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# Best And Worst Of Brand-Building Web Sites, 2007

by Ron Rogowski  
for Customer Experience Professionals



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Forrester Applies Its Web Site Brand Review Methodology To The Sites Of 20 Top Brands

by **Ron Rogowski**

with Harley Manning, Ross Popoff-Walker, and Steven Geller

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How good is the overall experience offered by top brands' Web sites today? To find out, we graded the sites of 20 of the world's top brands on how well they cater to user needs (Brand Action) and how well they infuse their Brand Image into the Web experience. Only one site managed to differentiate itself in both these dimensions: Lexus.com. Common Brand Action problems included poor text legibility and confusing category names. On the Brand Image side, sites were guilty of lackluster function and using imagery and layouts that didn't align with offline materials. To improve the online brand experience, top firms should focus first on supporting user goals, distributing brand "cheat-sheets" to designers and stakeholders, and checklisting proposed content and function against brand attributes.

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Forrester reviewed the online experience of 20 top brand sites: Audi, BMW, Chanel, Citi Smith Barney, Gucci, JP Morgan, Lexus, LG, Louis Vuitton, Mercedes-Benz, Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley, Panasonic, Philips, Porsche, Rolex, Samsung, Sony, Tiffany & Co., and UBS.

#### **Related Research Documents**

"Executive Q&A: Web Site Brand Reviews"  
May 18, 2007

"How Well Do Sites Build Their Brands?"  
April 3, 2007

"How Brands Succeed Online"  
June 9, 2005

## TOP BRANDS MUST LIVE UP TO HIGH EXPECTATIONS ONLINE

What makes a Rolex watch worth \$10,000 and a Timex watch worth \$50? Why should investors pay financial advisors a percentage of their assets when the Web provides a wealth of information and advice for free? To convince consumers that their offerings are worth the prices they command, sellers of high-consideration products and services need Web sites that do two things:<sup>1</sup>

- **Communicate value in an emotionally engaging way.** The content, function, language, imagery, typography, and layout that sites provide should reinforce a company's brand positioning and be consistent with how the firm presents itself in other media.<sup>2</sup> For example, the site of an automotive company that wants to be perceived as innovative should showcase innovative products and call out innovative product features. And when prospects visit the site after seeing an ad, the tone and manner of the site should match what they saw in print or on TV.
- **Deliver value by offering useful, usable content and function.** Whether they buy online or off-shoppers go to Web sites to inform purchase decisions by getting answers to their key questions. Sites that don't support consumer goals frustrate and annoy visitors — negative emotions that transfer over to the brand. That's why sites must make it easy for consumers to find and use the content and function they need. For example, individuals shopping for a flat-panel television set to complement a newly remodeled room need to understand what size TV is appropriate for the room and how it will look in the room.

## HOW GOOD IS THE ONLINE EXPERIENCE AT THE SITES OF TOP-RATED BRANDS?

To find out how the sites of the world's top automotive, consumer electronics, financial services, and luxury accessory brands use the Web to their advantage, we:

- **Picked 20 top brands in four industries.** We started with a list of the world's 100 most popular brands.<sup>3</sup> We then identified the top five companies in each of four categories: automotive manufacturers, consumer electronics manufacturers, financial services companies, and luxury accessory manufacturers.<sup>4</sup> Next, we picked the appropriate consumer-facing site for each of the firms.
- **Tried to accomplish relevant user goals.** Following the principles of Forrester's Scenario Design methodology, we attempted to complete user goals that were specific to the purpose of each type of site (see Figure 1). We used the same user goal for all five sites within each industry. These goals came from our own research on both online consumer behavior and the specific industries evaluated.

- **Uncovered the brand positioning for each site.** We identified statements the companies made about themselves by combing through “About Us” sections of their sites, FAQs, press releases, and annual reports. To find reference examples of “on brand” imagery, typography, and layout treatments, we reviewed brochures, magazine ads, direct mail ads, and prospectuses. When available, we also viewed pertinent television commercials.
- **Graded each site on Brand Action and Brand Image.** Finally, analysts conducted two separate but related reviews of each site (see Figure 2). First, we conducted a Brand Action review — rating support for the transactional, informational, and usability aspects of the brand against a relevant subset of our Web Site Review criteria. The second review — a Brand Image review — captured how well the site conveyed the emotional and experiential attributes of the brand.<sup>5</sup> The combined results of both reviews provide a holistic picture of how well each site builds its brand.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1** User Goals And Companies Evaluated For This Report

User descriptions	User goals evaluated	Companies	Evaluated sites
<p><b>Automotive</b>            38-year-old VP of marketing for a technology company. He's in the market for a new luxury sports car that combines speed and style. He is a bit of an audiophile, so a premium sound system is a must.</p>	<p>Find a top-of-the-line, luxury two-seat convertible. Learn about the car's power, acceleration, interior styling, and audio system. Configure the vehicle to get ballpark pricing, get a brochure, and find the closest dealer.</p>	Audi BMW Lexus Mercedes-Benz Porsche	audiusa.com bmwusa.com lexus.com mbusa.com porsche.com/usa
<p><b>Consumer electronics</b>            Male, 46-year-old real-estate agent from Seattle. Now that their kids are 8 and 10, he and his wife are remodeling to make the play room more of a TV room. To complete the transformation, they want to buy a flat-panel TV that will give them a great movie-watching experience. He has heard a lot about flat-panel TVs, but he doesn't know the differences among models.</p>	<p>Understand the differences among models of flat-panel TVs and how each enhances the movie-viewing experience. He wants to find a model that will look good in his living room for around \$3,000. He could spend more, but he wants to preserve some capital to furnish the room.</p>	LG Panasonic Philips Samsung Sony	us.lge.com panasonic.com philipsusa.com samsung.com sony.com
<p><b>Financial services</b>            Male, 48 years old, with \$1 million in investable assets spread across a number of accounts at multiple firms. He has always made most of his own investment decisions, including a handful of trades per year. But now he wants a dedicated advisor who will collaborate with him to manage his portfolio and be proactive about planning.</p>	<p>Find a full-service firm to help with retirement planning. He wants to know if the firm offers high-quality retirement income planning advice, if the firm gives genuine attention to someone of his asset level, and what it costs to work with the firm.</p>	Citi Smith Barney JP Morgan Merrill Lynch Morgan Stanley UBS	smithbarney.com jpmorgan.com askmerrill.ml.com morganstanley.com UBS.com
<p><b>Luxury accessories</b>            55-year-old male. He and his wife are successful entrepreneurs who enjoy the finer things in life. It's their 20th wedding anniversary, and he is taking his wife to Hawaii to enjoy a week in the sun. He also wants to surprise her with a nice gift.</p>	<p>Find an elegant and stylish timepiece that matches his wife's platinum engagement and wedding rings, and that will be a perfect accent for both professional and evening attire. Get a good understanding of the size and thickness of the watch and find out where to purchase it.</p>	Chanel Gucci Louis Vuitton Rolex Tiffany	chanel.com gucci.com louisvuitton.com rolex.com tiffany.com

**Figure 2** Methodologies For Evaluating How Sites Build Brands

Brand Action review	Brand Image review
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is essential content available where needed?</li> <li>2. Is essential function available where needed?</li> <li>3. Are category and subcategory names clear and mutually exclusive?</li> <li>4. Does the site use language that's easy to understand?</li> <li>5. Does the site use graphics, icons, and symbols that are easy to understand?</li> <li>6. Is the text legible?</li> <li>7. Are interactive elements easily recognizable?</li> <li>8. Does the site perform well?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does the site's <b>content</b> support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?</li> <li>2. Does the site's <b>functionality</b> support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?</li> <li>3. Does the site's <b>language and tone</b> support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?</li> <li>4. Does the site's <b>imagery</b> support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?</li> <li>5. Does the site's <b>typography</b> support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?</li> <li>6. Does the site's <b>layout</b> support brand positioning in a manner that is consistent with other channels?</li> </ol>

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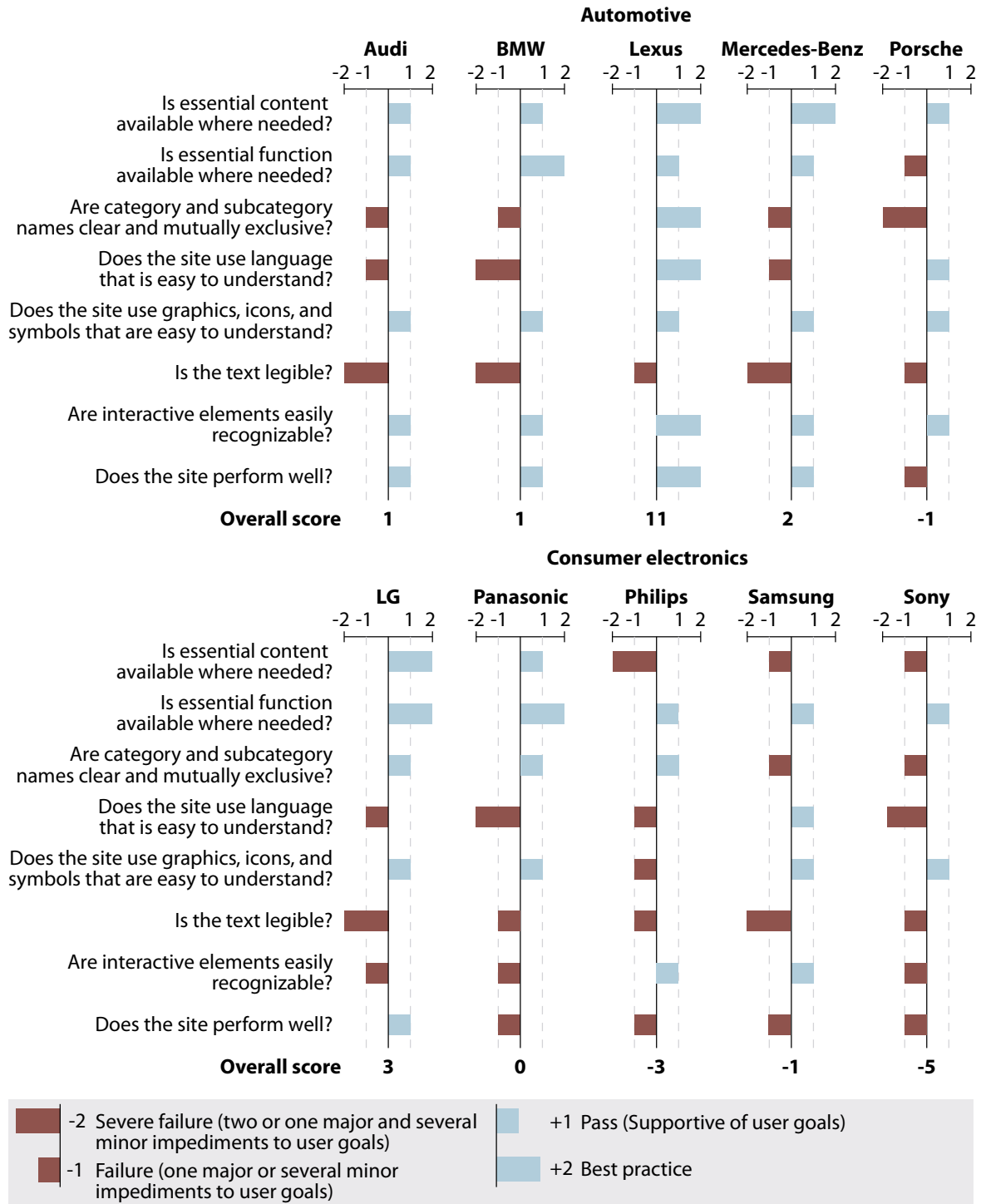
Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

### Only Two Sites Passed Our Brand Action Tests

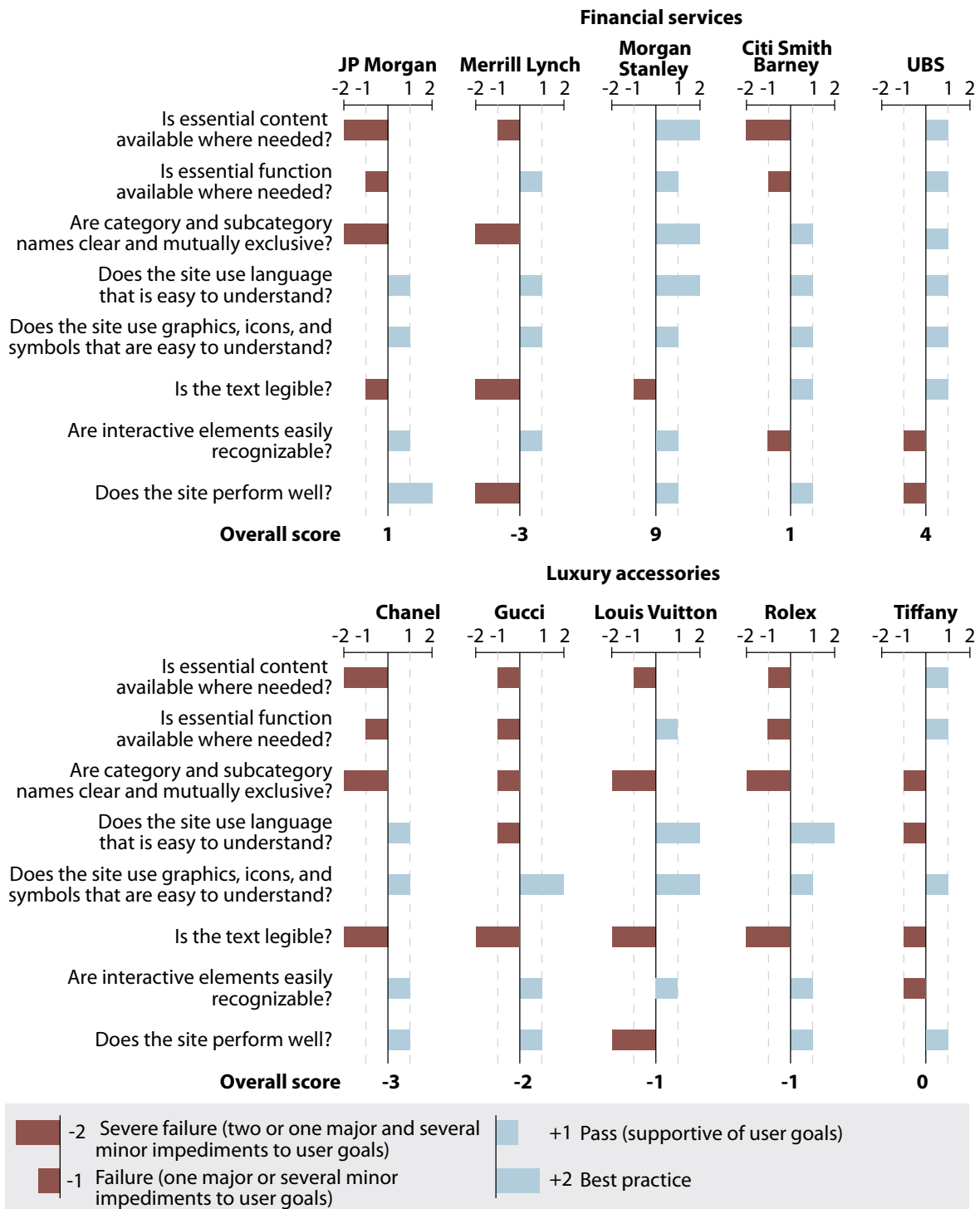
To score the Brand Action criteria, Forrester analysts attempted to accomplish a relevant target-user goal on each site. We graded the experience against eight criteria and awarded one of four possible grades for each of the eight: -2 (severe failure), -1 (failure), 1 (pass), or 2 (best practice). Overall scores could therefore range from a low of -16 (8 x -2) to a high of 16 (8 x 2). As a group, sites fared poorly at Brand Action, with only two (one auto manufacturer and one financial services firm) achieving an overall passing score of 8 or higher. Our evaluations showed that (see Figure 3):

- **Lexus' superior menus, content, language, and performance earn a top score of 11.** Many automotive sites use obscure model names or numbers as key navigation elements. But the menus at [lexus.com](http://lexus.com) group models into clear classifications like sedans, coupes, luxury utility vehicles, and luxury hybrids. When users mouse over each model, they see a photo plus high-level specs and pricing to help them identify the right vehicle. Once on a model page, shoppers find abundant content about features, including an entire subsite devoted to espousing the merits of the Mark Levinson audio system. Jargon-free copy and a zippy, error-free interface add to the usability of the site.
- **Morgan Stanley earns an 8 with content that's easy to find and understand.** High-net-worth investors want to know how their financial advisor is going to help them — and what the service will cost. Morgan Stanley's site directs users with a clear menu structure that includes choices like "Working Together," "Planning," "Investment Products," and "Customer Service." Subcategories also include key terms our user was looking for, like "Retirement" and "Understanding Our Commissions And Fees." This menu structure enables users to quickly find concise content that describes minimum investment levels, fee structures, and Morgan Stanley's consultative approach to investing.

**Figure 3** Results Of Brand Action Reviews Across 20 Sites In Four Industries



**Figure 3** Results Of Brand Action Reviews Across 20 Sites In Four Industries (Cont.)





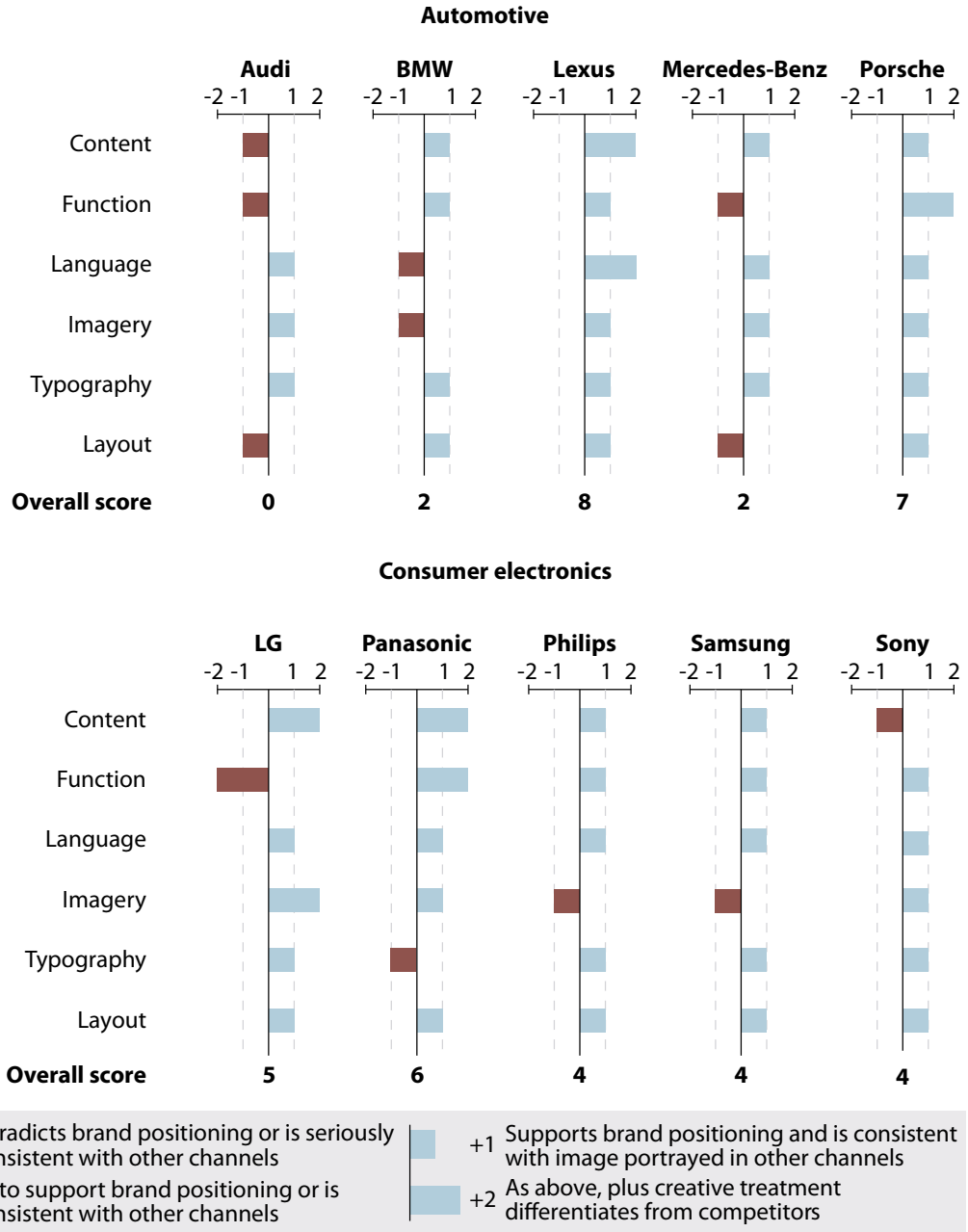
### Five Sites Passed Our Brand Image Tests

We scored the Brand Image criteria based on how well each site communicates and supports its brand positioning. Parallel to our Brand Action review, we awarded one of four possible scores for each of our six criteria, ranging from a low of -2 (contradicts brand positioning or is seriously inconsistent with other channels) to a high of 2 (supports brand positioning, is consistent with other channels, and differentiates from competitors). Total scores could therefore range from -12 (6 x -2) to a high of 12 (6 x 2). The 20 sites that we evaluated were somewhat better at Brand Image than Brand Action, with five achieving a passing score of 6 or higher. Our evaluations showed that (see Figure 4):

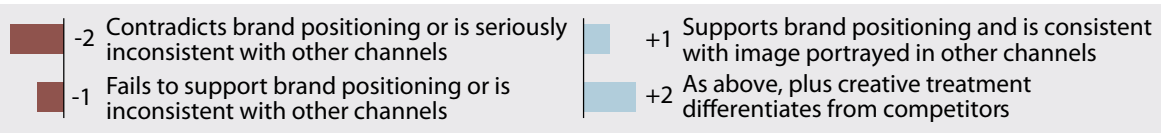
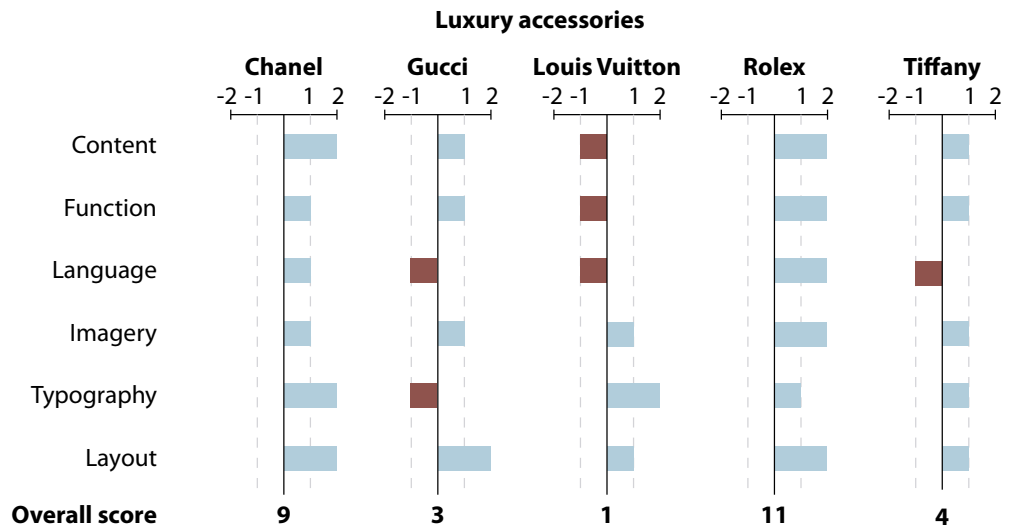
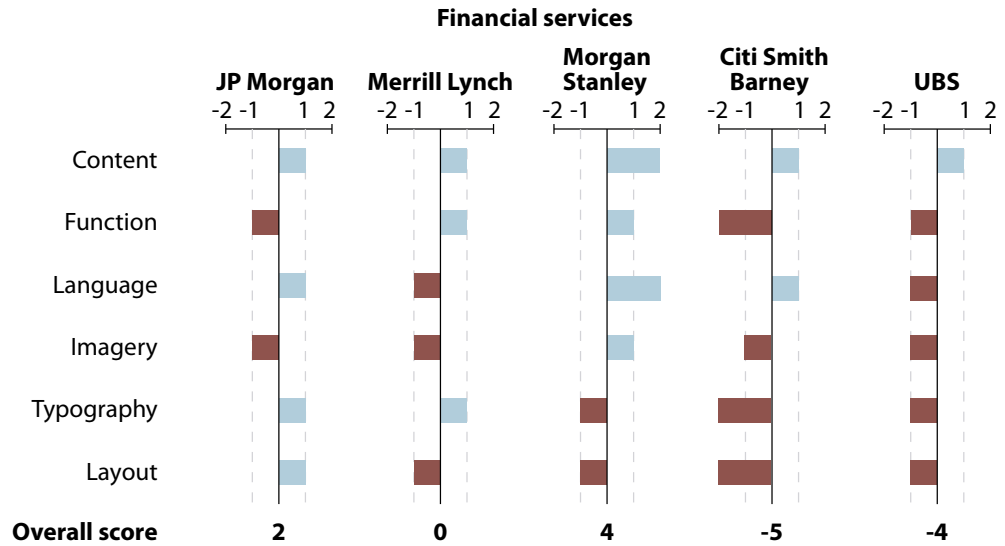
- **Rolex's innovative design earns it a near perfect score of 11.** Rolex's site exudes the brand's promise of "innovation and achievement." The home page greets visitors with a giant working image of a watch that shows the correct local time. Video highlights each feature of Rolex's timepieces with impeccable image and sound quality, extending and enhancing the site's eloquent copy. The site's novel layout puts navigation elements at the bottom of the page on a green background, a stylistic element picked up from Rolex's print ads. To top off the experience, the site allows users to download movies to their iPods — extending the brand experience from the Web to devices.
- **Chanel fashions a unique vision that garners a score of 9.** Chanel's site features its founder's uncompromising nature, uniqueness, and passion for perfection. Incredibly sharp images of timepieces, photographed with dramatic lighting, showcase product craftsmanship. The site introduces images through cinematic transitions and juxtaposes products against backgrounds that accentuate their inspiration from the surrounding natural world. Text is used sparingly and is set in the unmistakable custom Chanel font. The entire experience is packaged in a unique layout where spacious dark backgrounds coalesce with light, airy music enhancing the allure of Chanel's products.
- **Lexus creates a luxurious feel that earns a score of 8.** Lexus successfully reinforces its promises of quality and luxury. The home page features high-quality images that stand out, even among other high-end vehicle sites. Menu categories make it clear that the company doesn't merely sell SUVs or hybrids, it sells "luxury utility vehicles" and "luxury hybrids." The quality experience continues on individual model pages: The SC Luxury Coupe overview positions the vehicle against a dramatic background of anchored yachts and boasts that "even in the sun, it gives you goosebumps." The copy tone and manner is spot on when describing interior features, too. For example, "The SC cabin boasts sumptuous hand-stitched, leather-trimmed seating, fine wood accents, and a vast array of amenities."

- **Porsche creates sufficient fascination to earn a 7.** The Porsche brand promises “quality” and “fascination.” Its site emphasizes these attributes with high-quality tools for comparing models across a variety of attributes like price, fuel economy, and top track speed. The configurator offers an unusual touch — a rich, 360-degree zoom function that allows the user to indulge himself with fascinating details of his favorite model during the customization process. But the site doesn’t just entice with function: There is abundant content in the model pages to support the company’s other brand promise — “safety.”
- **Panasonic brings its ideas to life for a 6.** The name Panasonic is, “A commitment to quality, value, and innovation, bringing you ideas for life.” The site is replete with content and function that reinforces this promise, like the “Why buy Panasonic?” section that describes how the company develops leading-edge products that last. Additionally, there is an innovative function that allows a potential TV buyer to choose a picture of a room, then drag and drop a TV into it to see how the set might look at home. Even better, shoppers can upload pictures of their own rooms and use them with the tool.

**Figure 4** Results Of Brand Image Reviews Across 20 Sites In Four Industries



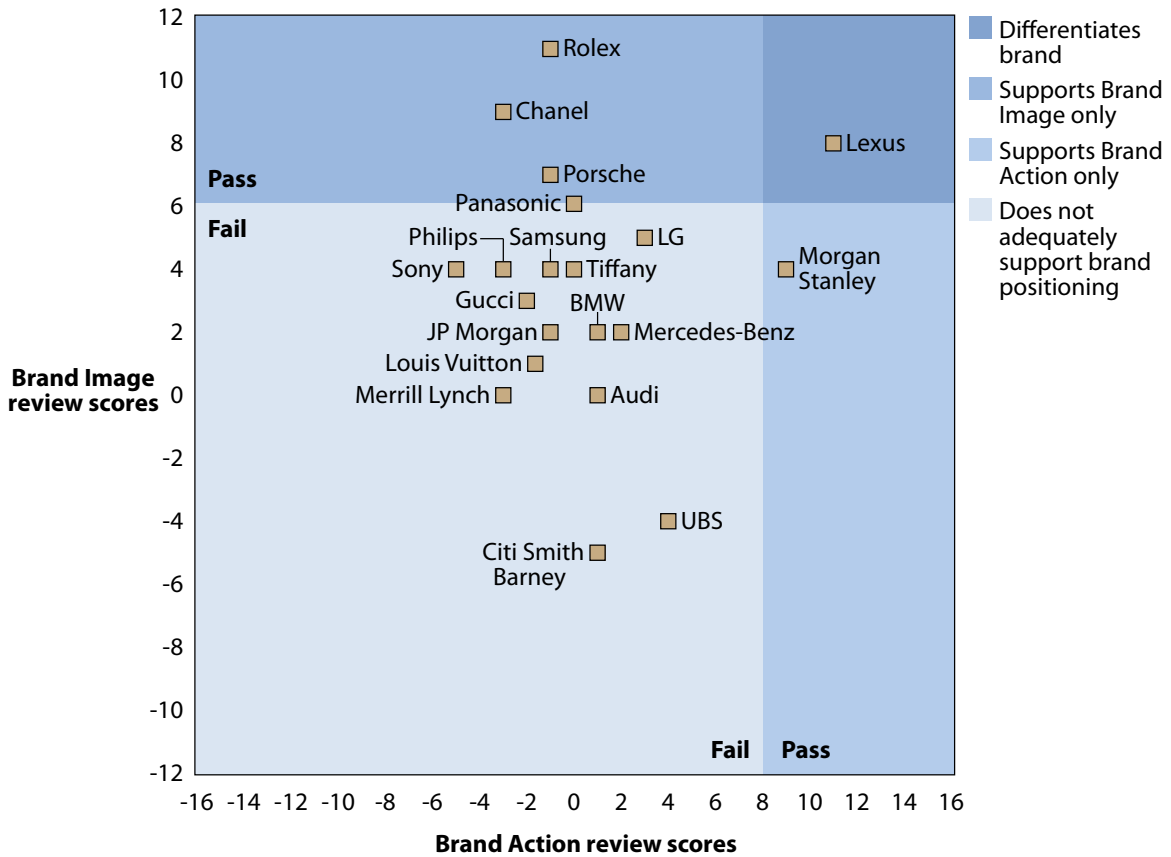
**Figure 4** Results Of Brand Image Reviews Across 20 Sites In Four Industries (Cont.)



**ADOPT BEST PRACTICES THAT BUILD BRANDS ONLINE**

Of the 20 sites we reviewed, only Lexus passed both our Brand Action and Brand Image tests (see Figure 5). The majority of sites we reviewed were better at supporting their brand positioning than they were at supporting user goals, but most had flaws in both areas. Firms can avoid common online brand mistakes by looking to leaders for examples of best practices.

**Figure 5** Overall Results Of Brand Reviews Across 20 Sites In Four Industries



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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

**Improve Brand Action With Content That’s Both Easy To Read And Find**

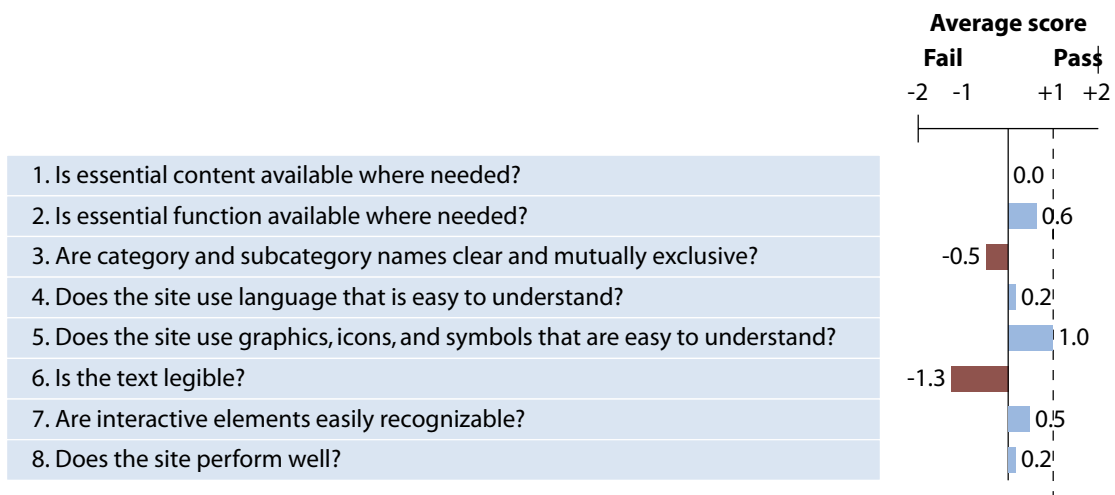
The 20 sites we reviewed had an average Brand Action score of 0.6 — a far cry from a passing score of 8. Top design flaws included illegible text and ambiguous or overlapping category names (see Figure 6). To remove these customer experience roadblocks, companies should:

- **Make copy at least as readable as it is on ubs.com and smithbarney.com.** While not perfect, the text on sites by UBS and Citi Smith Barney stands out from the pack. That’s because it’s

relatively large, dark, and set against a white background. Other luxury brands should copy these sites or — even better — emulate the flagship site of a highly respected media brand, nytimes.com, which still sets the standard across all industries for easy-to-read text. In this way companies can avoid the fate of Rolex, Morgan Stanley, and Lexus, which undermine their crisp, clear, meaningful copy by turning it into an online vision test.

- **Look to Lexus, Panasonic, and Philips for clear category names.** Lexus creates logical groupings for consumers by organizing its obscure model names — like “IS” and “RX” — under meaningful category labels like “sedan” and “coupe.” Panasonic and Philips also passed our menu test by including simple, effective trigger words like “Televisions,” “DVDs & VCRs,” and “Cameras & Camcorders” in their menus. This is an especially important lesson for sites in the luxury accessories category, every one of which had confusing menu structures. For example, Chanel has a link to “Jewelry Collections” under “Watch Collections,” which overlaps with the higher-level category, “Fine Jewelry Collections.”

**Figure 6** Average Scores By Question For Brand Action Reviews



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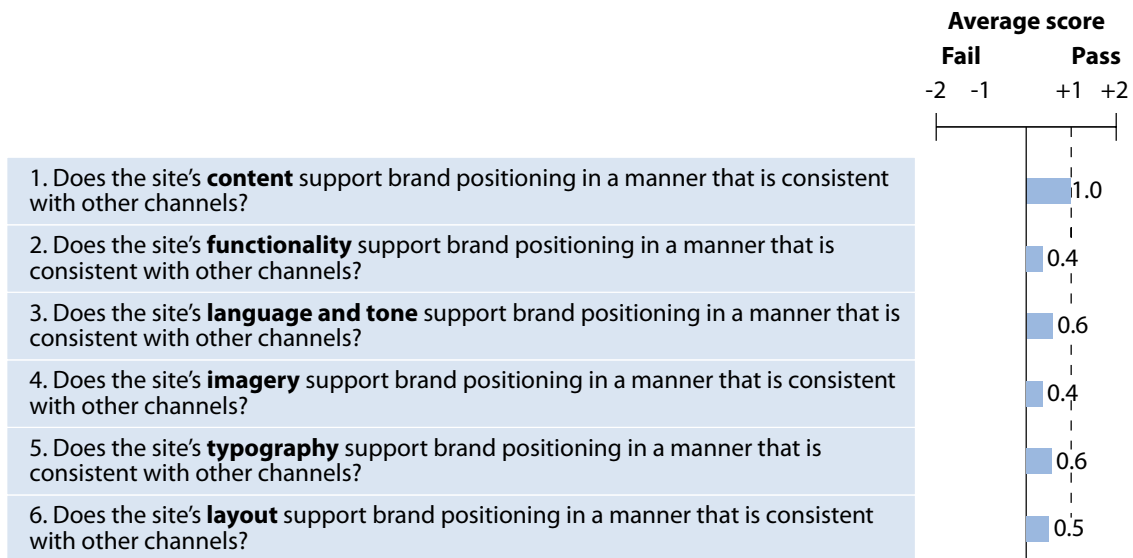
Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

### Improve Brand Image With Compelling Function And Stylistic Consistency

The average Brand Image score was markedly better than the average Brand Action score. But at 3.3 it still fell short of a passing grade of 6. Among the most common problems were lackluster function and stylistic inconsistencies with offline materials (see Figure 7). To improve brand image, firms should:

- **Learn from function that’s fascinating at porsche.com and innovative at rolex.com.** Porsche’s function encourages users to obsess about their vehicles, indulging in the brand’s promise of “fascination.” Clever functionality includes a “Model Advisor” with a slick narration that describes each vehicle as the user rolls a mouse over it. Similarly, Rolex lives up to its brand attribute of innovation by offering online features like video explanations of features and the ability to view and compare different watch components in a single view. In contrast, LG undercuts its positioning as “the brand that is delightfully smart” by providing a ho-hum comparison engine that features technical jargon without offering contextual help to explain these obscure terms.
- **Infuse offline elements into creative designs like LG and Louis Vuitton.** LG takes its offline ad campaign and uses the same imagery — three guys on the edge of their seats watching golf from a putting green — but animates the scene to convey the message that watching the game on an LG TV is just like being there in person. Louis Vuitton’s site combines the firm’s unmistakable font with photos of Scarlett Johansson to provide visual continuity with its print ads. These leaders should serve as examples to companies like UBS and Citi Smith Barney, whose online experience uses imagery, fonts, and layouts that look distinctly different from their offline marketing.

**Figure 7** Average Scores By Question For Brand Image Reviews



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### REDESIGN YOUR SITE TO APPEAL TO BOTH SIDES OF THE BRAIN

You can't frustrate and annoy customers into liking your brand. And you can't bore them into liking your brand, either. To make sure their sites cater to both the logical and emotional needs of users, customer experience professionals should:

- **Support customer objectives with a disciplined design process.** The first step to building a brand online is ensuring that it has the content and function that target users need to complete their goals — whether those goals are transactional or purely informational. To do this, firms need a business-centric design process that starts by setting business goals, ends by measuring business results, and includes appropriate user research and testing along the way. Additionally, firms need to audit their practitioners — or design agencies — to ensure they have the skills required for specialized tasks like information architecture and interaction design.<sup>7</sup>
- **Create a brand “cheat sheet” to guide both designers and stakeholders.** The simple act of collecting a company's brand attributes and putting them on a single page is a valuable exercise for most firms. Customer experience and marketing executives should create a clear statement of intended brand attributes along with examples of how the company intends to live up to those attributes. Everyone on the design team, as well as all stakeholders involved in the review and approval process, should get these easy reference guides. Firms should use the cheat sheet as a simple checklist when approving new content, function, or designs. Additionally, companies should conduct quarterly reviews to make sure that the site stays on-brand as updates occur and positioning shifts over time.

## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

### Online Resource

The underlying spreadsheets detailing the user descriptions, goals, and brand attributes for the sites reviewed in this report are available online. The underlying spreadsheets detailing the results of the brand reviews shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5 are available online.

### Methodology

To determine how well the world's top brands succeed online, we first referenced a list of Interbrand's “Best Global Brands 2007.” Next, we identified the top five sites in the four largest industries represented: automotive manufacturers, consumer electronics manufacturers, financial services institutions, and luxury accessory manufacturers. Analysts then conducted two separate reviews of each site. The first review rated support for the transactional, informational, and usability aspects of the brand (Action). The second review captured how well the site conveys the emotional and experiential attributes of the brand (Image). To capture Brand Action, we selected a relevant subset of Forrester's Web Site Review criteria. We derived criteria for evaluating Brand Image by analyzing the brand frameworks of Web design agencies and major consumer-facing companies.



## Companies Reviewed For This Document

Audi	Merrill Lynch
BMW	Morgan Stanley
Chanel	Panasonic
Citi Smith Barney	Philips
Gucci	Porsche
JP Morgan	Rolex
Lexus	Samsung
LG	Sony
Louis Vuitton	Tiffany & Co.
Mercedes-Benz	UBS

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 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.
- <sup>2</sup> Eighty-six percent of the respondents to a recent survey of Forrester's Customer Experience Peer Research Panel indicated that for site redesign projects completed in 2005, "build greater brand loyalty" was an important business goal. See the March 17, 2006, "[The ROI Of Web Redesigns Made Simple](#)" report.
- <sup>3</sup> Source: August 6, 2007, "Top 100 Global Brands Scoreboard," *BusinessWeek* ([http://bwnt.businessweek.com/interactive\\_reports/top\\_brands/index.asp](http://bwnt.businessweek.com/interactive_reports/top_brands/index.asp))
- <sup>4</sup> HSBC was among the top five financial services brands in the list; however, since it does not offer brokerage services in the US, we omitted it from the review.
- <sup>5</sup> Forrester derived the criteria for evaluating Brand Image by analyzing the brand frameworks of Web design agencies and major consumer-facing companies. See the June 9, 2005, "[How Brands Succeed Online](#)" report.
- <sup>6</sup> Reviews were conducted on public facing Web sites during the period from July 10, 2007 to August 15, 2007.
- <sup>7</sup> Once companies have a shared point of view on customer experience, they need processes and skills that reinforce and support their goal of improving it. See the March 31, 2006, "[Culture And Process Drive Better Customer Experiences](#)" report.

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