Our 2011 Online Support Rankings & Ratings report shows why the biggest aren't always the best

Marty Gruhn

For the most part, I'd rather have a root canal than use most support Websites.

Search for information and you end up with a list of a bazillion documents with truncated descriptions that read like Sanskrit.

Want to take a different path? Try ferreting your product out of a laundry list of every product the company ever made.

Or try the "follow our logical links" scenario—where you end up drilling to China.

At the end of all of this wonderfulness is the real insult. Support content that either requires an engineering degree to understand—or a wad of general purpose instructions that dance around the problem and miss the issue by a country mile.

Finally, don't get me started about most site's support program content. (You know, the stuff that explains why you have to pay to play.) First, you can't find it. When you do, it's packed with so many superlatives you need a dictionary to figure it out.

Honestly, you'd think support teams would get it after doodling on the Web for 16 years.

Drum Roll, Please

Given my opinion of support on the Web, I was surprised how much the 2011 support evaluations perfectly reflected my opinions of these support sites. Most of the sites we evaluated deliver half of the content, features & capabilities deployed on best-in-class support sites. With the exception of four sites— Cisco.com, Symantec.com, IBM.com and the IBM Software Group site—every site's usability misses the Good Practice mark. I'd probably throw a bone to Dell.com, EMC.com, and Microsoft.com for coming close—but the rest are simply not up to snuff.

I've just finished putting the finishing touches on our new 2011 online support rankings and ratings report which published today. Here's some of the more interesting things in this new report.

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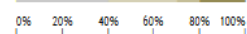
IBM, Dell and HP have all the goodies

IBM.com's, Dell.com's and HP.com's monster-size support sites handed them the top rankings this year. If you want to create a world-class support size packed with every bell and whistle, you don't have to look much further than here. Among the players, Dell.com is the biggest (added three new features this year), but IBM.com puts its goodies together to better effect (its usability ranks third; Dell.com ranks fifth).

This brings me to the real tail that wags the dog.

siteIQ eBusiness Index Rankings
Features & Capabilities | Online Support (public access)

2010 Ranking	2011 Ranking	Ranking Trend	New Features & Capabilities	Movers: Content & Features	Communities Operated by	Features Provided	Features & Capabilities Score		Good/Best Practices
2	1	▲	3	▲	Dell.com ◆	82		73.87%	•
1	2	▼	0		HP.com	81		72.97%	•
1	2	▼	0		IBM.com	81		72.97%	•
3	3	▪	2	▲	CA.com	63		56.76%	
7	3	▲	6	▲	Cisco.com	63		56.76%	
3	4	▼	0		IBM Software	61		54.95%	
5	4	▲	2	▲	Microsoft.com	61		54.95%	
4	5	▼	0		Intel.com	60		54.05%	
6	5	▲	2	▲	Symantec.com	60		54.05%	
6	6	▪	0		Juniper.net	58		52.25%	
8	7	▲	1	▲	Oracle.com	56		50.45%	
9	8	▲	0		Adobe.com	53		47.75%	
10	9	▲	0		Nortel.com	49		44.14%	
11	10	▲	0		SAS.com	45		40.54%	
12	10	▲	2	▲	Brocade.com	45		40.54%	
13	11	▲	3	▲	EMC.com	39		35.14%	
14	12	▲	1	▲	SAP.com	25		22.52%	
15	13	▲	0		CDW.com	21		18.92%	
16	14	▲	0		Newegg.com	11		9.91%	
17	15	▲	0		Insight.com	10		9.01%	
					Average Score	51		55.94%	

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Features & Capabilities Leader ◆   Good • Best ●

2011   source | siteIQ Website Best Practices Group

Cisco.com proves an important point

When usability is the issue, we've always said that small can be mighty – and Cisco.com proves the point. Cisco.com's support site took first place usability honors—which is a testament to all of the hard work we've seen on the site this year. If you are a siteIntelligence Case Studies Library subscriber, you can see Cisco.com's best-in-class innovations here: https://siteiq.centraldesktop.com/sirc/blog/1088332/view/bytag/cisco (Category: support, Tag: cisco). (Have your login info handy).

From a usability perspective, Cisco.com has the most complete roster of support information that is easy to find. To see why, take Cisco.com's site search engine for a spin and pay attention to post search filtering capabilities. Then check out the support zone's fly-out navigational panel. If you want to learn why these matter, check out Cisco.com's best practice case studies here: https://siteiq.centraldesktop.com/sirc/blog/1088332/view/bytag/cisco. (You guessed it: subscription & login required.)

siteIQ eBusiness Index Rankings
Usability & Effectiveness | Online Support (public access)

2010 Ranking	2011 Ranking	Ranking Trend	Usability Points: Gains/ Losses	Movers: Usability (Points)	Communities Operated by	Points Awarded	Usability &Effectiveness Score		Good/Best Practices
1	1		2	▲	Cisco.com ◆	712		71.20%	•
1	2	▼	0		Symantec.com	710		71.00%	•
2	3	▼	0		IBM.com	705		70.50%	•
3	4	▼	0		IBM Software	700		70.00%	•
4	5	▼	2	▲	Dell.com	682		68.20%	
4	6	▼	0		EMC.com	680		68.00%	
4	6	▼	0		Microsoft.com	680		68.00%	
5	7	▼	0		HP.com	675		67.50%	
5	7	▼	0		Juniper.net	675		67.50%	
5	7	▼	0		SAS.com	675		67.50%	
6	8	▼	0		Brocade.com	670		67.00%	
7	9	▼	0		Adobe.com	655		65.50%	
10	10		0		Nortel.com	650		65.00%	
8	11	▼	0		CA.com	630		63.00%	
9	12	▼	0		Oracle.com	595		59.50%	
11	13	▼	0		CDW.com	535		53.50%	
12	14	▼	0		Intel.com	520		52.00%	
13	15	▼	10	▲	SAP.com	290		29.00%	
14	16	▼	0		Insight.com	125		12.50%	
15	17	▼	0		Newegg.com	80		8.00%	
					Average Score	582		58.22%	

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Usability & Effectiveness Leader ◆   Good • Best ●

2011   source | siteIQ Website Best Practices Group

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Not so fast. The winners should cancel their victory lap.

So where are the pleasant surprises? Put Brocade.com, EMC.com, and Symantec.com on that list.

–   Brocade.com has the most complete & thorough support _program_ information (a **Best** Practice) — and does the best job of encouraging visitors to take the next step.

–   EMC.com's support program information is easier to find—and does the best job of providing program contact information.

–   Symantec.com delivers the best support click streams, which generated the highest Good Practice rating for all of its hard work.

siteIQ eBusiness Index Rankings
Usability & Effectiveness | Online Support (public access)

Is support program information complete & thorough?

2010 Ranking	2011 Ranking	Ranking Trend	Usability Points: Gains/ Losses	Movers: Usability (Points)	Communities Operated by:	Points Awarded	Usability &Effectiveness Score		Good/Best Practices
1	1		0		Brocade.com ◆	80		80.00%	●
3	2	▲	0		Cisco.com	75		75.00%	•
2	2		0		Microsoft.com	75		75.00%	•
4	3	▲	2	▲	Dell.com	72		72.00%	•
4	4		0		EMC.com	70		70.00%	•
4	4		0		HP.com	70		70.00%	•
4	4		0		IBM Software	70		70.00%	•
4	4		0		IBM.com	70		70.00%	•
4	4		0		Juniper.net	70		70.00%	•
4	4		0		Oracle.com	70		70.00%	•
4	4		0		Symantec.com	70		70.00%	•
5	5		0		Adobe.com	65		65.00%	
5	5		0		CA.com	65		65.00%	
5	5		0		Nortel.com	65		65.00%	
5	5		0		SAS.com	65		65.00%	
6	6		0		CDW.com	55		55.00%	
7	7		0		Intel.com	50		50.00%	
8	8		0		SAP.com	40		40.00%	
9	9		0		Insight.com	25		25.00%	
10	10		0		Newegg.com	0		0.00%	
					Average Score	54		61.10%	

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Usability Leader ◆   Good Practice ▬ Best Practice ▬   Good • Best ●

2011

source | siteIQ Website Best Practices Group

And what about the rest of the pack? You know, those other 13 support Websites on the evaluation list? Let's just say there was another interesting surprise.

Earth to enterprise: what are you thinking?

With the exception of IBM Software Group, enterprise software sites need to up their usability game. From my perspective, their rankings are downright embarrassing.

CA.com ranks 11th, Oracle.com ranks 12th and SAP.com brings up the back of the pack in 15th place. The only support sites that are worse than these triplets are reseller sites (CDW.com, Insight.com and Newegg.com) –and they don't provide much, if any, support on their sites. Yikes!

So how does IBM Software Group stay out of this industry ditch? IBM.com's highly integrated support portal is the wind beneath its wings. To see why this portal delivers a bit of online support nirvana, check out our case study in the Library: https://siteiq.centraldesktop.com/sirc/blogentry/5334686/. (Yep, you'll need that pesky login information again).

Dell.com support is really a tale of two cities.

Finally, no analysis is complete without taking a look at the conventional wisdom corner; in this case the prevailing belief that Dell.com operates the biggest and best online support site. This may (or may not) be true behind the Dell Premier firewall—but it's a mixed bag if you are on the public side of the equation.

When the numbers are rolled up, Dell.com's support zone's content, features & capabilities rank #1, but its usability slips into fifth place—right behind the IBM Software Group site. As important, it only ranks first in one out of ten usability categories (a Good Practice for support zone logic). Other than that, Dell.com persistently ranks in second and third place.

The bottom line

So there you have it. The roster of winners based on 138 things support sites should provide–plus ten ways they should help users achieve their objectives. For the top five, I send hardy congratulations. For the rest of the pack, roll up your sleeves. There's lots of work ahead.

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IBM.com's, Dell.com's and HP.com's monster-size support sites handed them the top rankings this year. If you want to create a world-class support size packed with every bell and whistle, you don't have to look much further than here.

eBusiness Index Websites

Overall Category Performance | Online Support (public access) — **2011**
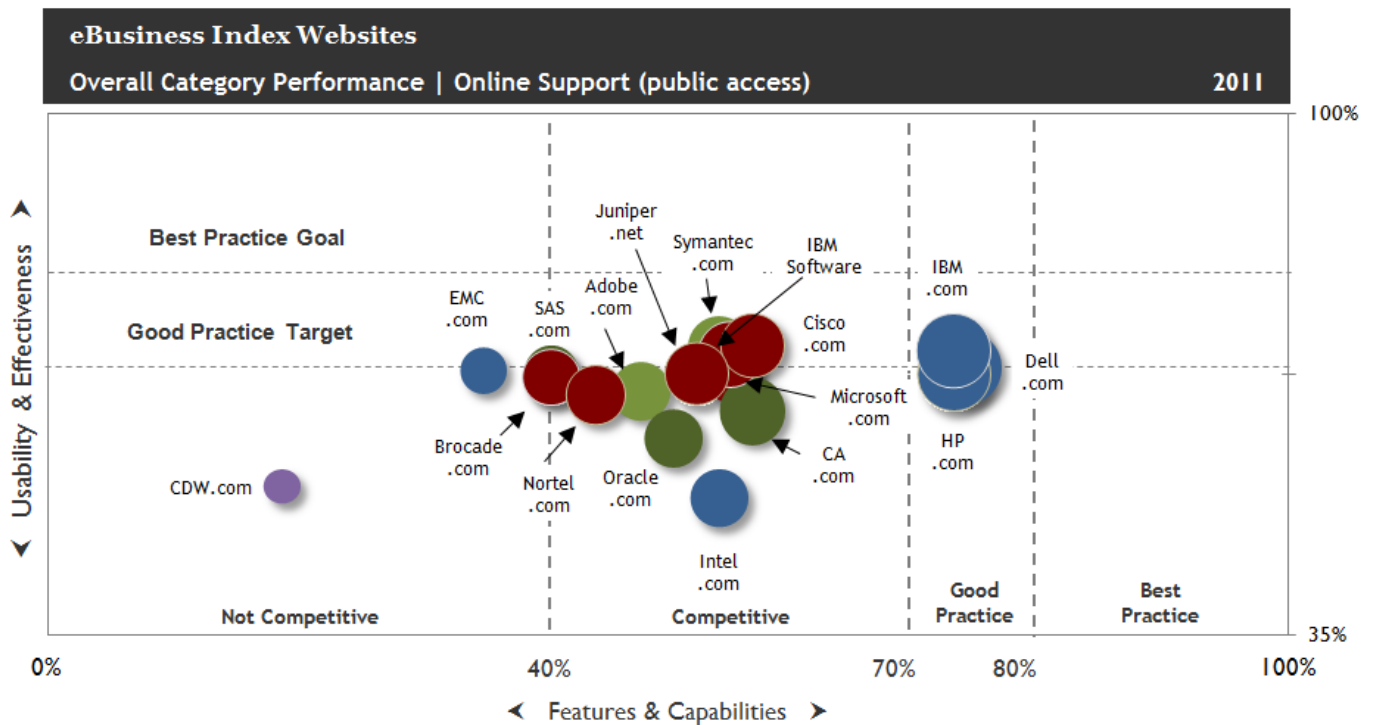
source | siteIQ Website Best Practices Group

Additional results, rankings & ratings are available in **siteIQ's 2011 Online Support siteIQ eBusiness Index Rankings Report**. Subscribers can access this report in the siteIntelligence Case Studies Library at www.siteiq.net/client-login (log-in credentials required). Non-subscribers can purchase and download this report from our Website at www.siteiq.net.

Symantec.com delivers the best support click streams, which generated this highest Good Practice rating for all of its hard work.

siteIQ eBusiness Index Rankings
Usability & Effectiveness | Online Support (public access)

Is the click stream to support information reasonable?

2010 Ranking	2011 Ranking	Ranking Trend	Usability Points: Gains/ Losses	Movers: Usability (Points)	Communities Operated by:	Points Awarded	Usability &Effectiveness Score		Good/Best Practices
1	1		0		Symantec.com ◆	75		75.00%	•
2	2		0		Cisco.com	70		70.00%	•
2	2		0		EMC.com	70		70.00%	•
2	2		0		Juniper.net	70		70.00%	•
2	2		0		Oracle.com	70		70.00%	•
2	2		0		SAS.com	70		70.00%	•
3	3		0		Brocade.com	65		65.00%	
3	3		0		Dell.com	65		65.00%	
3	3		0		HP.com	65		65.00%	
3	3		0		IBM Software	65		65.00%	
3	3		0		IBM.com	65		65.00%	
3	3		0		Microsoft.com	65		65.00%	
4	4		0		Adobe.com	60		60.00%	
4	4		0		Nortel.com	60		60.00%	
5	5		0		CA.com	55		55.00%	
6	6		0		CDW.com	50		50.00%	
6	6		0		Intel.com	50		50.00%	
7	7		10	▲	SAP.com	20		20.00%	
8	8		0		Insight.com	10		10.00%	
9	9		0		Newegg.com	5		5.00%	
					Average Score	56		56.25%	

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Usability Leader ◆   Good Practice ▪ Best Practice ▪   Good • Best ●

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To identify and track best Website practices in the technology industry, siteIQ sponsors and operates the siteIQ eBusiness Index. Launched in 2000, this ongoing, eleven year-old study evaluates the Websites operated by leading technology companies, and audits up to 30 additional Websites that are design and B2B innovators. These annual Website evaluation results provide insights into new requirements, competitive leaders, Website trends and best practices across the IT and related industries.

Industry	Company	B2B Innovators & Watch List Companies include
Business Software	Adobe Microsoft Symantec	Apple.com [I] Acer.com (gateway.com) AutoDesk.com A&E Network Bain.com Bearingpoint.com Capgemini.com Citrix.com Ey.com Luxury car sites, including Jaguar.com[I] Mercedes-benz.com[I] Netapp.com Nintendo.com[I] Nokia.com[I] Novell.com Salesforce.com Sony.com[I] USA Network.com WebEx.com
Enterprise Software	CA IBM Software Oracle SAP SAS	
Enterprise Systems	Dell Computer EMC Hewlett-Packard IBM Intel Oracle.com	
Network Systems	Brocade Cisco Systems Juniper Networks Level 3 Communications	
Reseller/Channel Partners	CDW Insight Newegg	
Professional Services/Systems Integrators	Accenture Deloitte U.S. IBM Global Services	**I = Design and interactivity inspiration**

These results are based upon information believed to be accurate and reliable. Opinions expressed reflect our judgment at the time and are subject to change.

The siteIQ Website Best Practices Group is an independent research company that conducts detailed Website Benchmark evaluations and provides expert analysis of Website best practices, trends and requirements in the IT industry. Through its research, consulting and Website assessment programs, siteIQ helps its global clients establish competitive and industry leadership on the Web. For more information about our reports and services go to www.siteiq.net.

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About siteIQ

The siteIQ Website Best Practices Group is an independent best practices research & consulting company that conducts detailed Website evaluations, and provides expert analysis of Website best practices, trends, and requirements in the computer industry.

Through its best practice case studies, reports, and custom Website evaluation services, siteIQ helps its global clients establish competitive and industry leadership on the Web.

siteIQ sponsors and operates the siteIQ eBusiness Index, which provides semi-annual rankings of the best Websites in the computer industry.

Since 1996, we have conducted over 2,500 Website evaluations for global Web teams managing the largest consumer and B2B-class Websites in the technology industry.

The siteIQ Difference

To accurately compare a Website's performance to competitive sites and current industry best practices requires one thing. A highly-structured and documented "level playing field" that measures every Website equally — and constantly evolves as Website requirements change.

This is the role of the siteIQ Best Practices Benchmarks.

These benchmarks identify and measure over 1,200 types of content, features & capabilities found on the most successful Websites in the computer industry.

Contain up to 119 metrics that measure a site's usability & effectiveness from the visitor's point of view.

Our evaluations analyze the full spectrum of a Website. From design to marketing to Web 2.0 and social media. From e-selling to e-commerce to customer support.

Detailed results pinpoint a Website's real strengths and challenges. How it ranks compared to competitive sites. The facts Web teams need to prioritize activities and plan for future investments.

For more information about siteIQ Website best practice research, programs, syndicated reports, and insights, visit our Website at www.siteiq.net.