tool that performs automated checks of every page of a site to measure and report on deviation from branding guidelines. Shell uses the results of these checks to show compliance across regions and publicizes them throughout the company creating a competition out of being the most standards-compliant country.