Window on your world:

Lessons for an effective corporate home page

By Jason Sumner and David Bowen

January 2015

Inside:

- The three roles of a corporate home page.
- Evaluating home page trends: are they right for your organization?
- Advice and best practice on specific home page features.
- Drawing on expertise from Bowen Craggs & Co and interviews with digital managers who run some of the most effective home pages in the Financial Times Bowen Craggs Index of corporate online effectiveness.

To get the full report, contact Dan Drury: ddrury@bowencraggs.com
Contents

Contents ........................................................................................................................................... 2
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 3
Like this sample report? ..................................................................................................................... 5
Whatever answers you need, you just found them ............................................................................ 5
About Bowen Craggs .......................................................................................................................... 6
Part One: The three roles of a corporate home page ......................................................................... 7
  Set of signposts, billboard, magazine front cover ........................................................................... 7
  How to balance the three roles ........................................................................................................ 9
  Editorial control underpins the three roles ..................................................................................... 11
Part Two: Bandwagons, best practice and lessons learned ............................................................. 13
  Getting granular: Fitting content to audience groups .................................................................. 13
  To scroll or not to scroll? ................................................................................................................ 13
  News you can’t use: do press releases belong on the home page? ................................................. 13
  The ‘mobile first’ myth .................................................................................................................... 13
  Follow me: the role of social media icons and feeds ................................................................. 13
  Play time: Guidelines for video on the home page ..................................................................... 13
Part Three: In-depth analysis of top-performing home pages ....................................................... 14
  Roche: Maintaining focus ................................................................................................................ 14
  Goldman Sachs: Strikingly different ............................................................................................. 14
  Qualcomm: The exact equivalent of a billboard .......................................................................... 14
  SAP: Triumph of simplicity ........................................................................................................... 14
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 15
Further resources ............................................................................................................................... 16
Introduction

The most valuable piece of real estate you own

For most corporate websites, the home page is the single most visited page. Advances in search and social media have threatened its pre-eminence by sending more visitors directly to pages deeper within the site, and indeed for other types of websites (media in particular) the home page has been declared all but dead.

Corporate websites are more complex than most other sites, however, because they have a number of different types of visitors – customers, suppliers, technical audiences, jobseekers, journalists, investors and other stakeholders – all of which are seeking specific information tailored to them. Our analytics data show that seven in 10 visitors to corporate websites still arrive via the home page, and the conversations we have had with web managers at some of the world’s largest companies suggest similar figures. The home page may be less important than it was a decade ago, but it is arguably still the most important piece of real estate an organization owns. ‘The corporate website is the window on our world, and the home page definitely remains critically important,’ says Simon Quayle, director of digital communications at GSK, and one of several digital managers that we interviewed for this report.

About this report

Window on your world: Lessons for an effective corporate home page is intended as a guide for digital managers who want to make their home pages more successful. This does of course raise the question of what ‘successful’ means – we will attempt to answer it. Part one outlines what we see as the three essential roles of the home page, and how you should think about the balance between them. Part two deconstructs current home page trends such as the fashion for scrolling, social media icons and feeds, and the use of video, to help you decide whether they are right for your organization. Part three provides a detailed analysis of the four top-performing home pages in the Financial Times Bowen Craggs Index of corporate online effectiveness. Throughout the report there are concise cases of best and worst practice in the form of ‘Home page high points’ and ‘Home page howlers’.

For the report, we have drawn upon the following resources:

- Bowen Craggs & Co’s years of expertise in helping the world’s largest companies to improve their corporate websites;
- Insight from our Financial Times Bowen Craggs Index of corporate online effectiveness;
- In-depth interviews with digital managers who run some of the most effective home pages at the world’s largest companies.

About the authors

Jason Sumner and David Bowen are senior consultants at Bowen Craggs & Co.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people for their time and insight:

- Andreas Askeland, Web manager, Corporate affairs, Saudi Aramco
- Neil Atkinson, Head of digital engagement, Unilever
- Florian Hiessl, Head of online communications, Siemens
- Jeordan Legon, Global head of digital and social media for pharma, Novartis
- Janet Morgan, Director of content strategy and editorial planning, GSK
- Simon Quayle, Director of digital communications, GSK
- Joan Renner, Content manager, Corporate marketing digital initiatives, IBM
- Brian Wasson, Director, global marketing and communications, SAP
Like this sample report?

Bowen Craggs’s entire research library is available to our subscribers, providing unlimited and unrivalled access to the Web Effectiveness database: “the essential resource for global web management”.

Membership of our Web Effectiveness database is an exclusive pass to scores and commentary for the more than 100 global companies in the FT Bowen Craggs Index plus highlighted best practice from the top performers.

Our research is independent, our opinions trusted and our recommendations proven. We specialize in group-level digital communications and learn from analysing the online estates of the world’s biggest corporations. Our network of 500+ communications professionals from around the globe grows our knowledge; as does our constant audience research focussed on investors, media professionals, policy makers, jobseekers and consumers.

Digital is different at group level. Applying received wisdom and best practice from wider social media, online publishing and e-commerce trends may – and too often does – do more harm than good.

Whatever answers you need, you just found them

Q. Why are many companies getting mobile optimisation wrong – and how you can get it right?

Q. Which new web design fashions should I adopt – and which should I avoid at all costs?

Q. What makes a content strategy clear enough to keep my communications compelling and consistent across multiple online channels?

Q. Which social media channels should I use?

Q. How should I manage my online estate – and get my bosses and colleagues to support me?

Q. How do I measure the effectiveness of my online communications and my company’s performance against its peers?

Q. Where will I find best practice that I can use to leapfrog my competitors?

Q. What should my corporate website look like in five years’ time?

If you’re ready to get your hands on our research, we recommend becoming a subscriber. Get in touch by emailing research@bowencraggs.com

THIS IS A SAMPLE REPORT ONLY. WHERE CONTENT HAS BEEN WITHHELD, THIS IS INDICATED BY ‘[…]

To get the full report contact Dan Drury:

ddrury@bowencraggs.com
About Bowen Craggs

We are experts in global online corporate communications. We help you improve the effectiveness of your websites, mobile and social channels.

You can rely on the independence of our advice because we do not build websites. What we do is help you to improve your effectiveness with clear strategy, expert benchmarking, market research, analytics and best practice.

Our research – gathered over 10 years, published in the Financial Times and used by more than 50 of the Fortune Global 500 – can help you find and maintain the right course.

Every year we publish the Financial Times Bowen Craggs Index of corporate online effectiveness, which is established as the most credible ranking of large corporate websites, and provides a deep database of best practice.

Are you looking in the wrong place for digital comms advice?
The world is awash with online marketing and communications advice. But digital is different at group level. Applying received wisdom and best practices learned from wider social media, online publishing and e-commerce trends may – and too often does – do more harm than good. Wouldn’t it be great to have an advisor who lives and breathes group-level online marketing and comms?

You're faced with an escalating digital challenge - do more, across more channels, with fewer resources and the same budget. You have to prioritize efforts and take the quick wins - but are you making costly strategic mistakes? Whether it's chasing a flawed 'mobile first' strategy or destroying usability in pursuit of the latest web design fashion - we've seen global companies making big, expensive, brand-damaging mistakes.

Our research is independent, our opinions trusted and our recommendations proven. We specialize in group-level digital communications and learn from analyzing the online estates of the world's biggest corporations. Our network of 500+ communications professionals from around the globe grows our knowledge; as does our constant audience research focused on the investment community, media professionals, policy makers, jobseekers and customers.
Part One

The three roles of a corporate home page

Set of signposts, billboard, magazine front cover

We believe the corporate home page has three roles: as a set of signposts, showing people where they want to go; as a billboard transmitting positive messages about your organization, and as a magazine front cover, inviting people to explore the rich content within.

A set of signposts
The signpost role is the most straightforward. Most people coming to a home page have a good idea of what they are looking for, so the page should show them where to go. Here there is a body of good practice, summed up with the golden rule of usability: give people what they expect, or ‘be conventional’. Display links clearly, don’t surprise users with where they lead and don’t be obscure with the labelling. If you use dropdown mega-menus, make sure they are stable and that navigation is not dependent on them (some people find the mouse hard to use).

All developments here build on this conventionality, and most are to do with providing quick routes to inner content. They can either point to particular pages or provide ‘one click’ access to all second-level pages. Usability studies can provide feedback on what works and what does not. Companies with large web estates can also use the home page in the signposting role as a ‘hub’ to aid navigation between multiple country, brand and business sites. If visitors arrive, say, at a group’s India website and want to reach another country or business line, they should be able to navigate quickly to the home page and find their way from there. This function has to some extent replaced the large corporate web directories more prevalent in the earlier days of the web.

The signpost role is demand-driven – you are giving visitors what they want. The other two roles are supply-driven: you are giving them what you want. This is easier in some ways, but also riskier because success cannot be measured by usability tests.

Figure 1: The set of signposts: The www.bayer.com home page directs traffic with a series of vertically arranged coloured panels below the main image and near the desktop scroll line: ‘Search’, ‘Products’ and ‘Themes’.
A billboard

The billboard role is where greatest subtlety is needed. For many organizations and many people, the home page will be the first place they meet. ‘I have heard of a job opportunity at Company X. I go to its website. Whether I apply or not will be subconsciously influenced by what I feel in the first few seconds.’ Or ‘I am a potential supplier. I go to the site. Does this company look the sort of organization I want to do business with?’ And so on for any other group. That is why the home page is like a billboard, which is designed to impress a motorist in the few seconds they are driving past it. You have seconds to make an impression, and no second chance. What messages do you want to transmit? Simplicity is often the best approach. ‘Busy’ pages with too many headings and panels jostling for the visitor’s attention can drown out primary messages.

Figure 2: The billboard: The www.apple.com home page sends the immediate first impression: we are everything you have heard about us ‘slick, minimal, and design-conscious’.

A magazine front cover

The home page can be thought of as a magazine front cover if the site can be thought of as a magazine. This is a useful idea, for two main reasons. First, it tells the company to make it interesting and engaging, not just a giant filing cabinet. Second, it makes the concept of the web much easier to explain to print-driven colleagues. It also makes the role of the home page clear. A good magazine’s front cover is carefully constructed to say to readers ‘Take me off the shelf, read me’; a good website home page should say ‘You know you want to click this link. Go on, do it’. Graphics are important, so are stories and – most of all – headlines. Websites benefit from having an editor, in the journalistic sense: someone who knows the tricks of making a front cover irresistible. Magazine-type stories and videos need a ‘call to action’ – eg, ‘read me’, ‘find out more’ etc. We have found that visitors are left confused and do not automatically click on stories without these directional aids. The headline should give a sense of the kind of content visitors will find when they do click.
How to balance the three roles

Set of signposts: the essential role
Of the three roles, only the set of signposts is absolutely essential, because this role is fulfilling the needs of the audience, as opposed to the billboard and magazine front cover roles, which are serving the organization. Every website, not just corporate websites, must fulfil the basic function of sending visitors to the right place within the site as quickly and conveniently as possible. ‘The first and major task of the home page is routing people to where they want to go,’ says Florian Hiessel, head of online communications for Siemens, the German engineering giant.

Fulfilling the signpost role takes up relatively little of the home page’s ‘real estate’. It can be achieved with some combination of familiar, conventional menus – utility menus at the top, a main navigation bar or mega dropdown panel, universal footers and right links. Innovation is possible in signposting, usually through complementary elements or shortcuts based on a deep understanding of a site’s visitors and where they are likely to go. An example is the tag cloud on Royal Dutch Shell’s website (see ‘Home page high point, this page').

Billboard and magazine front cover: ‘optional’ (but vital)
A website is the most cost-effective tool to communicate with anyone in the world, so if your organization’s site is only or primarily a set of signposts, then you are saying you have no interest in either a) making an impression on them or b) nudging them to do anything else. In this way, the billboard and magazine front cover roles are optional (in the sense that the visitor does not require them to complete his or her task). But every corporate website should take advantage of the opportunity to create the best impression of the organization and also invite readers to read more about the interesting and beneficial things it is doing. Ideally every corporate website will have elements of both roles, but the balance between the billboard role and the magazine front cover role on a corporate website will vary according to the sector and primary audiences it is trying to serve.

Which types of companies are best suited to the billboard role?
The billboard role is most important for companies for whom customers and jobseekers are the most frequent and important visitors. These include IT companies (usually customers), investment banks and corporate sites of retail banks (usually jobseekers) and pharmaceuticals (usually jobseekers). The Goldman Sachs home page (gs.com), for example, through images of
friendly, diverse employees and prominent space devoted to responsibility initiatives, communicates the message ‘we are human, come and work for us’. (See home page analysis, Part three). Pharmaceutical companies have more than their share of critics, and in order to recruit the best people, they need to give the impression they are a force for good in the world. So the billboard role is very important. This is why the immediate impressions of home pages of GSK and Roche, for example, often highlight community work, especially in developing countries, where stories of ill deeds are often set.

The most effective corporate website ‘billboards’ communicate to two or more important audiences at once. Although Apple’s primary audience for its billboard appears to be customers, the company is simultaneously saying to jobseekers, ‘this is an innovative company at the forefront of technology’ and investors visiting the site will be happy to see that customers are being satisfied (though the rest of the site fails to follow up on this message). Goldman Sachs’s touchy-feely messaging will also fulfil a similar role for its other core audiences.

Suited to the magazine front cover: energy and FMCG
Although the billboard role is certainly important for energy companies (which are as concerned as pharma companies about their reputations), energy companies are particularly well-suited to the magazine front cover role. Because they are engaged in complex feats of engineering (drilling wells 5,000 metres under the sea, etc) they tend to have rich content that is interesting to a wide audience. This provides a big opportunity to invite people in to discover more about them. An example is the Total home page (total.com), which is very much the front cover of a publication, posting stories under the ‘Our Energies’ banner (See Figure, 4).

Figure 4: The www.total.com home page highlights rich, interesting content under ‘Our Energies’ banner.

Fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies such as Unilever and Procter & Gamble are also suited to a strong weighting towards the magazine front cover role for two reasons. First, they do not, as a group, tend to have the same reputational issues as the energy and pharmaceutical sectors. Second, by the nature of what they do, they have a lot of magazine type material, such as recipes or lifestyle-related stories, with wide appeal.
The balance between the set of signposts, the billboard and the magazine front cover roles will be unique to individual companies. Although some sectors and audience groups lend themselves to common choices, the most important thing is to ask the question – which roles are most important for your company and then organize home page content accordingly.

Editorial control underpins the three roles

One of the biggest weaknesses of most home pages is that they are not thought of in an editorial way. If the website is the company’s biggest publication, and the home page is the cover of the biggest publication, then it follows that the home page needs an editor deciding what goes on and (most crucially in large organizations with many departments vying for attention) what does not. A strong editor’s role is to understand, first, who are the various audiences that come to the site, what they require and how to balance these varying needs. And then to ask how the company can serve messages to those audiences in the most appealing way.

A strong editor is also a politician, balancing pressures from within the organization, from the head of investor relations for example, demanding there is a share price on the home page, or the head of media insisting that press releases appear. A strong editor is able to say no, perhaps arguing that press releases on the home page fulfil none of the three roles: they do not direct people where they need to go; they do not create a strong positive impression of the company, nor do they invite people to click into the site (most press releases are rather dull). The one audience potentially interested in the press release, journalists, can be directed to the correct section via effective signposting. The same could be said of a share price chart or any number of features stakeholders in the business might wish to promote. It is difficult to focus the home page on the three essential roles without the ability to say ‘no’ to content that does not serve the audience’s requirement for specific information, or the company’s need to communicate something interesting to those audiences.

Figure 5: A unique video recently featured on the www.ibm.com. The ‘smallest video in the world’ was created by manipulating atoms with a scanning tunneling microscope.

A case for content based on the brand at IBM

Joan Renner is the editor of the ibm.com home page. When editorial debates arise about whether a piece of content is right for the home page, she makes the case based on the brand messages IBM wants to convey. ‘The most important thing for the home page to do is to correctly reflect the brand,’ she says. Three brand values are well known throughout the organization –
‘dedication to every client’s success’, ‘innovation that matters – for IBM and the world’, and ‘trust and responsibility in all relationships’. If the content does not reflect one of those brand values, it is easier to say that it will not go on the home page.

There are also more specific technology areas the company is focusing on, and this direction comes down from the CEO: the ‘cloud’, big data and analytics, mobile, social business, and security. Her team also uses audience analytics – stories that are too niche do not do well in terms of clicks. They try to ensure that on a weekly basis they feature thought leadership content, or stories about employees using IBM technology to address big problems such as the Ebola crisis or protecting the rain forest. The most frequent debates, however, occur at a more micro level about syntax and grammar. ‘We have more issues over messaging,’ Ms Renner says. ‘On the home page we want to be conversational and provocative and a little fun. We don’t want clichés, meaningless long headlines. A short headline, a descriptive subhead and a really short call to action is the winner.’ The difficulty can be increased when the home page editorial team is trying to change a message that has been finalised for a campaign in partnership with an agency, for example. ‘When the editorial team feels strongly about the message, we do an A/B test, then the visitors can vote.’
Part Two

Bandwagons, best practice and lessons learned

Getting granular: Fitting content to audience groups

 То scroll or not to scroll?

 News you can’t use: do press releases belong on the home page?

 The ‘mobile first’ myth

 Follow me: the role of social media icons and feeds

 Play time: Guidelines for video on the home page

In this section we evaluate current issues, trends and fashions in corporate website home page management to help you decide if they are right for your organization. We draw upon the experiences and lessons learned from digital managers at some of the world’s largest organizations, including GSK, Unilever, Siemens, IBM and Roche. We also offer advice and best practice from our own experience helping online communication teams around the world.
In this section we look at the four home pages that tie for top marks in the Financial Times Bowen Craggs Index of corporate online effectiveness: Roche, Goldman Sachs, Qualcomm and SAP. The Index ranks the websites of 78 of the world’s largest companies on a range of metrics. The home pages featured each scored 11 points out of a possible 12 on the metric ‘strength of home page’. Our analysis of Roche includes commentary from Jeordan Legon, formerly head of web strategy and external digital media at Roche (and now at Novartis).

Part Three

In-depth analysis of top-performing home pages

Roche: Maintaining focus

[...]

Goldman Sachs: Strikingly different

[...]

Qualcomm: The exact equivalent of a billboard

[...]

SAP: Triumph of simplicity

[...]
Conclusion

More important than any feature or set of features, is the thinking behind them. Have you asked how the balance of the three roles applies to your organization and the audiences it is trying to reach?

The ideal home page

[...]

THIS IS A SAMPLE REPORT ONLY, WHERE CONTENT HAS BEEN WITHHELD, THIS IS INDICATED BY ‘[…]

To get the full report contact Dan Drury:

ddrury@bowencraggs.com
Further resources

What we do

www.bowencraggs.com/What-we-do

Bowen Craggs is unique: we specialise in group-level digital communications. Here are three ways you can benefit from our knowledge and expertise…

Access research that will improve your online strategy

The world’s deepest analysis of corporate online estates. Constant audience research across all stakeholder groups. A trusted and growing global knowledge-sharing network. These are the cornerstones of our research reports and bespoke consultancy.

Email ddrury@bowencraggs.com to receive a free copy of our latest report.

Explore the world’s most powerful resource for global web managers

Receive an exclusive pass to the Web Effectiveness Database – the engine for the Financial Times Bowen Craggs Index.

Email ddrury@bowencraggs.com for your free login to this searchable wealth of information.

Read our weekly insight and analysis

For regular commentaries on all aspects of online corporate communications, subscribe to our newsletter www.bowencraggs.com/subscribe/