

Internet Insights

by Péter Jacsó

Rise of the Personalized Web Portals

Allow users to customize, and they will stick around much longer

Portals were the big innovations last year. The major search engine sites, like Yahoo!, Excite, Infoseek, Lycos, HotBot, and Snap, were fiercely competing to see who could attract more customers—though not as much through better search engine features and indexes of Web sites as through enhancing the home page with more service options. One added political news headlines and links to the stories of a major daily, so the other countered by doing the same with wire services. The third offered headlines and links to Internet and computer-related journals. Then they moved to other territories. One added a hotlink to the Internet Travel Network, and another teamed up with Microsoft's Expedia travel service. If one search engine site added NBA scorecards, the others ushered the NFL scorecards onto their home pages, leaving the NHL scorecards for the rest of the pack.

Exclusive deals by Web portals are rare, so soon all these search engine sites had comparable service offerings on their home pages. The portal syndrome had become so pervasive that I recommended to a bar-hopping friend of mine that he should try this as an opening line: "Could I be your portal to the world for tonight?" He reported back unusually good hit rates.

Being just a portal that offers a gateway to a cavalcade of useful and not-so-useful Internet services is passé. Today the big deal is offering a *personalized* Web portal.

Your Way All the Way?

Successful people in the hospitality and catering industries quickly learn the personal preferences of their customers. They realize that they can build loyalty if they know the guest's name, his or her preference for rooms that get the morning sun, or that the patron in the Greek restaurant likes his gyros with just little feta cheese but lots of olive oil on the salad. The clichéd expression "adding a personal touch" also manifests itself tangibly in tips. Even at places where tipping cannot be expected, personalization has its place, and actually has become the tag line at Burger King.

Search engine sites have also recognized the power of allowing the users to customize service options, and sometimes even the sequencing of their appearance on the portal. Actually, Yahoo! introduced the My Yahoo! option more than 2 years ago, but it took quite some time until the other search engine sites woke up and started to copy the My Yahoo! strategy down to the nitty-gritty details. It is surprising to me that it took so long when the appeal of adding a personal touch is obvious.

Keep 'Em on a Short Leash

The lament of the search engine site developers has been that the users kept "butterflying": after a quick search they would go to another site, then—at best—return to check the results list, just to stray again a second later. The best Web portals can now

achieve what resort hotels have also been trying to do: keep the customers on the premises and keep them consuming whatever they desire. Caesar's Palace and the Mirage have substantial shopping malls of their own with numerous restaurants, beauty salons, health spas, gyms, pools, bars, and business suites (if you really must send a fax or churn out a memo to your boss during your holiday and your laptop is not with you). Others offer ten-

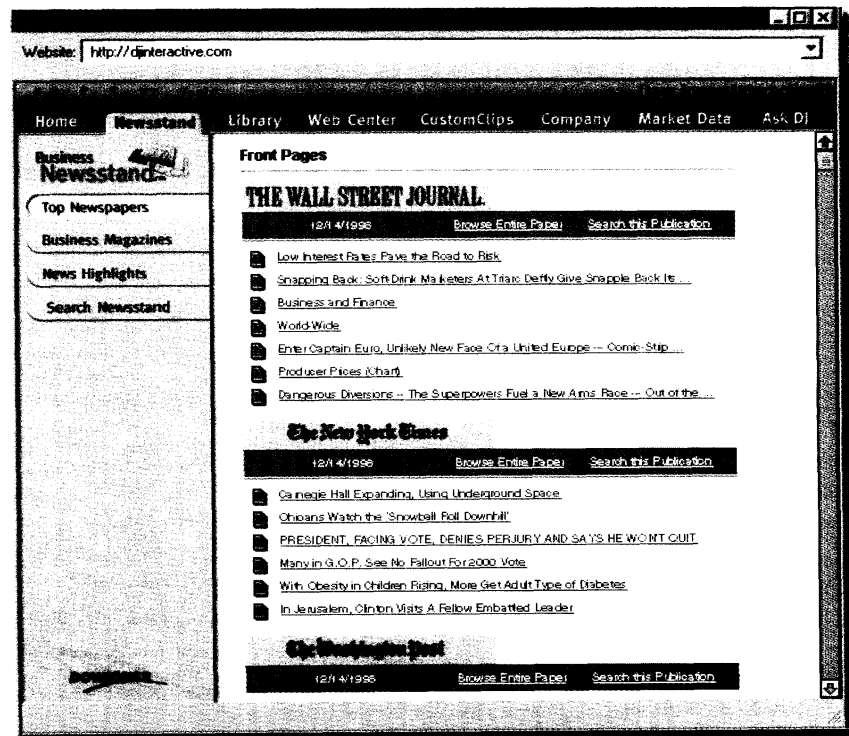
nis courts and/or golf courses. Many guests don't leave the premises of the Sheraton hotel on Fiji on a 3-day stopover between Australia and the U.S., or if they do, they do it on Sheraton's buses that take them to Sheraton-sponsored events.

Customization of Portal Content

Most search engine sites have run-of-the-mill services. A few have more unique ones,

like yellow pages or lottery numbers. However, space on the opening screen, or the "screen estate" if you will, of the search engines' home page is limited. The range of services can make the portals as crowded as the lounge in a New York hotel hosting a large convention. The solution for the overcrowding is to let the users filter out what services they don't want to see and define the few options that they care about—even within a specific category. For example, even if you are interested in the NBA scores, you may care only about the Eastern Conference teams. MSN, which has a few unique customization options, lets users filter down to the individual team level. For

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news sources you may specify how many headlines you want to see from the sources available. This thinning out makes much sense. Frankly, I don't care about stock quotes, mortgage rates, worldwide weather conditions, or my horoscope, so I can filter these out completely and end up with a tightly organized portal with service options that are the most relevant for me (see Figure 1). The process is intuitive and efficient.

Of the most popular search sites, AltaVista is the only one that has not yet introduced the customization option. HotBot, which was acquired by Lycos half a year ago, has a Personal Page button, but it takes you to the Lycos personalization screen. The other search engine services are now spitting images of My Yahoo!, not only in terms of look and feel but also in functionality. NeoPlanet, the browser utility that I praised a few months ago in this column [see the February 1999 issue of *IT*, p. 22], stands out of the crowd by being designed

as a customizable portal from the ground up in every regard.

Customization of the Layout

A few portals also offer additional customization options, such as rearranging the layout of the options offered and changing the colors of the portal. MSN is good at it as long as you are using MS Internet Explorer as your browser. My Yahoo! and Snap are the best in this arena, not being browser-sensitive. With a few clicks you can add that personal touch, deciding which entries should appear in the left or right column and choosing either one of the pre-defined color-coordinated templates or making your own color combination (see Figure 2).

Beyond Search Site Portals

Many other prominent Web sites, like Time Warner's site and many of the shopping sites, are getting in on the portal business, but are short on customization. Imagine Radio (<http://www.imageradio.com>), though not a portal but a radio studio, takes customization the furthest. While some other music sites allow you to be your own disc jockey by offering a variety of channels from country to zydeco, Imagine Radio comes the closest to actually making you the DJ. You may choose not only your favorite crooners from several hundred artists and bands, but you may also assign a priority rank from 0 to 5, i.e., from never play to play the most often (see Figure 3). There are pre-defined clusters by genre, but you may choose any artists from a combination of those clusters. New performers are added regularly, but with a 0 rank so you won't be ambushed by a grunge band that made it into Imagine Radio's repertoire.

This level of customization is unprecedented. Hopefully by the time the other music sites recognize the appeal of this kind of customization, Imagine Radio will allow you to specify song level preference settings if you wish. I can't say that I like every one of Pink Floyd's or Leonard Cohen's songs, so I would like to be able to give 0 rank for the ones that I don't want to hear. Even until we get to that level of customization, Imagine Radio has some additional aces up its sleeve. When you come to a song from your preferred performer that you don't like, you can click on a button to move immediately to the next one. If you choose some newcomers with high priority and you don't like them that much, you just click on the edit button and the rank card appears so that you can demote them from category 5 to category 2, and this assignment will be retained even after you exit.

As you may have sensed from the above, my new recommended pick-up line for my bar-hopper friend now sounds like this: "Can I be your *personalized* portal to the world for tonight?"

Péter Jacsó is associate professor of library and information science at the department of information and computer sciences at the University of Hawaii. He won the 1998 Louis Shores/Oryx Press Award from ALA's Reference and User Services Association for his discerning database reviews. His e-mail address is jacsop@hawaii.edu.

The Dialog Corporation Launches DataStar WebCharts

The Information Services Division of The Dialog Corporation has announced that it has launched DataStar WebCharts, a new tabular display feature on DataStar aimed at helping users in the pharmaceutical sector to create tabular charts from their search results.

Available free of charge to both new and existing DataStar customers, the WebCharts software is fully integrated into DataStar Web and will considerably reduce the time required to prepare reports manually, Dialog reports. All users need to do is download and install the free WebChart software from Dialog's Web site at <http://www.dialog.com>. Users will also be automatically prompted with the option of loading the software while they are using DataStar Web.

When the software is installed, users click on the records they wish to select, then select "WebCharts" from the "Display" option and a chart is created instantly. The data may then be viewed in a tabular format, making it easier to follow and understand complex information because column heading titles are automatically created from the database being searched.

Available for use with all DataStar databases, DataStar WebCharts are particularly useful for examining drug developments, as they can automatically classify drug information by source, compounds, synonyms, registry numbers, license, etc., according to the structure of the database.

Once a chart is created, users have complete control over the chart's appearance and content, enabling them to customize it to their own specifications. Users can rearrange rows and columns, sort records according to column significance, add their own notes and comments, and save chart layouts as templates for future charts.

Information presented in tabular format with DataStar WebCharts can also be shared with colleagues via the corporate intranet by exporting charts into HTML or other formats.

Enhancements to the DataStar service also include a more user-friendly interface and the recent reloading of many pharmaceutical files with new information and improved retrieval capabilities.

"DataStar is an authoritative source of European business information and news, and it is the ultimate research tool for pharmaceutical, biomedical, and health-care related industries," said Ciaran Morton, president for Europe, Middle East, Africa, and Asia Pacific at The Dialog Corporation. "We recognized that scientists need a faster and more sophisticated application for manipulating, analyzing, and presenting their search results, and are launching DataStar WebCharts to meet that need."

Source: The Dialog Corporation, Cary, NC, 919/462-8600; Fax: 919/468-9890; <http://www.dialog.com>.

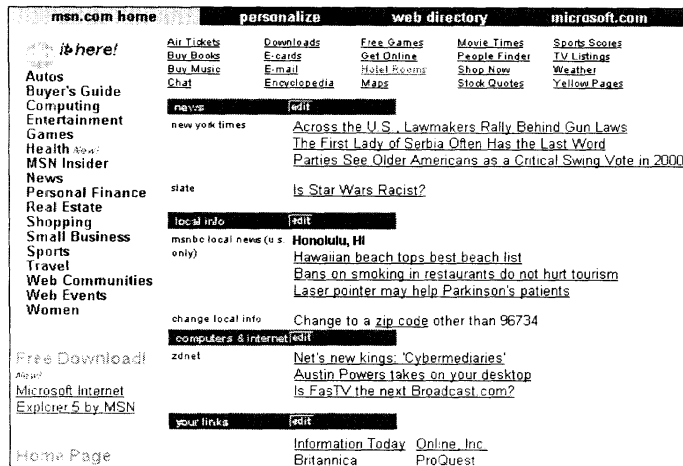


Figure 1: The personalized Microsoft Network portal

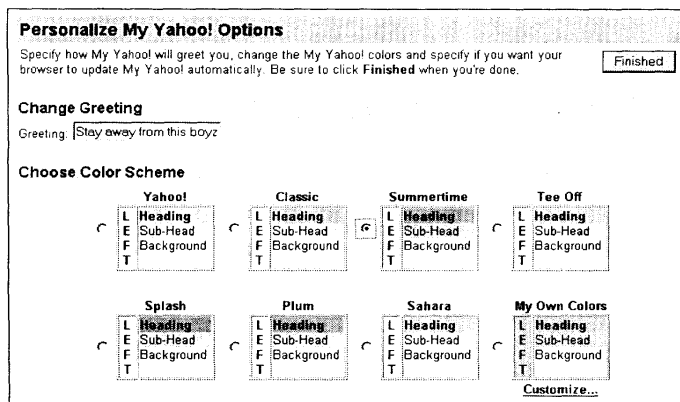


Figure 2: Color customization of My Yahoo!

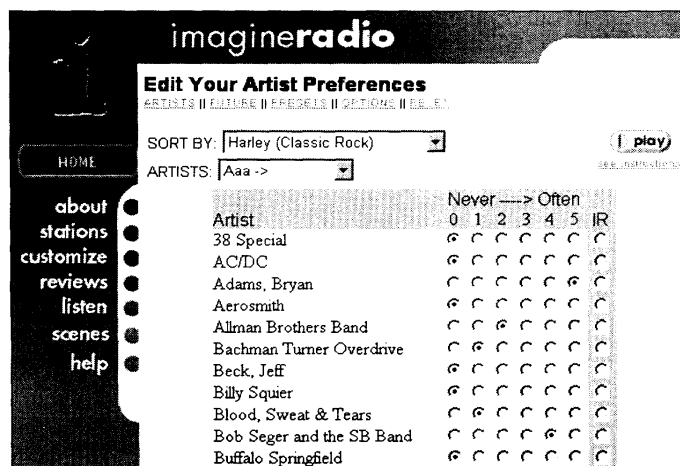


Figure 3: Picking and ranking artists in ImagineRadio