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Lessons Learned From 157 Web Site Brand Reviews

by Ron Rogowski
for Customer Experience Professionals

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Forrester Examines Results From Version 1.0 Of Our Web Site Brand Review Methodology

by Ron Rogowski
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Forrester recently updated its Web Site Brand Review Methodology to version 2.0. Before moving on, we analyzed the results of 157 Web Site Brand Reviews completed with version 1.0 between June 2005 and October 2008. This data shows that while sites fared better in supporting their brand attributes than they did in catering to user goals, the overall Web site brand experience is poor. To gauge how well their sites build brand experience, customer experience professionals should conduct their own Web Site Brand Reviews.

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NOTES & RESOURCES

The data in this report includes scores from 157 Web Site Brand Reviews conducted using version 1.0 of Forrester's Web Site Brand Review methodology.

Related Research Documents
"Best And Worst Of Brand Building Web Sites, 2008"
October 10, 2008

"Web Site Copy That Builds Brands"
July 1, 2008

"Web Site Content That Builds Brands"
March 3, 2008

FEW SITES OFFER BRAND BUILDING EXPERIENCES

Sites successfully build brands when they communicate value in an emotionally engaging way (Brand Image) and deliver value by offering useful, usable content and function (Brand Action).[1] In May 2005, Forrester introduced its Web Site Brand Review to help companies determine how well their sites do just that.[2] In October 2008, we introduced version 2.0 of this methodology, which builds on version 1.0.[3] Before moving on, we paused to examine the results of 157 evaluations completed using the original version of the methodology (see Figure 1). The data shows that:

- **Thirty-eight percent of sites passed our Brand Image tests.** Our reviews graded Brand Image against six criteria. Only 60 of the sites we evaluated received an overall passing grade of 6 or higher, and the average score across all sites was a disappointing 3.0 (see Figure 2).[4] But that statistic doesn't tell the full story. Failing any of the six criteria means that a site is misaligned with company or product brand positioning, offline creative treatments, or both. When we looked at passing rates by question, we saw that they were as low as 58% (see Figure 3).

- **Eleven percent of sites passed our Brand Action tests.** Our reviews graded Brand Action against eight criteria. Only 17 of the sites we evaluated received an overall passing grade of 8 or higher, and the average score across all sites was a disappointing 1.4 (see Figure 4).[5] A closer look at passing rates by question shows that they start at just 18%, and only one went above 70% (see Figure 5).

- **Only 8% of sites passed both our Brand Image and Brand Action tests.** The true measure of a brand building Web site is its ability to present core brand attributes in an emotionally engaging way and *at the same time* ensure that users can easily accomplish their goals. But only 13 of the 157 sites we reviewed managed to earn passing marks on both Brand Image and Brand Action tests (see Figure 6). And of those sites, only two managed to pass all 14 questions in the review.

Figure 1 Forrester's Web Site Brand Review Criteria Version 1.0

Brand Action Review	**Brand Image Review**
1. Is essential content available where needed?	1. Does the site's **content** support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?
2. Is essential function available where needed?	2. Does the site's **functionality** support positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?
3. Are menu category and subcategory names clear and mutually exclusive?	3. Does the site's **language** and tone support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?
4. Does site content use language that's easy to understand?	4. Does the site's **imagery** support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?
5. Does the site use graphics, icons, and symbols that are easy to understand?	5. Does the site's **typography** support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?
6. Is the text legible?	6. Does the site's **layout** support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?
7. Are interactive elements easily recognizable?	
8. Does the site perform well?	

53889   Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 2 Distribution Of Brand Image Reviews Across 157 Web Sites
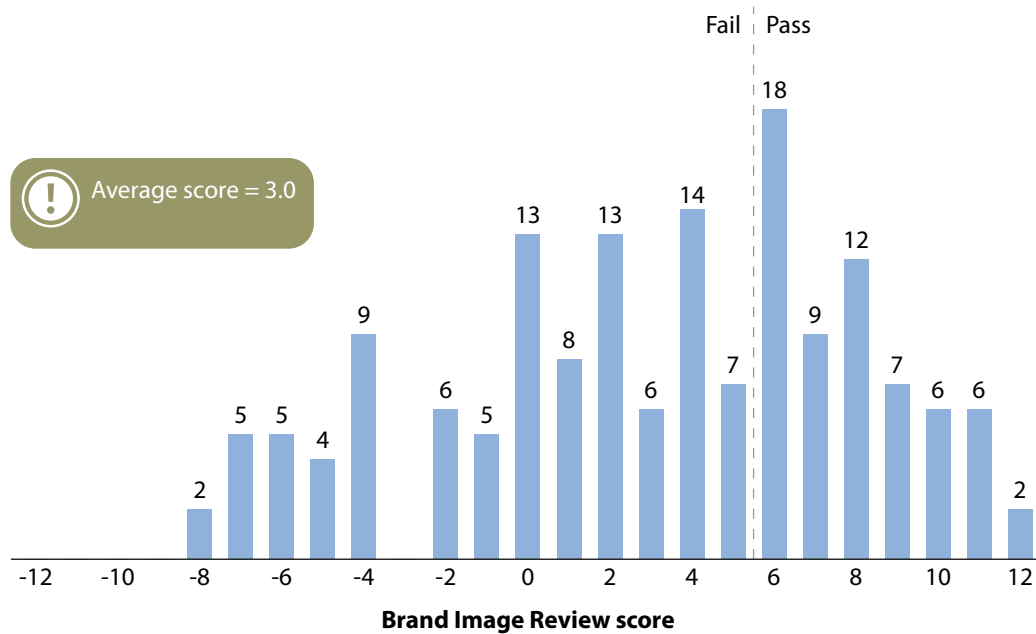
Fail | Pass

Average score = 3.0

Brand Image Review score

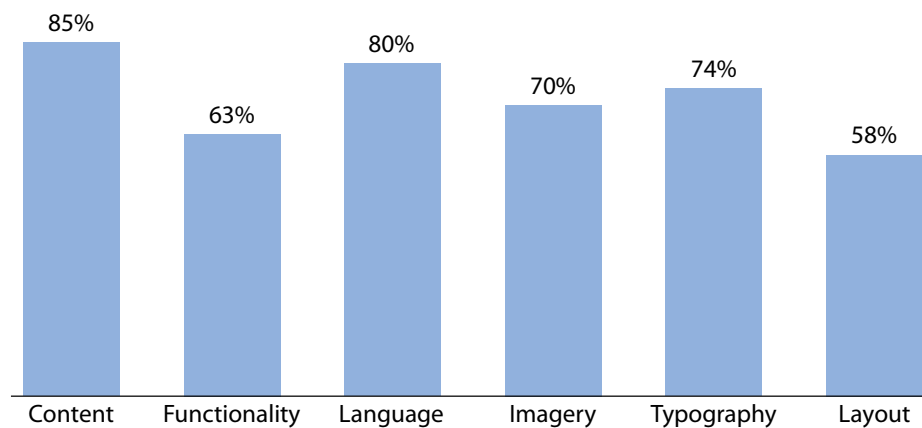Base: 157 Web Site Brand Reviews conducted since 2005

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 3 Percentage Of Sites That Pass Each Brand Image Review Question
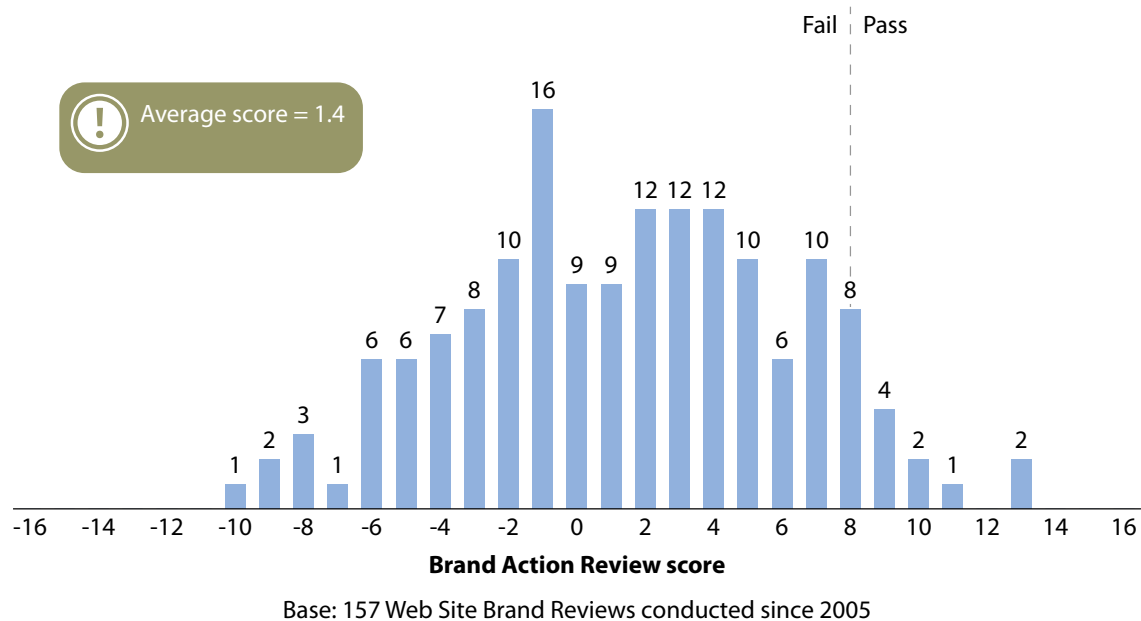
Content	Functionality	Language	Imagery	Typography	Layout
85%	63%	80%	70%	74%	58%

Base: 157 Web Site Brand Reviews conducted since 2005

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 4 Distribution Of Brand Action Reviews Across 157 Web Sites

Fail ¦ Pass

Average score = 1.4

16

12 12 12

10   10 10

9 9   8

8

6 6   6

7

4

3
2   2   2
1   1   1

-16 -14 -12 -10 -8 -6 -4 -2 0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16

Brand Action Review score

Base: 157 Web Site Brand Reviews conducted since 2005

Figure 5 Percentage Of Sites That Pass Each Brand Action Review Question

Question	%
1. Is essential content available where needed?	62%
2. Is essential function available where needed?	67%
3. Are menu category and subcategory names clear and mutually exclusive?	52%
4. Does site content use language that's easy to understand?	70%
5. Does the site use graphics, icons, and symbols that are easy to understand?	87%
6. Is the text legible?	18%
7. Are interactive elements easily recognizable?	62%
8. Does the site perform well?	69%

Base: 157 Web Site Brand Reviews conducted since 2005

Figure 6 Overall Results Of 157 Web Site Brand Reviews
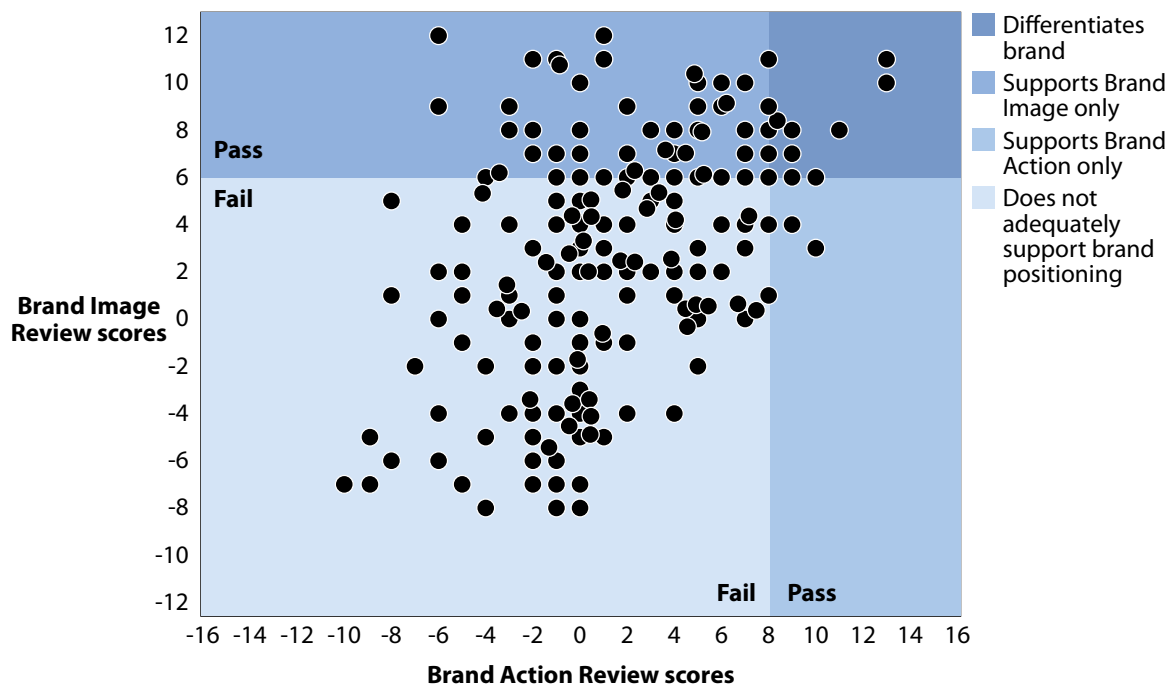
Base: 157 Web Site Brand Reviews conducted since 2005

53889   Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Brand Image Doesn't Permeate Sites

A closer look at Brand Image scores reveals that (see Figure 7):

- **Firms get the basics of messaging right.** Most sites pass our content and language tests, leading to average scores across all sites of 0.9 and 0.7, respectively. That's because messaging and tone are relatively easy to get right — in many cases copywriters can simply lift copy written for print and broadcast. And in fact, most firms do only the minimum needed to pass, leaving behind opportunities where brand building copy can differentiate a site experience.[6]

- **Function is a brand image letdown.** Function differentiates how customers interact with companies online. But functional aspects of most sites are surprisingly *un*differentiated, earning an average score of just 0.3. We've observed that many firms duplicate generic functions that exist at competitors' sites. For example, a key element of Smith Barney's positioning is "leading technology," but its site offers "me too" function for finding a financial advisor.

- **Designers don't effectively translate offline layouts to their sites.** Sites score lowest in this category, with an average grade of 0.1. Because Web sites have different display characteristics

and functional needs than print, screens shouldn't merely replicate paper. However, sites can and should incorporate elements like color blocks, squared or rounded bounding boxes, and text position to create continuity across channels.

Figure 7 Average Scores For Each Brand Image Review Question

	Score
1. Does the site's **content** support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?	0.9
2. Does the site's **functionality** support positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?	0.3
3. Does the site's **language** and tone support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?	0.7
4. Does the site's **imagery** support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?	0.5
5. Does the site's **typography** support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?	0.5
6. Does the site's **layout** support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?	0.1

Base: 157 Web Site Brand Reviews conducted since 2005

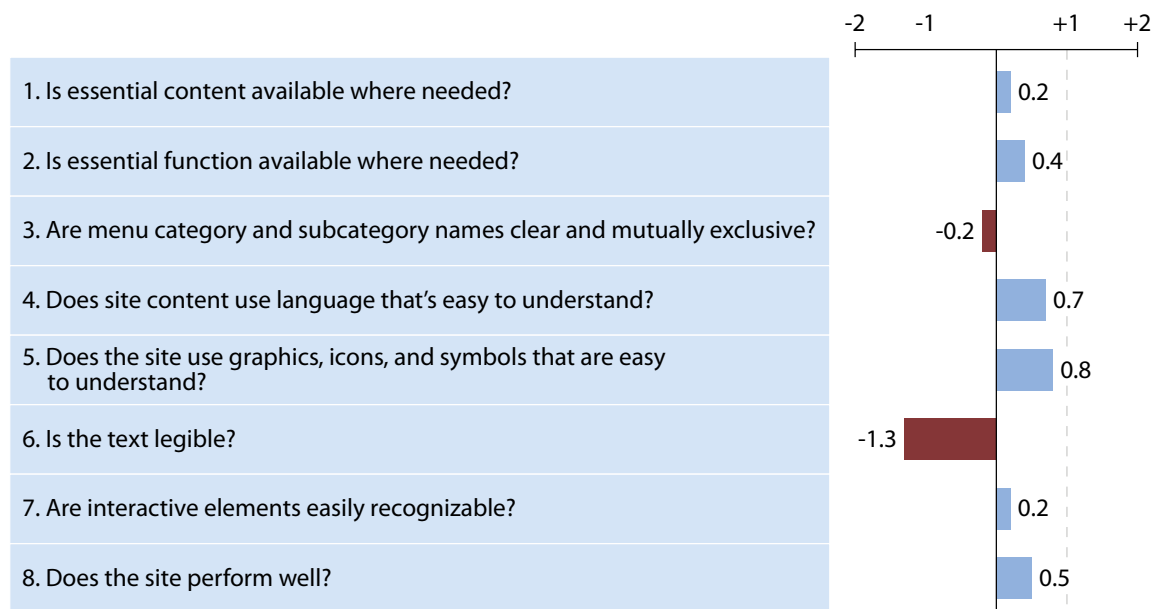53889   Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Sites Don't Offer Adequate Support For User Goals

Data from our Brand Action Reviews reveals that (see Figure 8):

- **Illegible text diminishes the experience.** To effectively build a brand, Web site typography needs to capture the right brand personality through type faces, text color, and justification. But text must also be easy to read — otherwise the firm's investment in selling copy goes to waste.[7] Unfortunately, text legibility scores averaged an almost unbelievably low -1.3.

- **Ambiguous and overlapping menus confuse users.** When sites try to get cute with menu categories, they risk alienating users for whom branded terms like "Digital Lounge" or catchalls like "Navigate" don't make sense. This inside out view of a site's content can frustrate and annoy customers who leave a site when they can't find a clear path to their goals. Our reviews found that many sites make this mistake, resulting in an average score of -0.2 for this test.

- **Unclear interactive elements hide value.** Web users need clear cues that tell them what parts of the site are interactive and what parts are not. When designers fail to clearly differentiate links from plain text, users miss out on the details they seek. Likewise, the slavish use of a corporate color palette can cause problems. For example, when sites use the same colors for section headers as for hyperlinks, users try to click on static elements and miss the active elements. But many sites' interactive elements leave users guessing, as evidenced by an average score of 0.2 on this test.

Figure 8 Average Scores For Each Brand Action Review Question

	Score
1. Is essential content available where needed?	0.2
2. Is essential function available where needed?	0.4
3. Are menu category and subcategory names clear and mutually exclusive?	-0.2
4. Does site content use language that's easy to understand?	0.7
5. Does the site use graphics, icons, and symbols that are easy to understand?	0.8
6. Is the text legible?	-1.3
7. Are interactive elements easily recognizable?	0.2
8. Does the site perform well?	0.5

Scale: -2 -1 +1 +2

Base: 157 Web Site Brand Reviews conducted since 2005

53889   Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CONDUCT REGULAR WEB SITE BRAND REVIEWS ON YOUR OWN SITE

The disproportionate passing rates between Brand Image and Brand Action scores means that firms are focusing too much attention on making promises and too little on delivering value. But most sites have room to improve in both dimensions of the brand experience. To gauge whether their sites offer customers a satisfying and differentiating Web site experience, customer experience professionals should grade their own sites' brand experience on a regular basis. To get started:

- **Document users and goals.** To get the most accurate view of how a site caters to its intended users, customer experience professionals should create a narrative description of the site's most important visitors, including their online behaviors, subject matter knowledge, and any anxieties or pet peeves they may have. Next, document the typical user goals that drive site business success. Beware of goals written at too high a level like, "Buy a book." Instead, include specific details that incorporate a richer explanation of the user's objectives, such as, "Find information about homeowner's insurance for a first-time home buyer. He'd like to know what the policies cover, how much coverage he needs, and what the policies cost. He'd like to get a quote and start the purchase process."

- **Define and document key brand attributes.** Site designers can't incorporate brand attributes into designs if they don't have a clear understanding of what those brand attributes are supposed to be. Likewise, site reviewers can't determine if a site is on-brand if they don't have a list of attributes to refer to. To complete a thorough Web Site Brand Review, make sure that you have a clear brand positioning statement. You'll also need examples of offline marketing materials and style guides for judging how well the site's visual design matches key elements of offline materials.[8]

- **Conduct a Brand Action Review.** Sit down at your site and attempt to buy the right product or find the essential information — whatever your user goals call for. Document each step and capture annotated screen shots of anything that impedes progress. Note your initial impressions of how well the site supports your tasks, making sure you constantly return to the user description in order to make judgment calls from the perspective of the target customer. Once you have completed your goals (or failed to complete them), document your findings in the Brand Action scorecard, and grade each question.

- **Conduct a Brand Image Review.** After completing the Brand Action Review, take a break. That's because it can be very difficult to shift mental gears from the perspective of the user's goals to the perspective of the company's brand attributes — a gap of several hours helps enormously. To begin the Brand Image evaluation, review the brand positioning statement and offline materials. Then examine the site, noting areas that either support or contradict brand attributes. While it's not necessary for every page to support every brand attribute, the best sites, like Nike, focus on infusing some element of the brand into each page. Once you have reviewed the site, document your findings in the Brand Image Review scorecard.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

The data in this report includes scores from 177 Web Site Brand Reviews conducted using version 1.0 of Forrester's Web Site Brand Review methodology.

ENDNOTES

[1] Consumer touchpoints — ranging from TV ads to the actual product that a company provides — have two roles in support of the brand: 1) to communicate the image that it specifies, and 2) to deliver the value that it promises. The relative importance of these two roles varies depending on the inherent capabilities of each touchpoint. For example, a TV commercial can promise that a Diet Pepsi will taste light, crisp, and refreshing, but the ad can't actually quench your thirst. That role falls to the Diet Pepsi itself, which must deliver a taste that's light, crisp, and refreshing to fulfill the promise made by the ad. See the June 9, 2005, "How Brands Succeed Online" report.

[2] There are two parts to a Web Site Brand Review. In the first part, reviewers try to accomplish a set of user goals by visiting a firm's Web site and checking it for known usability flaws that often result from misguided branding and messaging efforts. For the second part of the review, testers revisit their path through the

site and check each page and application to see if they support the firm's specific brand attributes. See the February 24, 2009, "<u>Executive Q&A: Web Site Brand Reviews, 2009</u>" report.

3 Forrester released version 2.0 of its Web Site Brand Review methodology in October 2008. Specifically, we added two new questions to our Brand Image Review Criteria to capture the brand's relevancy for target users and the quality of the sites' production values. These questions were created with input from brand and interactive agencies we interviewed as part of our regular methodology update process. See the October 10, 2008, "<u>Best And Worst Of Brand Building Web Sites, 2008</u>" report.

4 Forrester scores Brand Image criteria based on how well each site communicates and supports the brand positioning of the company and product line. There are four possible scores for each of the six criteria, ranging from a low of -2 (contradicts stated brand positioning) to a high of 2 (consistent with brand positioning plus differentiating from competitors).

5 Forrester scores Brand Image criteria based on how well each site communicates and supports the brand positioning of the company and product line. There are four possible scores for each of the six criteria, ranging from a low of -2 (contradicts stated brand positioning) to a high of 2 (consistent with brand positioning plus differentiating from competitors).

6 Done correctly, subtle changes to link names, system feedback, and error messages can help take a site experience from bland to differentiated. To get the maximum brand-building benefit from their sites, customer experience professionals should specify the emotions they want to evoke from site visitors, use language that is both clear and colorful, and focus on making copy tone and manner seamless throughout the online experience. See the July 30, 2008, "<u>Don't Miss These Opportunities To Differentiate Your Site With Brand-Building Copy</u>" report.

7 How firms present their text-based content to consumers on Web sites makes a statement about brand. To successfully build brand, Web site typography needs to be legible and to consistently reinforce key brand attributes in a manner consistent with other channels. Forrester uncovered several brand building sites that use core typographic design principles such as type style, size, leading, optimal line lengths, typographic hierarchy, and the choice of positive versus reverse type to maximize readability while reinforcing key brand attributes through visual design and layout of text. To create brand building Web site typography, customer experience professionals must use large, well-contrasted typefaces that are easy to read and scan, choose styles that match key brand attributes, and use consistent typography across channels. See the October 29, 2008, "<u>Web Site Typography That Builds Brands</u>" report.

8 Advanced practitioners can follow the example of Molecular and create "brand personas" that help designers refer to key elements of brand style, map key attributes to relevant personas, and organize information in a way that resonates with client stakeholders. See the September 8, 2008, "<u>Molecular Brings Brand Personas To Life</u>" report.

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