



Taking Portals Personally: A Design Review

A comparison of personalization features provided by MSN, Netscape, Yahoo, Excite and Lycos

By Harris Kravatz

"Make everything as simple as possible, but no simpler."

---Albert Einstein

While working with a team of web designers on a recent consulting gig, I noticed that each designer had a personalized portal home page, but each was based at a different portal. I wondered how my co-workers had made the decision of which portal to choose, since the basic features of each seemed about the same. I decided to compare the different personalization functions for these portals to determine which had the best features.

I define personalization as the ability for a web user to customize the content and layout of their own portal web page. It is one of the most successful ways of increasing traffic at portal sites today, and helps to ensure return customers. Typical content options include: local and national news, weather, stocks, sports scores, horoscopes, and favorite links.

Personalization also has navigational value. For many people, browsing the Web is still a slow experience. Personalizing a portal home page is one way to get much of the daily content they're seeking in one location.

For this comparison, I chose the five portals used by the design team members. First, I studied the most common features offered by the portals, which I've listed in the [Common Features Table](#) at the end of this article. These features range from the name a portal site calls its page, to how many clicks it takes to select your favorite sports team.

I also looked at where on the page the personalized information starts. After all, if I go to the trouble of personalizing a page, I want to see my information as soon as I display the page—I don't want to have to scroll to see it.

What I found varied quite a bit. I looked at the design of each portal's personalization features, and discuss my findings and impressions in a design review. I've also included a short list of tips to keep in mind if you're designing personalized content.

Design Review

1. MSN <http://home.microsoft.com/>

The screenshot shows the MSN Personalize page. At the top left is the MSN logo. To its right is a progress bar labeled "estimated download time at 28.8 Kbps (in seconds)" with a scale from 0 to 90. Below the logo is the word "Personalize" in a large, bold, serif font. A navigation bar contains five buttons: "msn.com home", "personalize" (highlighted), "web directory", "microsoft.com", and "help". Below this is a section titled "your page" with a sub-section "your selections". To the right of "your selections" are three buttons: "update", "reset", and "exit". The "your selections" section contains a list of categories: "stock quotes", "sports", "thing of the day", "local info", "business", "your links", "microsoft info", and "news". To the right of this list are two large vertical arrows (up and down) for reordering. Below the list is a note: "Select a category, and then use the arrows to move it up or down." To the right of the "your selections" section are several content areas, each with a header and a "show on MSN.COM home page" checkbox. The "search" section has radio buttons for "MSN", "AltaVista", "Infoseek", "Lycos", and "Snap". The "today" section has a checkbox for "Get top stories, coolest downloads, best deals on MSN every day". The "e-mail" section has a checkbox for "MSN Hotmail". The "news" section has checkboxes for "MSBET", "MSNBC News", "New York Times", "Fox News", "TIME Daily", "Slate", and "OnNow Web Events". The "stock quotes" section has a text input field containing "AMZN,AOL,CSCO,DELL,EBAY,FSI" and checkboxes for "Dow Jones" and "AMEX". At the bottom left, there are links for "Troubleshooting", "Lost your personal settings? Click here.", and "Problems personalizing your MSN.COM home page? Our".

Figure 1. MSN personalization page

The Microsoft network personalization features were the simplest of all to customize. The design of these features is intuitive, clean and simple. To personalize the page, you select the personalize button at the top left of the page. This displays a single page for selecting content and layout (Figure 1). To add content on your page, you simply select or deselect a check box on the personalization page to add or remove that category. Reordering of content is also intuitive and easy. The list of selected categories is located at the top left of the page. You simply select a category and then move it to the desired position using the large up and down arrows to the right of the list. To edit a specific content area, you simply click on the Edit button on the category header.

To ensure the user knows where they are, the title is displayed in large type at the top of the page. The personalize button on the button strip at the top is also highlighted. Large sans-serif fonts ensure the pages easy to read. After selecting content and layout options, you simply select the update button at the top. The update button, along with the reset and exit buttons, are located above the content options in their own frame, and are always visible. Adding content means simply clicking a check box and then clicking the update button. The update happens quickly, and you are returned to your personalized page. Additional features included easy to find links to a web index page and a help page. White space is used effectively and the layout is pleasing to the eye.

While being the easiest to customize, MSN.com does not offer the ability to specify a greeting, choose colors or specify multiple columns. However, I am a big proponent of keeping it simple, and they certainly do that.

2. Netscape <http://www.netscape.com/>

Netscape Netcenter Tuesday - March 23, 1999 - 3:30 PM

You are here: [Home](#) > My Netscape - Harris

My Netscape - Harris

[Add Channels](#) [Preferences](#) [Help](#) [Sign out](#)

[Customize Channel](#) [Minimize Channel](#) [Maximize Channel](#) [Remove Channel](#)

Welcome, harriskravatz

New! [Add Free Calendar](#)
New! [Local News](#)
New! [Local Events](#)
New! [Travel](#)
Need help? Try the [FAQ](#).
[Make This Your Home Page](#)

Sports

TODAY
YESTERDAY
National Basketball Association

Atlanta at	80	E
New York	71	
LA Lakers at	96	E
Dallas	93	

[NFL](#) [NHL](#) [NBA](#) [MLB](#) [Golf](#)
[College Hoops](#) [Auto Racing](#)
[Soccer](#) [More...](#)

Horoscopes

Cancer

[See all signs](#) [Rate your romance](#)

If you can avoid traveling today, it's probably a good idea. You don't have to worry about danger, but delays could certainly mess up your plans. You might arrive at your destination just to find out that what you needed was where you left. If you're going shopping, let your fingers do the walking first.

Gemini

[See all signs](#) [Rate your romance](#)

You're pretty smart, but sometimes you tend to get a little nervous. That could happen today, if you're thrust into a position of authority. If you find yourself tongue tied and confused, just focus on your overall objective.

Stocks

SYMBOL	PRICE	CHANGE
My Portfolio		
FSMKX	90.13	-0.15
INTC	114.56	-0.56
AOL	121.50	-8.50
DELL	35.69	-2.19
CSCD	100.31	-2.44
MSFT	166.56	-6.25

Portfolio Total: 0

Symbol Name

Quotes delayed 20 mins.
* Indicates Hi or Lo movement.
[Disclaimer](#)

Netcenter Apps

[Check WebMail](#)

Figure 2: My Netscape personalized page

Netscape, in my opinion, has the most pleasing layout of all the portals. I like the way that colored boxes are used to group the content areas and enhance readability. The page contains three columns and loads of information, but it doesn't seem crowded. Of all the personalized portal pages, Netscape's provides the most information within the visible page without scrolling.

Netscape uses the verb Customize to describe the personalization action. Customization pages are well laid out. They have a unique look to them, more like a dialog box and less like just another web page. Each page has a title at the top. A customization page allows you to select both the content and the layout of a specific content area. Layout is specified using two drop-down lists: one to select the order and one to select the column. (You can also change the layout of the entire page through the Preferences link). Interaction is intuitive. One thing that I don't like is the design of the preview feature, which makes the pages overly long. In the time it takes to re-display the preview page, you could be seeing the real page. In addition, there are two Save buttons: Save and Save and preview. This could cause confusion. Does Save and preview take me back to the My Netscape page? Contrast this with the preview feature provided by Excite (see #3 below), which is less confusing, and uses space more effectively.

Netscape customization pages take advantage of the standard side-by-side list technique, allowing items to be moved between lists. They do it well, except when a list item moves down instead of left or right, which occurs on the Customize Stocks page. The page contains two lists side by side at the top: Add stocks and Add indexes. The user chooses an item from one or both of these, then clicks the add button, which builds their list below. The items move down, but the lists are horizontally aligned. It would have been better to design the page in the same manner as the other pages of this type to reduce confusion. Labeling the lists would also aid usability.

Content area headers contain three graphic buttons used to modify the content area. However, the buttons have no labels and it is difficult to figure out what each button does. The page contains a key at top, but it scrolls out of view when you scroll down to see more information.

3. Excite <http://www.excite.com/>

excite Personalize My Colors! [Help](#)

Helpful Tips: 1. Choose My Colors
Choose colors from options below or enter your own.

Background color (see color key at right for help)

White	Aqua	Tan	Grey
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Peach	Violet	Lime Green	Brown
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

For advanced users:
Enter hex number for another color: ex. FFFFFFF (White)
[look up hex number](#)

Header color

Yellow	Dark Red	Dark Blue	Orange
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Green	Grey	Aqua	Purple
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

For advanced users:
Enter hex number for another color: ex. FFCC00 (Yellow)
[look up hex number](#)

Text header color

Color Key

Background color: Search
Header color: Search
Text header color: Yellow Pages, Book, People Find, Flights, Sh, Email
Visited link color: Flights
Link color: Flights

Helpful Tips: 2. Preview My Colors
Click the Redraw button to see how your colors will be applied.
Submit below when finished.

My Stuff [Change](#)
Example of personalized content on the front page with some links and some visited links in the text.

Figure 3. Excite Personalize My Colors page

The Excite personalization features are simple and attractive. To personalize, you select the content, layout or colors links within the personalization manager box. Each customization page is intuitive, placing a single task on a single page. The use of colored headers and group boxes make the pages easy to read. Numbering of steps makes these pages easy to use. Submit and Cancel buttons, standard on every customization page, provide consistent interaction, no need to read each button and think what does this button do? White space is used effectively to organize the page content. Each page has a title that describes its purpose.

The color selection feature is particularly well-designed (Figure 3). It offers a lot of function, but is still simple to use. The color feature supports both novice and advanced users. Novice users choose colors by selecting radio buttons, and if you're an advanced user, there is a text box to specify hex values for page content. The color key and preview features are easy to understand and don't take up a lot of real estate.

To edit a specific content area, you simply select the Change link on content header. This is the only choice on the header.

The only area where I felt the design could be improved is in the layout function, which could benefit from a more visual technique. The user is required to type in a sequence number in a text box associated with the content area. This number is used to specify both the order in which the content appears and the column it appears in. A more visual technique, for example, list boxes with buttons to reorder items, would be more effective.

4. Lycos <http://www.lycos.com/>



Figure 4. Lycos Personalize Content and Layout page

To personalize content and layout, Lycos provides a drag and drop applet, the most advanced personalization technique of the portals reviewed (Figure 4). Users specify content and layout on two pages by dragging and dropping content boxes between areas representing page 1, page 2 and available content. Overall, however, the personalization features are somewhat confusing and inconsistent.

I applaud the designers for providing the Java applet. However, I would not make this Java applet the default method of customizing, for it takes some time to display the page and is bound to be a problem for the average web user. Lycos offers a non-Java technique, which is available from the Java applet page: "If you can't enable java, click here to use the non-java version."

This page could also benefit from some better titling and less technical jargon. A filing cabinet is referred to twice in the instructions, but the graphic is not labeled, just the area it resides in, which is called unselected content. The instructions appear at the bottom of the page.

Navigation is also a problem. Personalization pages provide no option to go back or to cancel. The My Lycos graphic at the top left of personalization pages is clickable, but instead of returning you to your personalized My Lycos page, it takes you all the way back to the Lycos home page.

Editing your personal information and greeting is another problem area. Clicking the edit button on the top section's header (My Lycos) displays the edit your profile page. This is not obvious, however, because none of your personal information is displayed in this area, and there is no indication that the edit button allows you to change this information. The edit button also allows you to change the greeting, which doubles as the title of the topmost area's header (initially set to My Lycos). However, the user is allowed to change this, thereby deleting this area's title.

The My Lycos personalized page uses colored boxes to group information, and offers three different layout styles. However, the page contains too many links, and some areas are very cluttered, such as the scores area. Topic headings are also displayed as links, making this page overly confusing.

5. Yahoo <http://www.yahoo.com/>

The screenshot shows the Yahoo 'Personalize Page Layout for My Front Page' interface. At the top, there is a 'My YAHOO!' logo and a welcome message: 'Welcome Harris_Kravatz! - [Sign Out](#) - [Help](#)'. Below this is a section titled 'Personalize Page Layout for My Front Page'. The instructions read: 'Change the display order by selecting an item and clicking the up or down arrows. Remove an item by selecting it and clicking the remove [X] button. Be sure to click **Finished** when you're done.' There are two columns of modules: 'Left Side (narrow)' and 'Right Side (wide)'. The 'Left Side (narrow)' column contains 'Sports Scoreboard', 'Horoscopes', and 'B's Fab Finds'. The 'Right Side (wide)' column contains 'Small Business Tip', 'Destination Spotlight', 'Today's Fitness Feature', and 'My Clubs'. Each item has an up/down arrow for reordering and an 'X' button for removal. At the bottom of each column are 'Add/Remove Modules' and 'Finished' buttons.

Figure 5. Yahoo personalize layout page

Yahoo offers the greatest number of personalization features of the portals reviewed, providing four different methods of selecting content and the ability to add up to 6 pages of content. However, this is a case of too much function, not enough design. All this redundancy hinders the user from forming a clear mental model of how personalization works.

The design of the Yahoo personalization features also suffers from inconsistency. A common dilemma faced by web designers is whether to use links or buttons to perform actions. My preference is to use buttons, which is consistent with the other portals reviewed. I reserve links for drilling down on textual information. Yahoo uses both buttons and links on the same page to perform actions. For example, the page Personalize Page Content for My Front Page contains buttons called Change Layout and Finish at the top right of the page. This page also contains a Delete Page link (underlined), which appears on the Select Page Settings header. On the Edit your Portfolios page, Edit and Delete links are underlined and bracketed. All together, the personalization pages use three different formats to display actions: buttons, underlined links and bracketed, underlined links.

This Edit your Portfolios page is particularly confusing. And someone else thought so too, for at the top of the page is the text: Not sure what to do? See the instructions at the bottom of the page. This text is found on other Yahoo pages as well. If you have to resort to these instructions, this is a signal that a re-design is needed. Contrast this with the MSN home page, which has few instructions, and really doesn't need any at all.

Another problem occurs on the page Personalize Page Layout for My Front Page (Figure 5). This page has lists containing content modules and buttons to the right of the list that allow you to reorder or remove modules. However, there are also two buttons on this page called add/remove modules. Selecting a module in the list and clicking the X button removes that module. If this module was removed, then what does the add/remove modules button do? Do I have to click this button to commit the removal? Clicking it did something I did not expect – it displayed the content selection page. The Personalize Page Layout for My Front Page page contains 70 words of instructions on how to use the lists, but fails to explain what the add/remove modules buttons do, in my mind the most confusing part of the page.

The buttons on the content area headers are also a problem. To change a specific content area, the user clicks one of three buttons on the header. However, two of these buttons contain graphics but no labels, and it is not obvious what these buttons do. After experimenting, I discovered that one of the buttons is detach. Clicking this button launches a new browser window containing the category. Some of the category headers contain only one button and some two. I'm not sure why.

Navigation is another problem area. Personalization pages don't provide a cancel option, nor a way to get back to the My Yahoo page. If I'm three clicks down from the MyYahoo page, and I want to get back, I must click the browser back button three times. The only option on these pages is sign-off.

Another problem area is page titling. You can have up to 6 pages of content. When attempting to personalize one of these pages, it is not clear which page you are personalizing. The only cue is the long page title containing the page name at the end of the title. An example of this is: Personalize Page Layout for My Front Page. A more visual method is needed here, such as reproducing the tab strip with the current page highlighted. To ensure users understand where they are, a page title should be the same as the link or button that displayed it. When clicking the Yahoo add page link, the title of the displayed page displayed is Create a page.

The add page feature is problematic. This feature allows a user to add up to five additional pages of content. To add a page, the user clicks the add page link, which is located on the rightmost tab. The location of this action is a problem. Tabs are used for navigation, and should not contain actions. When the user has added a sixth page, the link changes from add page to delete page. There is no explanation given. Dynamically changing the name of a link is confusing, and changing it to delete page is dangerous.

The last problem area I will mention is the options feature. Options allows you to change the color and the greeting of My Yahoo. However, the options link looks like it is part of the add page link, for it is displayed as "add page – options". The user will not know these are separate actions, and the word options does not adequately describe its function. Changing the color and the greeting are key features of My Yahoo, and should be separated and properly labeled.

Conclusion

The ability to provide personalized web content is vital to the success of the web. Personalization designers should strive to make these features easy to use, obvious and efficient. For most users, the web is still a very slow experience. People are less willing to explore and navigate between multiple pages in this environment. To encourage users to personalize means providing features that are simple, intuitive and fast.

Crucial areas to focus on include

- Putting a single task on a single page.
- Using buttons for actions.
- Providing an option to go home, and to go back.
- Providing proper titles for each page.
- Avoiding technical jargon.

If you find yourself adding a lot of textual information to help users, this is a signal that a re-design is necessary. And above all, keep it simple.

Common Personalization Features Table

	Portal				
	Microsoft Network	Netscape	Yahoo	Excite	Lycos
Features					
How to personalize	Click Personalize button on bar at top of MNS.com home page	Click My Netscape button at top right of home page	Click the My Yahoo button at the top of home page	Click Personalize your Page! link at top left of home page	Click My Lycos at top right of home page
What page is called by portal	Msn.com home page	My Netscape	My Yahoo	No name given	My Lycos
How to set greeting	Personal greeting not available	Click Preferences button at top right	Click Options link at top right of page	Click Personalize your Page! link at top left	Click Edit button on My Lycos header
How to select content	<p>1. Click Personalize button at top of page or Edit button on category header.</p> <p>2. Select content using check boxes, radio buttons, scrolling lists and text boxes.</p>	<p>1. Click Add Channels link at top right or customize button on channel header.</p> <p>2. Select content using check boxes, radio buttons, scrolling lists and text boxes.</p>	<p>1. Click Content button at top left or click Edit button on category header.</p> <p>2. Select content using check boxes, radio buttons, scrolling lists and text boxes.</p> <p>Note: Can also select content from left and right side drop-down lists at bottom of page or select add page link at top right.</p>	<p>1. Click Personalization Manager Content link or click Change button on category header.</p> <p>2. Select content using check boxes, radio buttons, scrolling lists and text boxes.</p>	<p>1. Click Content & Layout link in My Lycos area and use drag and drop applet to select content.</p> <p>2. Click Edit button on category header and select content using check boxes, radio buttons, scrolling lists and text boxes.</p>
How to change layout	<p>Click Personalize button at top of page. Then reorder categories by selecting a category item and moving the item using the up/down arrows to the right of the list.</p> <p>1 column layout only.</p>	<p>Click customize button on channel header. Select position column from drop down lists.</p> <p>Can also click Preferences button (top right) to move and remove channels from columns.</p> <p>3 column layout only.</p>	<p>Click Layout button at top left or change layout button on content selection page.</p> <p>From the left and right lists, reorder or remove list items using buttons</p> <p>2 column layout only.</p>	<p>Click Personalization Manager Layout link.</p> <p>Reorder content by typing sequence number into associated field.</p> <p>2 or 3 column layout.</p>	<p>Click Content & Layout link in My Lycos area.</p> <p>Reorder content and specify page location using drag and drop applet or drop-down lists.</p> <p>2 column layout only.</p> <p>3 page styles available by clicking Page Style link in My Lycos area.</p>
How to change color	Cannot change color	Cannot change color	<p>Select options link at top right.</p> <p>Select from 1 of 8 different color schemes, or select customize link to choose your own colors.</p>	<p>Select Personalization Manager Color link.</p> <p>Change background, header, text, link and visited link colors using radio buttons.</p>	<p>Click Colors link in My Lycos area.</p> <p>Choose from 1 of 13 different color schemes.</p>
Pages: How many and How are they chosen	2 pages. msn.com home page and web directory. Click buttons on strip at top of page.	1 page only	Up to 6 pages. Add a page by selecting the add page link, top right.	1 page only	2 pages. Click Go to page two link at top right.
Number of clicks to select your sports team	3 clicks	6 clicks	6 clicks	6 clicks	7 clicks
Location of first	Middle of page	Middle of page	Middle of page	Bottom of page	Middle of page

Portal

	Microsoft Network	Netscape	Yahoo	Excite	Lycos
personalized info in 800x600 resolution					
Info required to personalize page	Information not required	Name, ID, password, name, email address, zip code, gender, age range	Name, ID, password, password reminder phrase, name, email address, zip code, gender, birth date, industry, occupation	Name, ID, password, password reminder phrase, name, email address, zip code, gender, birth date	Name, gender email address, zip code, birth date