

Estrada Portal Strategy

Summary

This paper describes the methodology and advantages of Estrada Web Technology's approach to building and maintaining portals, focusing on both the technical and business issues. Additionally, this paper succinctly and in plain English defines what a portal is, including an overview of the most common portal types. Reasons for building portals and important considerations are also presented.

What is a Portal?

The word *portal* has been so widely used and overused that it is difficult to define. However, most experts agree that a portal is a Web site that serves as a "one stop destination," gathering and presenting various types of information or information from different sources. This process is called *integration*. Integration involves pulling data from external systems and displaying it in the portal framework. Integration may also include the portal product's ability to integrate (or "talk") with other portals. Additionally, true portals provide Web visitors the ability to personalize the portal to their preferences, by selecting what information they wish to view and how it is presented.

Portals generally fall into two main types: gateways to the Web (Web portal), such as MSNBC or Yahoo, and central resources for a specific topic, service, or product (niche portal, vertical portal or "vortal"), such as iVillage or WebMD. Within these main types, there are many sub-categories, and, indeed, some portals are hybrids, containing some elements of gateway and vertical portals. For example, many universities sponsor portals that they encourage their alumni and others to use as their Web start page, and which present information of interest to the university community as well as national news and other types of information.

Why would my organization or business want to create a portal?

The obvious reason that portals are so popular with Web users is convenience and control. When done well, portals provide a wealth of information in one convenient central location, with the added advantage of allowing users to tailor that information to their specific preferences. Additionally, (when they are done well), portals are perceived as providing current information that has been controlled and selected in some way, and therefore more reliable than general resources scattered about on the Web. For organizations and companies, portals offer an unprecedented way to target and reach audiences, and to be perceived as providing a genuine benefit to customers, while avoiding many of the disadvantages of other forms of marketing.

How do most portal technologies work and what are their limitations?

Most companies that provide portal building technologies and services share the same overall approach to creating and maintaining portals. They provide tools or resources that gather information from various sources and transform them on the fly into some standard format, so that they can be presented together in a way that makes them appear seamless. The two most common ways to accomplish this task include screen scraping and deeper integration.

Integration is often mistakenly reduced to "screen scraping." Some portal vendors claim to offer integration, but in reality offer nothing more than a component that can pull an existing web site into a

web component frame (similar to how frames work on a regular Web page). The problem with this approach is that enterprise must maintain the external Web system in addition to the portal, and pay close attention to any visual changes in the appearances of those systems. If the intent of the integration effort is to do more than display static content, a screen-scraping solution will not be effective. However, if you are trying to integrate with a proprietary legacy system that was not built to allow for integration, screen scraping may be the best that most portal systems can do.

A better, but still not the ideal, approach is deeper integration, such as a portal tool with an API that could make calls to an external system in order to pull in the information directly to the portal. Deeper integration is still relatively rare among most portal technologies on the market.

While the standard approaches to portal building seem logical and are serviceable, the problem is that they typically require a great deal of resources and effort. Both screen scraping and deeper integration involve on-the-fly data transformation each time the information is pulled from the source(s) before it can be presented via the portal.

How does Estrada Web Technology's portal strategy differ from that of typical companies?

Estrada's strategy for gathering, aggregating and presenting content and data through its portals represents a **significantly more flexible and efficient** approach to portal creation and maintenance than that of our competitors. Estrada portals are easier to develop initially, to maintain for the long term, and to extend for the future. Because Estrada portals require less effort, resources and time, they enhance your Return on Investment.

How is this efficiency and flexibility possible?

Highly Efficient Handling For Internal Data

To begin with, Estrada employs a modular system for storing and retrieving data, using units called "bricks." This approach means that information in Estrada is already *aggregated*, or uniformly stored and structured, making it efficient to call the data for presentation. Estrada's modular data structure is also ideally suited for personalized portal applications, allowing portal users to pick and choose the types of content they want, and how it should be presented.

Syndicated Content and Data from External and Legacy Systems

In addition to superior handling of content within the Estrada portal environment, Estrada also solves the greater challenge of integrating data and information from external sources. Some examples of common external data sources include syndicated content that is purchased from other sources, databases and legacy or "back office" systems. Estrada gives the ability for developers to custom-build integration from these external sources through the **Estrada Template Library** and the **Estrada Software Development Kit (SDK)**.

- The **Estrada Template Library** provides an extremely flexible capability to gather and aggregate content and data that is Web-enabled (capable of, or already being presented via the Web).
- The **Estrada SDK** is an intuitive Application Program Interface (API) that enables programmers to create a custom interfaces for retrieving data and content from external sources and integrate it seamlessly into Estrada's uniform data structure. Using the Estrada SDK, developers can create custom "bricks" or specialized content gateways, which are designed to interface with a specific external system. A significant advantage is that customers are not limited to certain platforms or data source, as with some portal technologies on the market today. Instead, the SDK allows developers to build bridges to virtually any data system or content resource imaginable.

What are the advantages of Estrada's portal strategy?

Estrada's portal strategy is more **proactive and efficient** than that of other portal applications on the market. Others typically require time- and resource-intensive data conversions that must be performed continually from the original format into the portal's format. In contrast, Estrada utilizes built-in data aggregation, storage and retrieval from the start. The result is much greater efficiency.

Additionally, Estrada allows customers to use the same technology for their portals, Web development and content management rather than having to integrate different systems and maintain each separately. While many vendors claim that their portal products integrate with other enterprise applications, there is generally a significant amount of implementation work necessary before actual deployment is possible, as customization is the norm rather than the exception with enterprise applications.

What about expansion for the future?

Scalability must be considered in the planning and implementation of any enterprise portal. A portal that performs well for today's needs but is unable to scale up to meet the demands of tomorrow is a critically limited business solution. As a portal server may soon become the heart of the enterprise, support for multiple databases, web sites, additional users, etc. it is of the utmost importance. As with selecting any enterprise application, it is important to provide a solution that not only provides the necessary functionality now, but that also offers greater flexibility moving forward. The longevity of a portal solution is a driving business imperative because of the high cost of replacement.

As a fully extensible technology, Estrada ensures that it will continue to meet and exceed future challenges. Estrada's development platform, including the Template Development Library and Software Development Kit, provide customers with the means to continually change and extend their portals. Additionally, these development tools open the door for customers to connect their portals to virtually any data source, whether it is already Web-enabled or buried deep within your back office legacy system—or in a form that has yet to be developed.

For information on how Estrada can help your organization achieve and enhance your own portal strategy, please contact us.



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