



Portals: Rabbit Holes to Grand Gateways

Internet portal, what does that mean?

Our first dimension or measure of an Internet portal deals with the site's focus. This can range from a wide, general interest to being very specific and narrow in scope.

Some purists might assert that a portal must provide a customizable interface allowing users to tailor their Web site desktop to fit interests, needs and personality. Many enterprise and administrative portals do this. For example, when you revisit Amazon (<http://amazon.com>), customized offerings are presented "just for you." If you would like to see and learn more about this portal type, you can visit Portal Webliography (<http://www.infomotions.com/portals/>) by E.L. Morgan. As the language of Internet evolves, the portal label has been liberally applied. Disagreement has arisen and debate over the real definition has become heated.

For purposes of this article, we have chosen to take a broader view of Internet portals and to view them as Web sites that provide a "gateway" to the Internet for the interests of a specific group of individuals. Portal developers can range from the enthusiastic indi-

vidual, to the dedicated small group with an entrepreneurial vision, and the larger professional design and development groups with broad goals and resources. We see a wide spectrum of possibilities and will explore the continuum of portal options as to their focus, flexibility and fees. But, be reminded that Internet portals can vary from the narrow rabbit-like openings designed for focused interests and information to the grand gateways that lay down a "red carpet" treatment.



Focus

Our first dimension or measure of an Internet portal deals with the site's focus. This can range from a wide, general interest to being very specific and narrow in scope. On the general end are Web sites designed for all Net users, such as StartSpot (<http://www.startspot.com>), that helps people quickly and easily locate the best information by topic. Every state has its general portal to government-related information and resources including My California (<http://www.state.ca.us>). For federal government, there is FirstGov



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(<http://www.firstgov.gov>) with access to all 20,000 U.S. government sites. Examples of portal sites for more specific interests include Web English Teacher (<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/>) that aims at providing the best K-12 English and language arts teaching resources while Sports Media (<http://www.sports-media.org/>) offers links to lesson plans and resources in physical education. There are also several general education portals such as Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators (<http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/>) and Education World (<http://www.educationworld.com/>) with its comprehensive resources, articles, curriculum materials and search index linking to related off-site content. Other focused portals include sites like GeoInvest (<http://invest.geoportals.com/>) whose goal is to connect users with

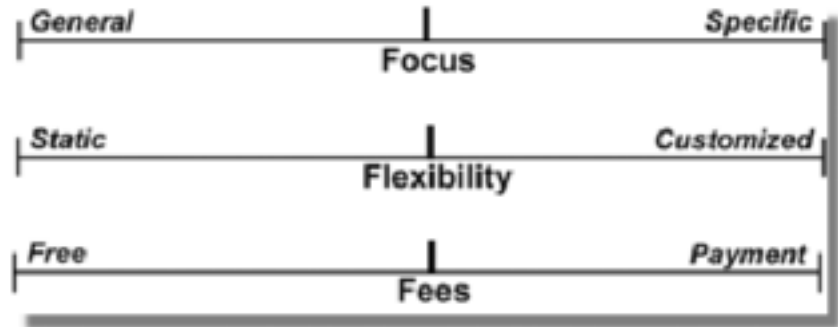
the best online investment resources, eNature (<http://www.enature.com/>) offering searchable field guides for nearly 5,000 plant and animal species, or SpaceDaily (<http://www.spacedaily.com>) with comprehensive coverage of space technology and related information. Our main point is that there are Web portals to fit everyone's interests and needs.



Flexibility

The second portal dimension is site flexibility and the options vary from static offerings to customizable interfaces. Here we can cite our own eduScapes Web site (<http://eduscapes.com>) as an example of a successful static portal. The Web site, designed for teachers and learners of all ages, is a comprehensive site for education and technology resources and is frequently revised, updated and added too, but the user interfaces are static. Every visitor, if they arrive by the same pathway and at the same time, sees the exact same thing. The opposite extremity in this portal dimension is characterized by Web sites that permit users to select several of their interface components, putting the control of some parts of the desktop in their hands. Visitors to My MSN (<http://my.msn.com/>) are offered an array of choices to fashion the site to their preferences.

Many professional organizations, universities and specialized libraries have developed Web portals for its members and patrons. Often, they restrict access to their membership, faculty and/or student body. You can view the introduction to such a Web portal at My Library from the Los Alamos National Laboratory (<http://lib-www.lanl.gov/lww/mylibweb.htm>). The variety and degree of options may vary among Web sites of this type, but several sites do offer custom interface choices. Alternatives to these customizable interfaces can be the provision of quality site maps, development of excellent navigation tools for moving within a Web site, the inclusion of a quality search engine for quick location of specific site content, and an in-depth indexing system that links users to content by subject, topic, author or other lists. These steps can make a site more intuitive and open to visitors. It also helps to highlight or point out the newest resources, the "hot topics," ongoing project updates, and seasonal information at the site.



Fees

The last portal dimension that we consider is the site's fee basis. Here the range is from a free, open site to fee-based options. In the early years of Internet technology, all or most Web sites were free. In recent years, many have moved to imposing some type of required payment for access. In many instances, a Web portal will include varied options such as a free portion available to all visitors and a premium section requiring membership or payment. BigChalk (<http://www.bigchalk.com>) and Lightspan, Inc. (<http://lightspan.com/>) are examples of popular portals that were once free and are now fee-based. Some, like RiverDeep Interactive Learning (<http://riverdeep.com/>), offer a 30-day trial membership.

As educators and instructional technology specialists, our focus has leaned toward examples related to teaching and learning, but there are Web portals for all sectors of the community-using Internet. In many cases, you have several choices and can select the best site from several. For example, if you are just getting into genealogy, you should first examine Cyndi's List (<http://www.cyndislist.com/>), Ancestry.com (<http://www.ancestry.com/>), Family Search (<http://www.familysearch.org/>), RootsWeb (<http://www.rootsweb.com/>), and Genealogy.com (<http://www.genealogy.com/>). There's a gateway for everyone—from auto repair (<http://www.trustmymechanic.com/>) to driving a school bus (<http://www.schoolbusinfo.org/>), parenting (<http://www.tnpc.com/>), woodworking (<http://www.woodworking.com/>), and a portal for understanding how just

about everything works (<http://www.howstuffworks.com/>). If it's the first site you check, the location where you find the most useful stuff, or one where you return time and again—then you have found a Web portal for you.



About the authors

Annette Lamb and Larry Johnson, a husband and wife team, live, work and travel in a motor home complete with a two-way satellite dish. As former schoolteachers and library media specialists, college professor and administrator, the two conduct workshops, seminars, and presentations, develop Web materials, and write and publish textbooks. Lamb and Johnson have put their PhDs in instructional technology to work for schools and universities across the United States and Canada—and sometimes beyond! Annette recently rejoined faculty ranks as visiting professor in the School of Library and Information Services for Indiana University Purdue University in Indianapolis (IUPUI). She teaches all of her classes at a distance. You can learn more about them at <http://eduscapes.com/about.htm>. ■

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