Savant Web Site Design Review *D. Wong draft 1.6.14*

**Business Case**

In 2014 Savant is planning to expand its market penetration to different levels of consumers. Savant will still cater to premium-level consumers and businesses, partner dealers and manufacturers, but will begin marketing itself to middle- and middle-upper tier buyers looking to get into an automation experience as their time, finances, and lifestyles allows do-it-yourselfers (DIY) at varied levels.

**Overview**

The goal of this document is to examine the many strengths and weaknesses of the current Web site as it speaks to Savant’s 2014 goals and objectives to better inform our design decisions as we seek to enhance the Savant Web site user experience (UX). There are many features and attributes from the current site that we may want to keep and build upon, or discard as we start moving forward.

This assessment was qualitative in nature and will look at the overall design architecture, UI, brand identity, SEO, look-n-feel, and overall content, tone, structure, and messaging. The review of this site also takes in context a survey of our top competitor sites and brands we like (Control4, Crestron, Lutron, AMX, Nest).

**Executive Summary & High-level Recommendations**

**The good**

The site overall is a well-designed and assembled. There’s a high degree of polish across the experience, and consistency in the look-n-feel, typographical treatments, use of color, and applied styles. The content is well-written, professional, and shares a common voice. Product and company descriptions are authoritative, informative, without devolving entirely into technospeak. The site has good contrast: text and imagery are dark enough on a white background that increases legibility. Many of the images used on the site are sharp and crisp and only a few appear obviously “canned” stock-oriented. There is a distinctly unified feel to the site and design variation from section to section helps avoid the pitfall of feeling too templated. Partner brand leveraging, and the consistency in content and structure add up to a good job of conveying trust, showing the breadth and depth of Savant’s product offering, providing background about the company, and providing a presence on the Web that appears reputable, trustworthy, and confident.

**The “OK”**The site isn’t a show-stopper by any means but if we want it to sell and market for the change in strategy there is always room for improvement which falls into several categories.

* **The vibe feels static, brochure-like, and doesn’t seem lively or dynamic.** While the content is unified and cohesive, nothing on the site is particularly task-oriented or goal driven, dynamic or exciting or lively enough to invite exploring or curiosity browsing. There’s also a lack of any definitive and telling messaging about who we are and what we do, no real strong calls-to-action to drive behavior or conversion or trust building, no fresh content that would compel stickiness, or revisitation. This seems strangely counter to our product offering which is about enhancing life, your lifestyle, making life easier and using your in-home technology more dynamic.

**Recommendation:** We’re not a content site and don’t want to be. But we can affect the language, labels, word choices, color, styles, and imagery we use in the next design to make it seem like something’s always happening here, that we’re a dynamic, multi-dimensional product that wants to be part of your home (or business) life, and that we’re continually building, improving, and innovating.

* **It doesn’t try to build a personal or emotive connection or invite interaction.** Sites that “know who you are”, “where you are”, or have a sense of answering a question you have, or finding a solution to a problem you’re trying to solve, all build personal connections to their visitors as in, “we’re in this together.” This emotive quality is missing from the site and visitors are left standing outside a real-world product experience that’s highly personal to them (it’s in their home). There also are none of the cool little demo features found on competitor sites that allow users to begin to experience their products in a virtual way. When a user can see, do, hear, and touch something, their connection to that product grows exponentially whether it’s towards a **purchase behavior** or WOM marketing. While sometimes these demos can be cheesy (Crestron), others (Nest) when done well can really drive curiosity, connection and belonging. Our site currently offers no way to connect with the product (other than seeing it in an experience center that is)

**Recommendation:** At least some of our competitors hint or directly speak to the wants, needs, worries and concerns, people have when trying ot assess a product for purchase, and it speaks to user-centric goals and behaviors. Tapping into true audience needs (and wants in our case as well), or the “problem” they’re trying to solve helps build connection and community with them, and supports the trust proposition, “they know me. “ They also provide a variety of channels to experience the product - viewed asynchronously in a short video demo, pushed in a video, browsed in description of products or services, or interacting synchronously directly in the page. Collectively these features work together to build a connection that’s good for our consumer, and better yet for virally marketing our products.

* **The content leans towards speaking to an insider/dealer/manufacturer audience first, and a buyer end-consumer as an afterthought.**  The focus of our site is currently to inform and support dealers and product. Plain speak beings to fade as hard details about product specifics get progressively more technical and jargony (e.g. drilling down on product to detail level). A vast majority of the content is relevant for certain, and good for a broad audience but there is also repetitive boilerplate bloat wrapped in here that can be edited, merged, and revised while still accomplishing the same end goal - Informing the user towards an action (buying, contacting us, exploring the site more) without beating them over the head.

**Recommendation:** Ideally the body content across the site ought to start a conversation about what we do, what we offer, how we do it, who we do it for, and why we do it -- As it relates to that visitor’s sole reason for coming to the site to begin with. Truly less is more is a direction we should strive for but oft more easily said than done. Essentially we should look to shift the content to make it more human, conversational, solution oriented (what problems are visitors trying to solve by coming ot our site?) and then combine and condense when it makes sense (e.g. Case studies within industry segments we cater too). Positioning content so that its “meeted out” as in progressively disclosed at varying levels when requested by our varied audience, is a more current method of presenting content effectively without it appearing like overkill.

* **Navigation need review and focus.** The site succeeds in some conventions (primary/secondary) but needs work in secondary levels of the site, specifically a focus on targeted user flows to main Consumer and Integrator audiences. We should strongly consider building flows for each of these main constituencies aligned to their most common scenarios. In basic design terms: Why do they come to our site for? What are they looking to accomplish? What goals have they formed before arrival? What tasks are they willing to undertake to achieve those goals, and how can we help them get there? For example:

CONSUMERS > Education > Dealer Directory > Dealer Listing > Contact them/us
INTEGRATOR > New products > Store > Product listing >

The current siloing of content as an organizational method is necessary but in the current schema, it’s a “grab bag” and “garden hose” approach that can make it difficult for users to build a quick mental model of our offering. Geared towards “browsing behavior” there are few directives or calls-to-action speaking to users’ most-likely task flows. In certain areas of the site for example, a 3rd level navigation of industry segments is sublimated to the right column (traditionally ad space) and muted (non-bolded selected state) which doesn’t support the user’s orientation and sense of path. Additionally labels often include our name, “Savant” (Savant and Apple, Savant Showcase?) which is superfluous since the user is on our site. Yet another example is the secondary nav in the About section which is duplicated (It appears both horizontally above the fold and is repeated in the right column) which suggests navigation affordance and IA/Visual treatment issues inherent to the current design.

**Recommendation:** A thorough IA review of site going forward is warranted to suss out and validate the key user flows for each audience cohort. A category-oriented navigation may work but a Solutions-focused, task-driven architecture may serve us better. Design should also assess whether other methods (task oriented, short phrase labeling, action-driven) organizational groupings and labeling may be better, how deep or shallow to design navigation conventions, whether 3rd level nav methods are needed, and whether section/category landing pages can be better utilized as navigation jump-offs vs. content vehicles that branch and drive users to specific content that meets their goals faster and to better satisfaction. .

* **The look-n-feel is in need of an update.** While the current site isn’t nearly antiquated (like AMX’s site) it does look more than a few years out of style (we look most similar to Crestron) and it’s not in keeping with top competitor sites we want to at least match or emulate (Nest, Control4) and is appearing to fall short of the current trends in Web Design. Things like stylistic uses of curved treatments, deep drop-shadows, rendered gradients, were common some years ago but these days serve to appear dated. In terms of color choice, the conservative blue/lt. gray/white, and metallic metal tones feel business-like and starkly corporate. Professionally cool and clean but not necessarily inviting, friendly, or approachable. In contrast, best of breed sites are currently using bold contrasts, sometimes with organic and warm colors, textures and dimension are applied elegantly and sparingly. Imagery we’re using is of high-quality but markedly lacks human or organic elements -- There are few people, animals, environments, habitats, but plenty of static “black box” products shots and glossy lifestyle images sans their owners which conveys a sense of being generic and not standing out. These attributes all work together to create a subtle yet subdued feel overall. Navigation while consistent at least is categorically driven and structure and styling do an allright job of maintaining orientation but at times can make it difficult for a user to understand their place/path in the site. There’s a lack of dynamic content (twitter feeds, blog posts, dated events or news etc.) or social sharing adds to the static and not lively or fresh feel and there are few inroads inviting users to participate in social aspects, interact, explore, or discover. Case studies are solid write-ups but text oriented and non-dimensional when compared to our competitor showcases that use a combination of gallery art showing context, videos tours, external reviews. We do a little of these but the number of case examples, how they’re organized and promoted in silos, may be making us appear smaller and less accomplished than our competitors. We should strongly consider leveraging the best aspects of Responsive Design for relevant aspects of the site (e.g. a Blog, Store) to match the trends towards tablets, mobile, and displays greater than 1300px wide. A site that’s responsive to a user’s subjective form factor further demonstrates our understanding of the UX, and aligns with our product as being current, keeping with trends, and on the cutting edge of the technology spectrum.

**Some general questions that come to mind as we approach a redesign:**

* Do we want to re-use in whole or part, that is, repurpose a majority of the content
* Who will support regular updates, routine maintenance, and ongoing design and development; An agency or are we considering in-house production and direct CMS hosting and ownership
* What tools, platform, and framework, do we want to start investigating and considering now in advance of any change in business ownership/process
* What is the expected life-cycle for the next iteration of the site and why?
* What kind of usage statistics, traffic, both volume and patterns, can we deduce from analytics about the site as a starting baseline?
* What can we use from a statistical analysis to define Metrics of Success for the next iteration of the site, and beyond?
* If this is an interim phase of the site’s evolution, what can we define as a timeline for the eventual evoution of the site (e.g. early mentions of 2 year life expectancy for this project)
* Who is the product owner of the site going forward and why? e.g. Marketing.
* Dev note: My suggestion is to build under an umbrella CMS integration (e.g. something like [Drupal](https://drupal.org/)/Mercury Editor) and production going forward all driven by CSS in a lightweight, scalable framework (Ruby, [Sass](http://sass-lang.com/)/Compass). Ideally, Savant employees should take editorial and maintenance ownership to write, edit and make administrative changes, modifying at-will according to cohesive marketing/Product/product marketing directives.

**The Home Page
Some misc. notes on Visual Design, Branding, & Messaging**

**Extend the color palette -** Our current color palette (medium blue, medium-gray, white) is classic business professional: Business services, banks and financial institutions, government, all commonly use these colors together to convey a sense of calm, authority, even neutrality. This made sense when we were focused on a commercial market but in changing gears to a consumer face, there’s room for expanding and extending our color palette to bring back the slick, sophisticated, artistic in our use of color for marketing collateral on or offline.

**Use photographs of people and places** - Crisp, high-quality imagery of real people and real places should be used throughout the experience to humanize the space that our products occupy. Much of the current imagery is abstracted or generalized or specific product art, which exacerbates the static feel of the site, and lending to perception of a showcase vs. a living environment. It’s understood that for cost and efficiency some stock art must be used but when we choose to leverage photography, we need to choose compelling and enriching art that appears non-canned, non-contrived. People are inundated with stock art daily and are quick to recognize quality vs. canned illustrative imagery, and often equate their brand perception relevant to what they see.

**Use focused messaging -** Primary and secondary messaging which traditionally tells visitors in a sentence or less what a company does (and for whom), is not present in the current site implementation. The closest thing to messaging is wrapped in the carousel and tied to specific products, “Brighten your surroundings (with SmartLighting WiFi)”, “Bring the show home with SmartAudio”. Sophisticated Control - Savant Universal Remote”, “ and “Commercial Control with TrueConference.” which focuses on products, but doesn’t necessarily speak succinctly about what Savant’s core business is leaving the unitiated with big questions about basic knowledge that they should have well within 10-15 secs. of arriving. Finally these secondary messages are rendered images not visible to search engines.

**Use a primary call-to-action:** “Learn more” links on each of the carousel entries supports a trust building focus but it’s a somewhat random vs. directed approach to driving user behaviors on the site. Collectively this isn’t enough to encourage exploration, discoverability, stickiness, or social sharing. Further, Learn more as a label to drive action has proven out in usability to need an enticing qualifier “Learn more about SmartLighting Wi-Fi” for example, has been shown in testing to be more effective. Accumulating trust factors is paramount in driving click-through and conversion behavior = On an order of magnitude, we must seek to give users more of what they want before asking them for anything in return.

**Primary tagline message -** “Now you can”

**Plusses:** Short phrase, inspirational and positive tone, clear and direct, memorable and creates curiosity

**Deltas:** It’s really catchy and memorable but also very inspecific. It’s not additive to the brand name, says nothing about the business specifically what we do or offer; Does not leverage competitor or partner brand knowledge in the public domain.

**Home page title tag:** “Home Automation Control Systems | Commercial & Building Automation & Intelligent Control”

**Plusses:** Direct and clear, not overloaded, SEO friendly, keyword oriented

**Deltas:** Worth taking a second look at competitor meta-tag (e.g. many use “smart”) and search positioning/use of keywords and phrases to yield commonality and leveraging of keyword ranking. We currently show up 3rd on Google and Bing for direct name search, at the bottom of Page 2 in Google for “home automation”, the middle of page 3 in Google for “smart home.”