In-House & Online

by Laurel Saville

A new website offers a central gathering place for far-flung, often-isolated in-house designers to share ideas, information, concerns, questions and advice.

Like so many interesting and productive collaborations, this one started with what Andy Epstein, formerly with Gund and now with Bristol Myers Squibb, dubbed a "blind date." According to Glenn John Arnowitz—creative director at Wyeth in Madison, N.J., as well as cofounder and vice president of InSource—when a vendor heard him complaining about the difficulties of running an in-house corporate graphics department, he suggested Arnowitz meet Epstein, who had been lamenting the exact same issues.

"Despite the differences in companies—Gund is a soft-toy company and Wyeth is a pharmaceutical giant—we had similar departments and faced the same challenges," Arnowitz notes. "We thought, if we feel this way, there must be other people who feel this way, too. Our first idea was to have an event." Epstein and Arnowitz organized a roundtable for in-house creative folks with assistance from Peter Philips from the Design Management Institute. A few phone calls and some effective word-of-mouth later, the blind date had grown into a network of dozens of people who wanted to keep meeting, talking and sharing information. Thus was InSource born.

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InSource
www.in-source.org

Morris! Communication
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THE WISH LIST

Because the mission of this nonprofit, completely volunteer organization is to "enhance the understanding, impact and value of in-house design" by sharing expertise, ideas and support, getting a presence up on the web was an obvious first step to connect all the people who were popping up and raising their hands from the back rooms of in-house creative departments across the country. The fledgling group developed a board of directors and, working with Lakefront Media, created a website.

Martin Shova—current president of InSource, formerly creative director at Kraft Foods and now a partner at One Flight Up Design & Innovation in Boonton, N.J.—notes that the group quickly recognized its potential and outgrew this first effort: "We needed a more dynamic site where we could post more content and provide more value and build an interactive community of creative professionals." And because the organization was growing rapidly, it also needed a website that could be easily expanded and managed by InSource member volunteers, without having to constantly return to a web design firm to post new content.

Old site

New site

The team pulled together a request for proposal (RFP), the drafting of which provided an opportunity to get very clear about wants, needs and expectations—which, as Shova points out, "was a long list. It got longer, too." The RFP listed the basic needs as "leveraging technologies to provide richer content and enhance the online experience for community members." Project scope included the following:

- Site redesign
- Functionality enhancements such as cross-linked and integrated content, quarterly updates, a content management system and message board, as well as member registration and showcase
- Site hosting and e-mail services
- Site management and marketing consulting

Community

But even more important than providing these hard assets were the softer concerns of the team. "The key was to build and drive that community feeling," notes Shova. "Internal design organizations are kind of sequestered from the larger organization. There's always that sense of alienation because we're

talking ideas and design rather than marketing or other functions core to the business. You're a support organization, but there are very few people who share your language." The other omnipresent challenge is self-justification.

"The design business is intangible. It's hard to put your finger on the value of design, so it's hard to talk to management because they're all about value. There are tons of different questions that come up that all in-house designers wrestle with, but there's typically no one in the larger organization that you can turn to for help," says Shova. This is where InSource wanted to come in on the web, offering that critical, yet mostly absent support system.
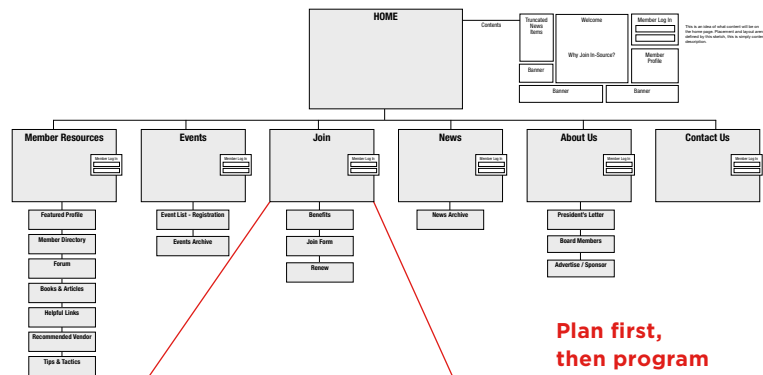
The web design and implementation task was given to Morris! Communication, a cross-media branding firm. Principal Steve Morris explains that he had some personal connections to the other designers who were, or had been, on the InSource board of directors. "There was a bit of history there, and with it came a truckload of empathy," he notes. "As we began to look at the RFP and talk about the challenges and the design and how we wanted the site to function, we kept coming back to the idea of community and communication and the question of how do we build it as a pavilion for ideas and information to be exchanged."

On the old site, members could only communicate with InSource itself, not with each other. The team quickly came up with the idea of setting up a forum. "The initial need for the forum came out of our desire for the organization to foster community," notes Morris. "On the agency side, there is a kind of luxury in that we have the possibility to build our culture around our business, whereas on the in-house side, that is much more difficult, as the culture is driven by the organization. It's harder to build your own internal design culture."

Design(er)s

The other immediate challenge was the actual design of the site. Lex Talkington, a graphic designer and site architect, and Aaron Grossman, another graphic designer with InSource, were keenly aware that they were designing for their peers. Talkington recalls, "The design process was a little intimidating, knowing we were designing for designers and knowing how subjective we all are. You kind of wince a little bit when you put the comps out." Morris notes that he kept wondering if his team was going to be up to the task: "Are our solutions going to be good enough to speak to the organization? It was a great test of personal confidence, an honor and a challenge."

To meet that challenge, the team came up with a range of options. "The first designs that we created

Plan first, then program
Several different wireframe concepts and architecture systems were developed and discussed before preliminary design began. Flow charts detail site architecture and process to define functionality and provide guidelines for the programming team.

knowing that we were designing for designers, were pretty out there," explains Talkington. Working with nothing more than a logo and brand colors of black, white and red, "We took the brand's new look that Glenn and Marty provided, and we pushed it pretty far to establish the online brand look and feel. Then Aaron and I went back and forth and peeled away the layers until we got to a look that fit the look they had established—one that fit the online environment and still had a corporate look and wasn't overly artsy." Adds Grossman, "Marty and Glenn kept coming back saying that it had to be warmer and have a more community feel."

In truth, input was coming from more than just Shova and Arnowitz. As if scripted from a graphic designer's worst nightmare, the InSource team was a committee of 12 in-house designers reviewing and commenting on the presented work. "All these corporate designers got a sick pleasure in doing to Steve and Aaron and Lex what our internal clients do to us," jokes Arnowitz. Morris protests, "And you guys pulled the classic move to take parts from one design and add it to another direction!" Arnowitz laughs, "Yeah, those were the things we swore we'd never do." He then explains, "While we didn't want to create a Frankenstein site, there were things from concept A we liked, and so we combined those with concepts B and C." Talkington gets in the last word by noting, with mock exasperation, "We were just very thankful that we didn't get digital JPEGs cut and pasted and redesigned. I'm guessing that there were people in the group that were itching to get their hands on the Photoshop files."

When trying to incorporate so many different—and strong—opinions on creative direction, there is always a risk that the end result will be reduced to the lowest common denominator. To ensure this didn't happen, Morris kept his eyes on the larger goal. "You have to keep the big picture and all the checks and balances in mind, and keep asking yourself, does it pass the litmus test of creating the bright, warm inviting website that we want to create? The core common denominator is that we wanted to create a look that had real respectability, was welcoming to any designer from any organization, but also had a sense of strength and legitimacy that felt sophisticated, elevated the profile and increased the credibility of the organization."

Ultimately, this was accomplished primarily by letting the core brand attributes stand out. The site uses the strong, vibrant, simple InSource colors of red, white and black—white provides a background respite, black brings attention to the logo and allows easy readability of type, while red draws attention to links and other critical information. These confident graphic treatments are balanced by a liberal use of

Take the best from each
First phase layouts began to hint at the critical sense of community the team wanted to achieve. The logo and color red were the only existing brand elements the team had to work with; these remained prominent, but the feeling of collaboration needed increased emphasis.

photographs that depict people and settings that could have been plucked from any design department in the country, complete with comfortable furniture, team sessions, cool eyewear and lots of black clothes. And if that's not enough to create verisimilitude, a photo and link to a real member profile appears on each and every page. Grossman points out that the end result is "very unique and stands apart from other sites like it. You go to this site and you immediately identify it with InSource."

THE COUNTDOWN

As if there weren't already enough challenges, a crunched time line that overlapped with the end-of-year holiday season added its own element of excitement to the project. Shova explains, "We sent out e-mails to members saying we were launching January 2, and then we had to tell them we were pushing it a week. We didn't want them to see the same old site."

Morris' team came up with the idea of using a timer, both to give members something fresh and tantalizing to see when they came looking for the new site and to keep the team on schedule.

Talkington remembers, "The minute that I pushed the countdown timer live, I sat down and realized what I had done, and that this meant we had a real time line. This timer was not well received by the technical team," he deadpans.

However, it worked. The site went live almost perfectly on time—there were just a couple of last-minute technical glitches—and it has been extremely well received by the membership, which has grown from 750 members early last year to 1500 members at the launch of the new site in 2007. Of course, now that everything has been checked off the original wish list, a new one has taken its place. "We'd like to have the ability to update all the pages ourselves," notes Arnowitz. "We're going to have a guest forum to give everyone the chance to chat with an expert, and give members the opportunity to post content, as well as case studies. And, down the road, we'd like to sponsor an in-house design competition."

But for now, the site is achieving its most important goal of creating a community. "The heart of the site is the forum," notes Arnowitz. "Every day there is a new posting and really cool threads happening. This is breathing life into the site." ⓖ

Countdown to launch
While the initial launch date had to be pushed back a week, membership offers precluded further delays. A countdown page not only created anticipation and excitement for visitors, it kept the pressure on the creative and programming team to accomplish the final tasks.
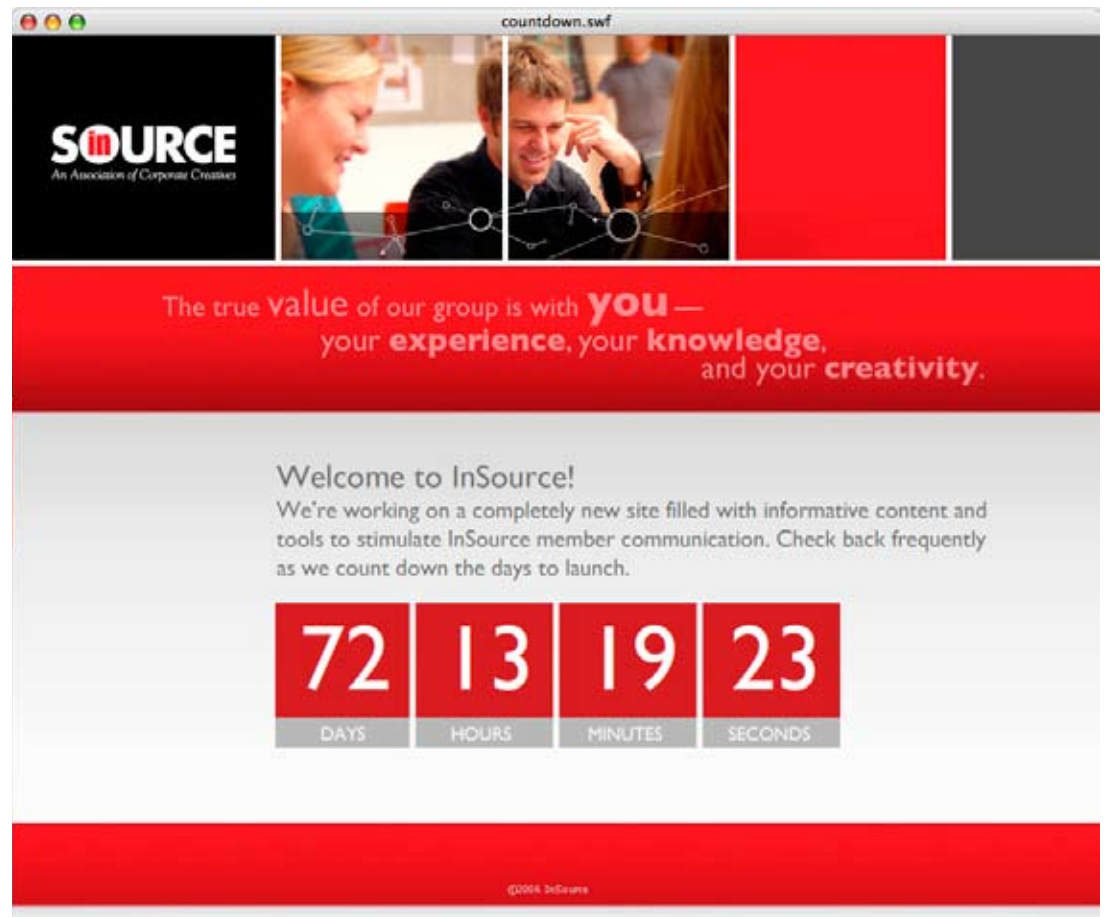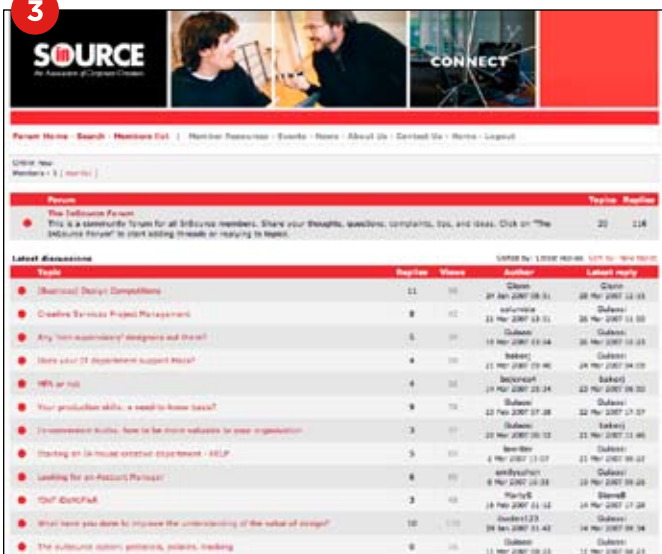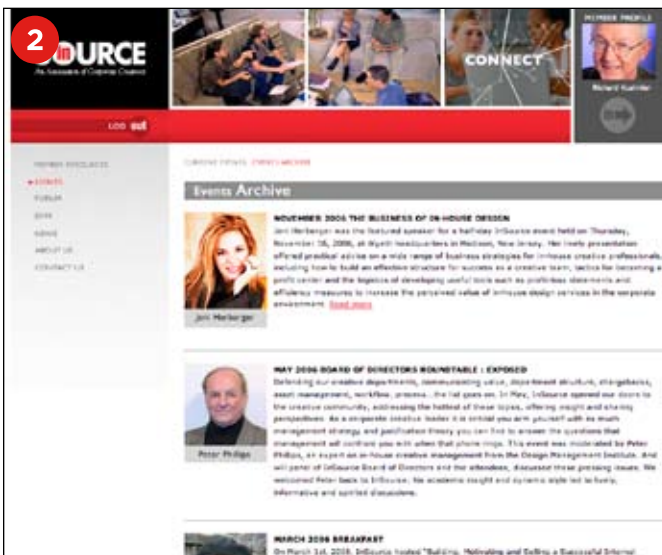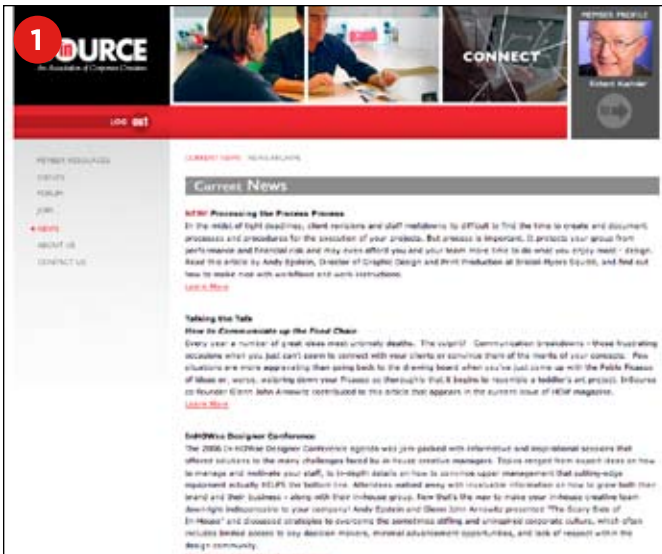
1. News
This section, accessible from the home page, well organized and easily updated, offers a clearinghouse for news and events from InSource and the design community at large.

2. Events
An "Events" page not only lists upcoming activities, but includes an archive that profiles past events—a feature especially valuable to, and appreciated by, those who could not attend.

3. Forum
The "Forum" is the heart of the site, where members share information, open dialogues and ask questions, which helps address the creative isolation many in-house designers feel.
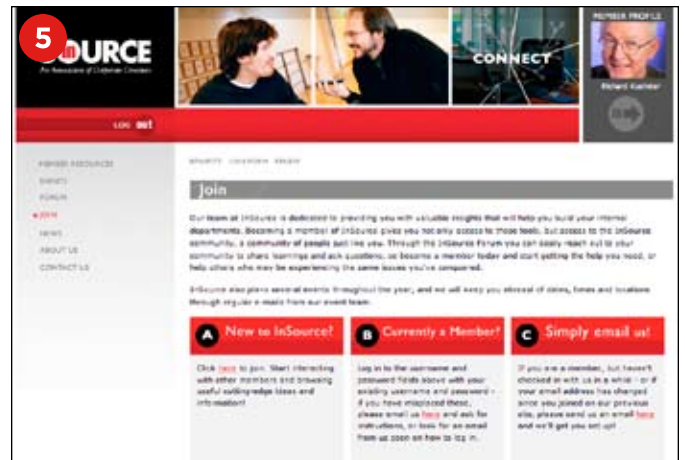
4. Community
A simple e-mail template is an opportunity to further brand InSource with a clear and recognizable communication pathway, and provides easy access for members to stay in touch.

5. Join
Since InSource was transitioning to a new database and paid membership, it had to recapture member info. Three clearly labeled, easily understood options direct members to the correct area of the site.