Benefits and Limitations of Portals

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INTRODUCTION

The demand of a rich suite of easy-to-use tools and help that simplify data management within a network is increasing more and more. These tools should give users immediate access to resources, and control over when and how they share information (Portals & Gateways references, 2006). This article:

- discusses the benefits and limitations of portals;
- mentions the different types of portals;
- introduces their advantages as well as their limitations; and
- concludes with conditions important for users' satisfaction.

WHAT IS A PORTAL?

Web portals are sites on the World Wide Web that typically provide personalized capabilities to their visitors. They are designed to use distributed applications; different numbers and types of middleware and hardware to provide services from a number of different sources. In addition, business portals are designed to share collaboration in workplaces. A further business-driven requirement of portals is that the content be able to work on multiple platforms such as personal computers, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and cell phones (Wikipedia, 2006).

Commonly referred to as simply a portal, a Web site or service that offers a broad array of resources and services, such as e-mail, forums, search engines, and online shopping malls. The first Web portals were online services, such as AOL, that provided access to the Web, but by now most of the traditional search engines have transformed themselves into Web portals to attract and keep a larger audience (Webopedia, 2006).

As defined by IBM, an Internet portal is "a single integrated, ubiquitous, and useful access to information (data), applications and people." A portal may look like a Web site, but it is much more. The latter, while an important part of any university's communications strategy, is primarily a way to provide static information (Richard N. Katz and Associates, 2006, chap. 8).

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PORTALS

There are several kinds of portals:

- **Vertical Portals:** Provide access to a variety of information and services about a particular area of interest. For example, http://www.wine.com is a vertical portal. Such portals offer information and services customized for niche audiences (e.g., undergraduates, faculty).
- **Horizontal Portals:** Often referred to as "megaportals," target the entire Internet community. Sites such as http://www.yahoo.com, http://www.lycos.com, and http://www.netscape.com are megaportals. These sites always contain search engines and provide the ability for a user to personalize the page by offering various channels (i.e., access to other information such as regional weather, stock quotes, or news updates). Providers of megaportals hope individual users go to their sites first to access the rest of the Internet. Their financial models are built on a combination of advertising and/or "click-through" revenues.

Enterprise portals can be either:

- **Vertical:** Focusing on a specific application such as human resources, accounting, or financial aid information; or
- **Horizontal:** Offering access to almost everything an individual user within the enterprise needs to carry out his or her function. Authentication and access are based upon the role or roles the individual plays in the organization. Horizontal enterprise portals (HEPs) are customizable and personalizable. If properly designed, they can replace much of the user's computer "desktop."

WHY ARE PORTALS IMPORTANT?

A portal provides Internet users with a single, customized entry point to network-based campus. In the higher-education context, the portals of most interest are horizontal, that is, they are designed to offer access to almost everything that an

Figure 1. Example of vertical portal (Retrieved from http://www.wine.com)

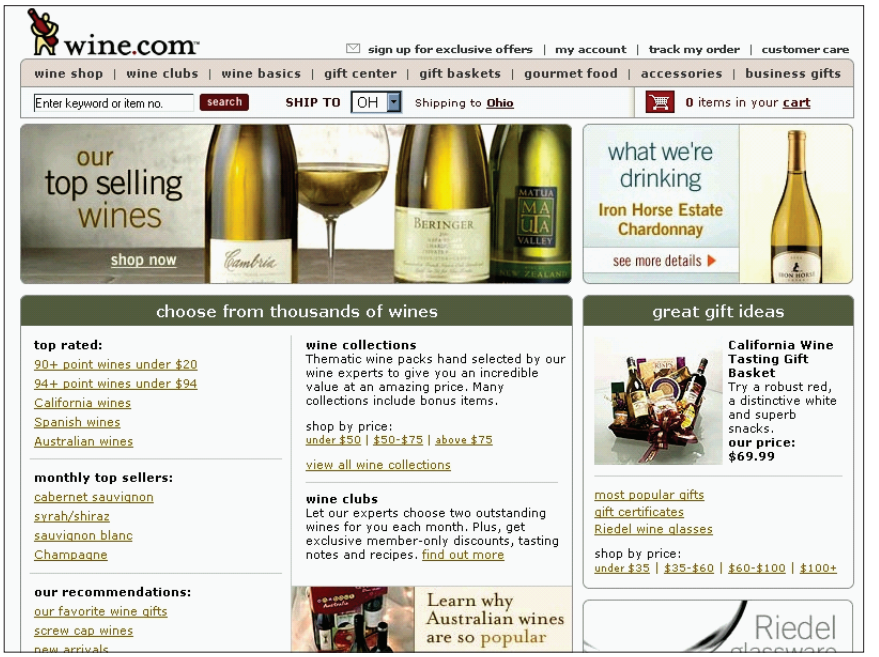

Figure 2. Example of horizontal portal (Retrieved from http://www.yahoo.com)