

The Ten Best Web Support Sites of 2005

Individual Site Analysis



Open Division

The Association of Support Professionals
122 Barnard Avenue
Watertown, Mass. 02472
www.asponline.com

Introduction

As part of this year's Ten Best Web Support Sites competition, judges from the Association of Support Professionals evaluated 55 Web support sites in terms of design, knowledgebase implementation, interactive features, personalization, and the challenges that the development team overcame. Based on the judges' scores, we have provided participants with the following charts that will let you compare your site against average scores for all entrants in the Open and Small Company Divisions. In addition, we have included general comments by the judges on each site, where available.

We sincerely hope that these evaluations help you identify areas for future improvement, and we look forward to seeing an upgraded version of your site in next year's competition.

Instructions to Judges

The following instructions were given to all judges as part of an explanation of the scoring system:

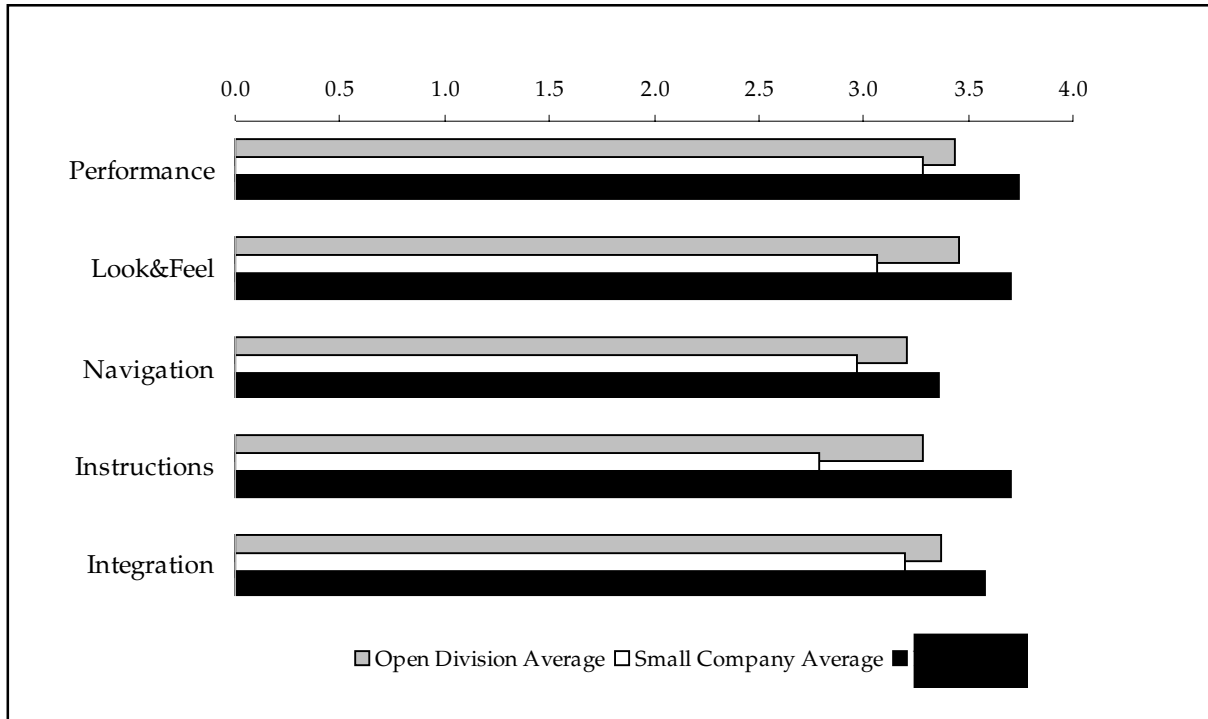
For each of the 25 criteria described on the following pages, please assign a numerical score that reflects your judgment about this item. Most of the questions deal with your subjective impression of the site, supplemented by information supplied by the entry essays, so please draw the best conclusion you can from the available information.

Each item is worth 0-4 points. We've offered brief text descriptions that correspond to scoring levels, but there is no single blueprint for a "perfect" support site. If the site developers have found an innovative way to deliver a quality support experience, feel free to assign a higher score than our text descriptions might suggest. (Similarly, you should downgrade a poor implementation.)

Note that some of our criteria—e.g., multi-language options and some forms of personalization—don't apply to all support sites, especially those hosted by small companies. You won't be "marking down" a site by giving a low score for these criteria; rather, these items give you a chance to award *additional* points to sites that offer exceptional features in these areas.

For each item, you may assign any score between 0 and 4, to a tenth of a point (e.g., 3.5). Since a site's overall standing will be based on a cumulative score (maximum 100 points), it's important that you assign a score for every item; answers like "n/a" or "how would I know?" are the same as giving a score of zero points. If you're really in doubt about a question, let us know and we'll try to help clarify the instructions.

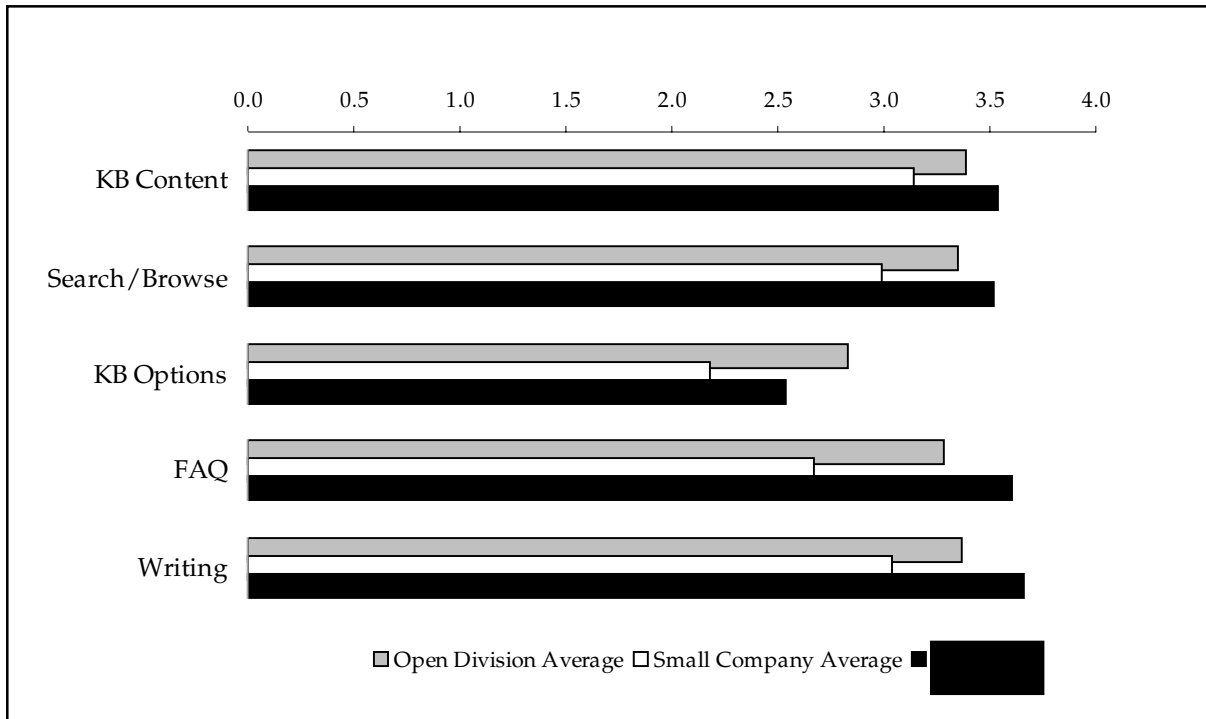
Finally, this year we've revised our approach to the judges' comments: We'd now like you to describe the *three most important enhancements* you'd recommend for each site. Length is up to you—anywhere from a few notes to a mini-essay, if that's what you feel like writing. As always, the comments are optional, but we've found that most people who enter are very eager to hear feedback from the judges about how to improve their sites.



■ Overall usability, design, and navigation

Based on your first impressions of the site and your subsequent exploration of key features, please assign scores for the following five criteria

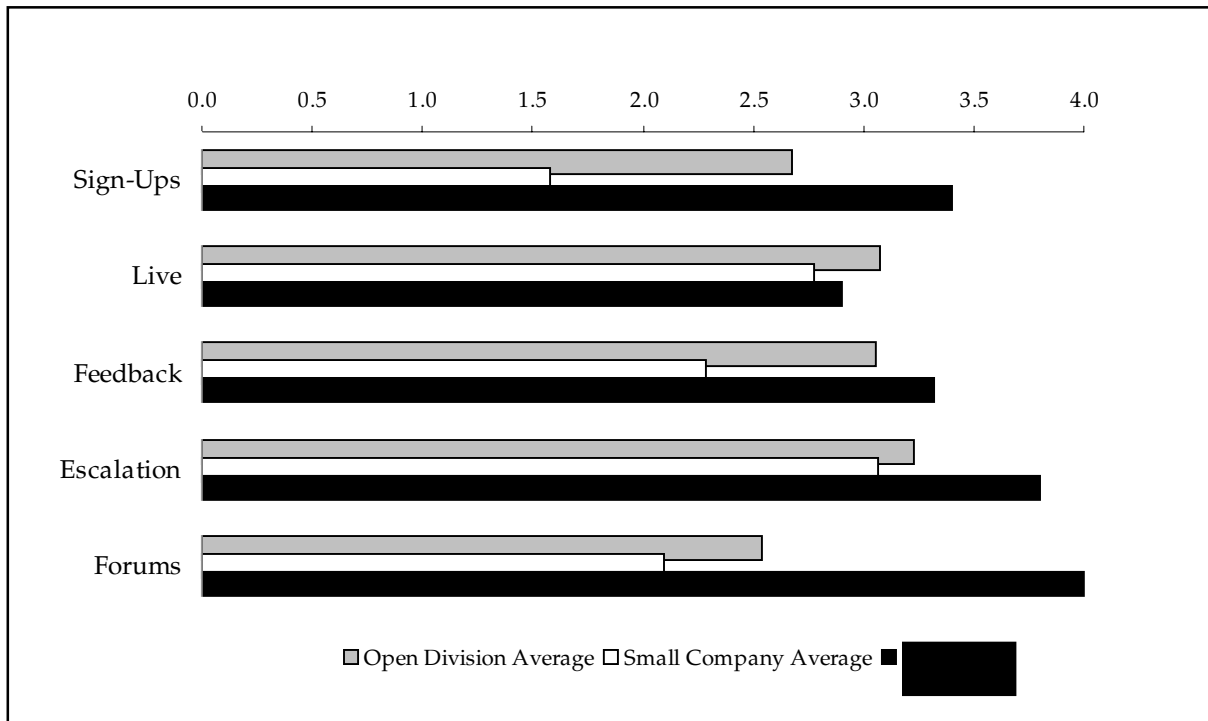
1. What's your impression of the site's overall performance?
 - Pages load quickly; need few clicks to reach important information (4.0)
 - Adequate performance, but a few sluggish spots and unnecessary clicks (2.0)
 - Performance is consistently sluggish, lots of unnecessary clicks (0.0)
2. What's your impression of the site's overall look and feel?
 - Excellent design; conveys a strong sense of professionalism (4.0)
 - Average appearance; feels somewhat home-grown (2.0)
 - Unattractive, amateurish (0.0)
3. How would you rate the site's overall navigation and flow?
 - Extremely intuitive, consistent throughout (4.0)
 - Average—logical, but not always clear where I should go (2.0)
 - Confusing, often misleading (0.0)
4. How would you you rate the quality of site navigation instructions?
 - Friendly, very clear, brief (4.0)
 - Adequate but sometimes wordy (2.0)
 - Bureaucratic, hard to understand (0.0)
5. How would you rate the site's integration of various support resources (tech notes, articles, downloads, FAQs, forums, etc.)?
 - Easy to find all resources from a single point or product page (4.0)
 - Resources are easy to find, but no single point of access (2.0)
 - Hard to get from one area to another; not sure I've found all resources (0.0)



■ Knowledgebase and search implementation

After exploring the site's content and trying a few knowledgebase queries, please assign scores for the following five criteria

1. What's your impression of the site's overall knowledgebase content (tech notes, articles, tutorials, FAQs, etc.)?
 - Comprehensive, in-depth collection of several different kinds of content (4.0)
 - Good collection of problem-resolution tech notes, not much else (2.0)
 - Content seems skimpy (0.0)
2. What's your impression of the Search and Browse functions?
 - Retrieves documents ranked by relevance; clear titles and summaries (4.0)
 - Retrieves many documents, but some are off-topic or poorly described (2.0)
 - No Search/Browse function, or function is ineffective (0.0)
3. What's your impression of other knowledgebase options (e.g., natural language queries, troubleshooting wizards)?
 - Well implemented, very useful (4.0)
 - Available, but implementation needs work (2.0)
 - No other knowledgebase options are offered (0.0)
4. What's your impression of the FAQ (or similar) sections?
 - Well written, comprehensive, clearly organized (4.0)
 - Many topics, but seems haphazardly organized (2.0)
 - Very limited number of topics, skimpy information (0.0)
5. How would you describe the writing and editing of the knowledgebase text?
 - Well written, easy to follow, step-by-step (4.0)
 - Adequate, but occasionally hard to follow (2.0)
 - Documents are poorly edited and often confusing (0.0)



■ Interactive features

Please assign scores for the following five criteria:

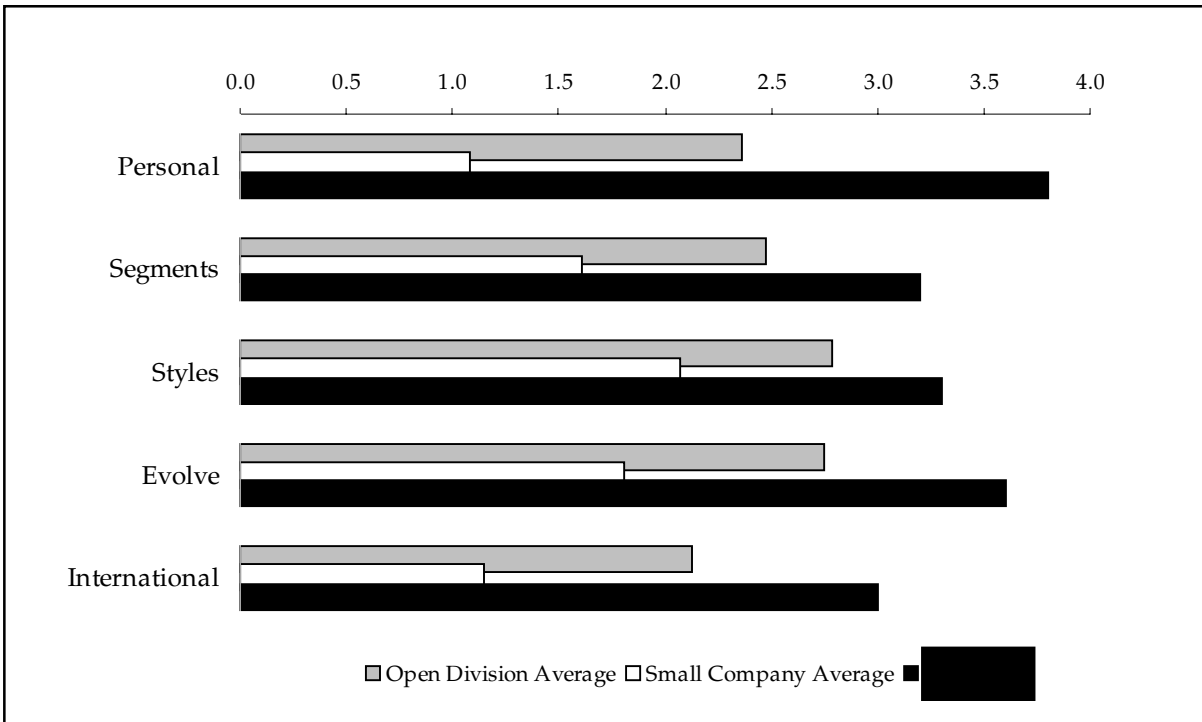
1. Does the site invite users to sign up for e-mail alerts, newsletters, tips, etc.?
 - Yes; and recipients can personalize content based on personal profiles (4.0)
 - Yes, but all recipients get the same e-mail message content (2.0)
 - No outbound e-mail services (0.0)

2. What options are available for online interaction with live support reps?
 - Users can log new cases online and check status of pending cases (4.0)
 - Users can submit e-mail queries and get personal answers (2.0)
 - No live interaction by e-mail or online incident tracking (0.0)

3. Does the site solicit user feedback on success of problem resolution?
 - Site conspicuously requests feedback on search results (4.0)
 - Company conducts occasional satisfaction surveys (2.0)
 - No evidence of feedback efforts (0.0)

4. If the site fails to resolve a problem, what escalation options (free or fee-based) do users have?
 - Many options, including telephone (4.0)
 - Limited options, primarily e-mail; no live phone (2.0)
 - No escalation options (0.0)

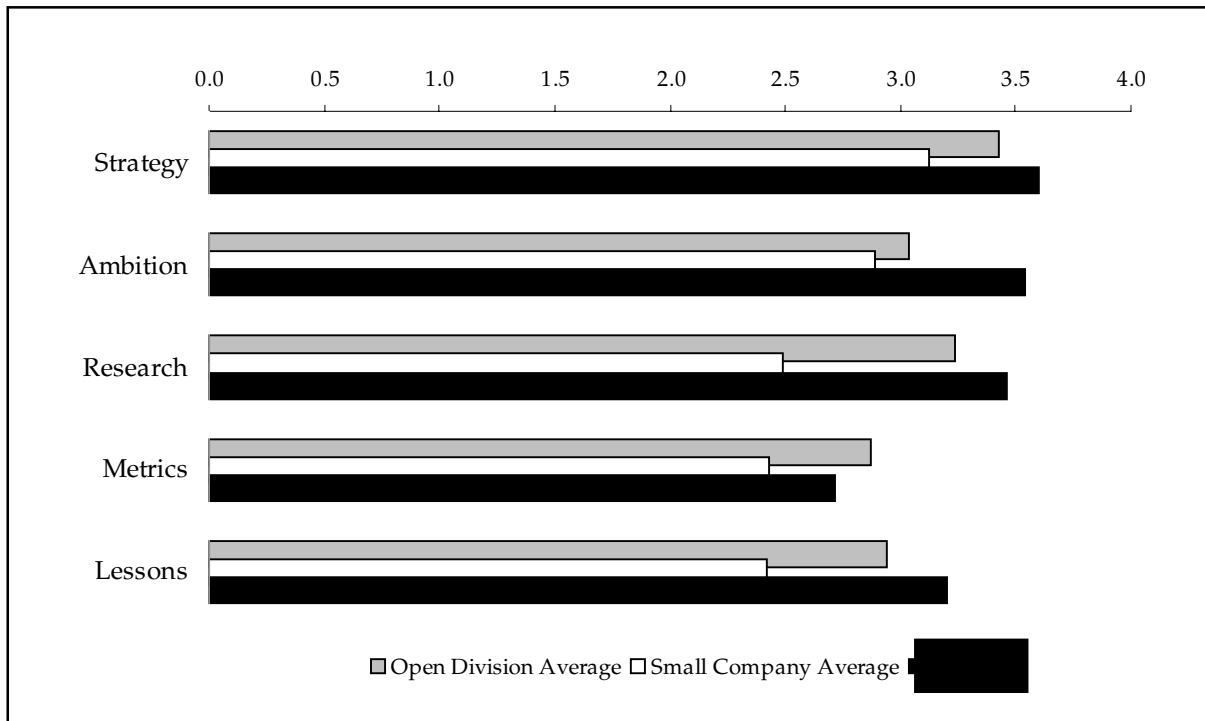
5. What kind of discussion groups are supported by the site?
 - One or more active forums, moderated by company representatives (4.0)
 - Forums seem lightly used; no moderators (2.0)
 - No forums (0.0)



■ Personalization

Please assign scores for the following five criteria:

- Can users create personalized support experience (e.g., personal home pages)?
 - Yes, based on product ownership, type of resource, and contact frequency (4.0)
 - Yes, based chiefly on product ownership (2.0)
 - No personal home pages or views (0.0)
- Is the site optimized to serve various customer segments?
 - Offers specific areas for customer types—e.g., dealers, novices, developers (4.0)
 - Some segment-specific content, but not offered in separate pages or areas (2.0)
 - Site seems to have a “one size fits all” approach (0.0)
- Does the site offer different types of solutions that reflect various customer learning styles and needs (e.g., tutorials vs. problem-solving tech notes vs. “cookbook” applications)?
 - Customers can almost always pick from several well-developed choices (4.0)
 - Content is designed to fix specific problems, but tutorials are offered (2.0)
 - Site seems to have a “one size fits all” approach (0.0)
- How did the site developers seem to evolve their personalization approach?
 - Fresh research into information needs of various customer types (4.0)
 - Approach is based on historical knowledge of customer segments (2.0)
 - Site seems to have a “one size fits all” approach (0.0)
- Has the company tried to customize the site for its overseas customers?
 - Site offers extensive multi-language support (4.0)
 - Site has a limited amount of translated content (2.0)
 - Site is entirely in one language (0.0)



■ The major site development challenge

Based on your review of the site-challenge essay and your experience with the site, please assign scores for the following five questions:

1. How would you describe the company's overall site development strategy?
 - Primary goal was to improve the customer's support experience (4.0)
 - Primary goal was to deal with internal issues, budget limits, technology (2.0)
 - Developers seem to have focused on resolving relatively minor issues (0.0)
2. In terms of the company's available resources, how ambitious was the challenge?
 - Intense effort, pushed the limits of available resources (4.0)
 - A separate development project, well-managed but fairly low-risk (2.0)
 - Business as usual, not much extra effort or resource commitment (0.0)
3. How well did the site's developers research their solution to this challenge?
 - Collected new information from interviews, Web logs, usability tests (4.0)
 - Relied chiefly on own internal experience with the site (2.0)
 - Decisions seem to have been based on site developers' personal opinions (0.0)
4. How did the site developers know that they had achieved good results?
 - Analyzed their results with formal, objective metrics (4.0)
 - Measured success mostly by subjective, analytical feedback (2.0)
 - Little evidence that success was measured in any way (0.0)
5. How would you describe the "lessons learned" from this challenge?
 - Insightful, strategic, applicable to broad range of situations (4.0)
 - Lessons are mostly technical and apply only to company itself (2.0)
 - Few insights gained from site development experience (0.0)

■ Suggestions and comments by the judges:

Judge #1:

1. Wow. Best support site by far.
2. Make it easier to personalize or navigate to foreign language sites. Have a “select a location/language” button.

Judge #2:

This is a good support web site and I am sure it was quite a challenge to integrate so much functionality into one site. And the latter shows: Too much gets in the way of getting the job done effectively and efficiently. There is too much screen clutter (graphics that are not to the point for a support web site), too many links on a page, and the most important information or links are not presented in the most obvious place (like on top of the page).

The site also needs better flow. I was surprised (see below) how my choice for a certain product was not reflected properly in the search engines and the additional links provided on the following pages (does the ██████████ projector have a Windows operating system ??).

The most important part of a support web site (we judge more on the technical support features than the service support features) are the KB, search engine and other trouble shooting features. These features do not always work well on the ██████████ site and are not presented with the importance they deserve. You might want to evaluate the technology you are using, its implementation and integration in the web site.

In short: good support web site, but over-engineered and the implementation lacks effective execution. Considering the size of the project and your commitment to a great support web site I think that through simplification, a better information architecture, some serious usability studies and improvements in the KB search and articles, you can take this site to the next level and (at least in my opinion) be one of the Ten Best again.

Some notes I wrote while judging the site:

Esthetically the site is well-designed and I like the graphics, but you use them too much—in particular the page-specific banner. I happened to judge your site while away from the office on a not too large screen. You use so much space with the page header and the banner that pretty much all the meat of the page needs to be scrolled to. The banner graphics are also a little too cute (people laying on a couch and such), especially for the IT Prof profile that I was logged in with. Your heavy use of screen real-estate led to a real problem, the “Software and Peripherals” menu of the navbar is so long that it did not fit on the 800*600 screen (ok, the pc I was using might be the last one that has this max resolution).

The UI is not always consistent. E.g.: product selection on the “Product Guides” pages is done differently from “Upgrades.”

You definitely do a great job getting lots of information to your customers and integrating many different support needs and resources into one site. I’m sure this was a challenge and I think

sometimes the wish to present the customer with the full enchilada gets in the way of a clear UI. E.g.: when I go into the Troubleshooting section, after I selected the product, I'm presented with so much on the screen that it is hard to find where the next step is for entering the KB or Troubleshooter. I would much rather see the search-box on top, and underneath that a list of top KB documents (rather than a link to it). And that list needs to be for the product I selected.

I selected a [REDACTED] Projector as my product and was surprised to be presented with a link the Microsoft web site and a link called "Hints and Tips: Find step-by-step instructions for solving general PC issues". I ran into more of these confusing links—for example the top of the Troubleshooting page listing three pull-downs that, I found out, are for selecting another product, but why put that on top, it is confusing. The thing I want to do now needs to be on top: dive into the KB.

Does your search engine take into account what product I selected? On top of the page I can see that I have selected a Projector [REDACTED], when I search the KB on "Crash" I get all kinds of non-projector related articles. Similarly, I am at a loss why I first select my product, then get a page that confirms that I indeed selected that product, but when I click on the link to Troubleshooting I need to choose the product again.

I really love your integration with the Microsoft KB and I'm sure it will help you to deflect many calls and emails to your callcenters.

To go through the Solutions Network for the [REDACTED], I needed to select an operating system—why ??? I decided to go a few steps back and select a Latitude instead. Much to my surprise, when I navigated to the Troubleshooting again, it still thought I was looking for information about the [REDACTED]. I went through the process again but still the Troubleshooter was thinking about my [REDACTED].

Your KB articles can be improved with clear descriptions of the problem, the root cause and solution. Graphics can help to get the message across more easily.

Your search engine does not really seem to be state of the art and "Advanced Search" is not more than a link to the www.d[REDACTED] search engine (making it only more difficult to look for a specific support article).

The Troubleshooting Wizard is not really a wizard, I had expected some interactive tool that was going to ask me intelligent questions and guide me to the solution but it does not do much of that. But it does do things like ask for the operating system of an LCD TV (why did I get an article presented about that anyway, since I told the Wizard that I had a [REDACTED]?).

Judge #3:

[REDACTED] is doing a superlative job providing customer service and support to a wide range of customers who have a very broad range of questions and familiarity with the site and computers in general. My suggestions:

1. I was surprised that [REDACTED] chose not to use the spoken word as part of the tour of their site. I pioneered the use of flash technology as a training tool on a technical support site several years ago. We had many repeat visits by providing aural, written and graphical representations of the information we were training.

2. It is not apparent from the site, but in independent (anecdotal) conversations with several colleagues, I am getting the sense that ■■■ is relying too much on its website to provide excellent customer service. It seems to be harder and harder to get outside the standard process to get a person to consider, react to, and solve a customer issue. For example, ■■■ and Microsoft decided to stop including PowerPoint as part of several standard offerings. My colleague purchased a system at the moment of the change. He claimed (and ultimately won the point from ■■■) that he was offered PowerPoint with his system, but when it arrived, PowerPoint was not on the manifest. It took him a number of hours over several weeks to bring this issue to the attention of someone who was willing to break away from the standard process to solve the problem.

Sorry, that's only two suggestions for enhancements. Great job on the site over the last several years.

■ Some Helpful Suggestions

Some very good site submissions lost points this year for shortcomings that have little to do with the overall quality of the sites themselves—password problems, missing pages in the submission packages, poorly written essays, etc. Some of these things we're able to catch and fix, but not always.

1. Passwords: Many sites are password protected, and we request temporary passwords so that the judges can see what a customer sees. Surprisingly often, there are typos in the passwords, wrong URLs, accounts that were never set up, etc. In a few other cases, we've been given no password at all. It only takes a moment to *test* the password info that you supply on the entry form, and it's really important to do so.

(If we can't resolve a password problem with reasonable efforts, our instructions to the judges are that they should score any inaccessible features as if those features didn't exist. That produces a lot of goose-egg scores, but we don't see any alternative.)

2. The "challenges" essay: An important part of the submission materials is an essay that's supposed to discuss the major challenges that the site developers had to overcome, and the lessons they learned. Some of the essays we get for this section are little more than marketing fluff—"We worked long and hard to make our customers happy, and they love us for it!" This approach usually results in a very low score in a section that represents 20% of the total points a site can receive.

The purpose of this essay is to help the judges understand the thinking behind each site—unique customer requirements, how the site fits into corporate strategy, etc. The essay also helps level the playing field among companies by giving points for creative problem-solving, innovation, insight, customer feedback, and other factors that are not as constrained by a company's site development budget. If you leave the judges in the dark about these issues, you'll probably lose points in this section *and* they may not clearly understand what you've done in other scoring categories.