Best practices for SharePoint intranets

Maximising the business value of your SharePoint investment

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Beautiful intranets

SharePoint straight ‘out of the box’ isn’t necessarily unpleasant to look at – it’s blue and has neat boxes – but it’s not ideal.

By investing some of your budget in branding and design you can make your SharePoint much more attractive. Having a great design really lifts the user experience, and is key for building trust and engagement. Getting the design right will help levels of adoption, and ensure brand consistency.

Plan carefully and budget accordingly! Branding SharePoint 2010 is ‘easier’ than branding the previous version, 2007, but it’s still a complex and involved process if you want a unique visual design that’s a significant departure from the ‘out of the box’ look and feel. It’s also a developer skill set.

Lynn Warneke, Kloud Solutions

KiwiBank’s bright but never obtrusive colour palette makes it an aesthetically pleasing intranet to visit.
Great design lifts the user experience

If you expect your employees to be using the intranet every day then you really want them to have a great user experience. Of course nobody comes to an intranet just because it is aesthetically pleasing, but it can have a significant effect on people’s perceptions of how effective and authoritative it is. Design does influence the user experience.

Strong design is also important to:

• establish consistency across different online environments, including alignment with external website
• reflect brand values of the company and also the “brand” or purpose of the intranet
• emphasise a new SharePoint platform, recognisably different from the old
• provide a backbone to ensure the intranet is easy to use and also accessible, including to users who are physically and visually impaired

Start with clear understanding

Before you implement any design, it’s worth understanding both the overall brand and purpose of the intranet, and SharePoint’s strengths as a technology.

Defining the overall ‘intranet brand’ is covered in chapter 4 (“Plan your project with a robust methodology.”) Whether your site is more about communication or collaboration will influence the visual design.

SharePoint has its own way of managing the delivery of sites, that is more complex and technical than many web content management systems. Like all technologies, the best outcomes are gained by understanding the product well, building on the strengths and avoiding the weaknesses.

Get the right designer

Visual designs must be designed with SharePoint in mind, so they fit with the technology platform, and don’t introduce bottlenecks and performance issues. (There is little value in a beautiful design that costs a million dollars to implement.)

Therefore it is worth getting a designer who has some experience of SharePoint. It also helps if you can get the designers and technologists working on the project together.

Typical website and intranet design processes involved getting a designer to produce a Photoshop file or HTML template, and then “throwing it over the wall” to the developers. This works poorly for SharePoint, so get both groups in the same room from the outset.

Managing the effort

In SharePoint even fairly small changes to the basic template can have a large apparent effect. These include changing the top banner, updating the colours, and tweaking the standard layout elements.

Obsessively tweaking the smallest design elements can be hugely costly and time-consuming in SharePoint, and can impact on upgrade options. So be clear about when to stop spending time on getting the perfect design.

Within all the constraints, do have fun turning SharePoint’s corporate charcoal interface into something that will appeal to your intranet users. From experience I’ve learned that a more beautiful SharePoint can positively impact user adoption.

Lynn Warneke, Kloud Solutions
Ensuring brand consistency at Coca-Cola Enterprises

Brand consistency is important on an intranet, particularly if brands have a very strong visual identity. An example of this is Coca-Cola Enterprises, who work with one of the most iconic brands in the world. Their new SharePoint 2010 intranet has a striking design (shown on the next page) which has maximum impact.

The distinctive red, the bubbles, the continuing 'dynamic ribbon' theme and the grey silhouette of the Coca-Cola bottle at the bottom of the page are all explicit reflections of the brand. The name of the new intranet – iConnect – is also a play on words as the ‘Icon’ is the name of the distinctively shaped Coca-Cola bottle.
A page describing the Executive Team on Coca-Cola Enterprises’ new intranet.
Spanish media-firm ONO’s new SharePoint 2010 intranet is visually stunning, and presents a mixture of communications and user-generated content via activity streams on the homepage.
Best practices for SharePoint intranets

Key Points

- If you want a beautiful SharePoint environment you will need to invest in applying a visual design.
- Ensure your design matches the main purpose of your intranet.
- This is an opportunity to adhere to strong corporate branding guidelines.
- Having a great design helps drive adoption and contributes to a positive user experience.
- Get a designer who has SharePoint experience, and let them work closely with the developers.

Australian firm Q Invest’s intranet “Mike” or “MyQ” has a strong visual identity, particularly in its diagonal theme which is repeated in the background and the menu tabbing.