

# Some Ideas Regarding “Look and Feel” Standards from PGT Draft Version, 8/26/97

## I. GISB Standardization: Appropriate vs. Potentially Harmful

### A. *Appropriate Focus on the Protocols*

In advocating a Web site implementation of certain EBB reporting functions, GISB has endorsed the use of open, non-proprietary standards (TCP/IP, HTTP) governing information transmission. In contrast to EBB access that may require proprietary client software, or a specific method of communication or variety of communication program, access to all TSP Web sites can be achieved with the same off-the-shelf browser.

### B. *Protocol Focus Allows Participation in Highly Beneficial Trends*

In the Information Technology industry in general, the increasingly widespread adoption of Internet Web protocols is revolutionizing application architecture, promoting:

- (1) Maximum freedom of choice (i.e., choice of vendor products),
- (2) Lower costs and increasing vendor entrants (from growing market size),
- (3) Innovation and continual improvement (from market driven competition).

Public Web sites, for example, are rapidly evolving and improving along with the associated technology. By limiting standardization primarily to the connecting protocols, the gas industry will be able to fully participate in these beneficial trends.

### C. *Utmost Restraint Urged Regarding Application Design Standards*

#### 1. Freezing Design Threatens Innovation

To identify a particular navigation approach, say, as a required standard, would have a stifling effect on Web site innovation. Some may argue that the standards could later be updated upon industry agreement. But the problem with that notion lies in the difficulty of testing possible new approaches in the market place, without violating the already enacted standards. And imagine, for instance, that the current standard was strict HTML 3.2 compliance, and then trying to advocate the usage of frames—we would have to point to examples outside our own industry, used by others fortunately less restricted.

Another consequence would be to reduce the motivation for a third-party provider to introduce an innovative approach, because of (1) the hurdle of obtaining endorsement as a standard, and (2) the threat of losing any competitive advantage in the very act of overcoming the hurdle—because of the time delay, and the extent to which the once-novel approach is then required of everyone.

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### **2. Premature to Set Standards**

It has been only 27 days since the GISB Standard 4.3.6 postings were required to be implemented, insufficient time to obtain adequate feedback from our customers, insufficient time to discover what problems there may be, what improvements would be beneficial.

### **3. Judicious Restraint Advocated**

Because of the potential danger of stifling innovation, reducing flexibility and customer service, any suggested standards regarding elements of application design should be subject to the most rigorous examination, require the most compelling argument and demonstrations. With respect to such standards, only the utmost restraint, the most judicious and light-handed approach, should be used.

### **4. Standards not Inherently Desirable**

Standardization, or standards, are not desirable in themselves, but only insofar as their adoption has desirable consequences on balance. Adoption of almost any standards has both positive and negative effects that warrant careful consideration. A particular danger lies in the premature adoption of a standard, before an adequate understanding of its consequences has been achieved.

## **I. Method vs. Goals**

An effort to clearly distinguish between desired goals and the methods chosen, or assumed necessary, to achieve those goals can sometimes promote the discovery of alternative methods with greater advantages or fewer drawbacks.

### **A. *What’s Behind It? Motivation of the Multiple-TSP Customer***

What is the motivation pushing for a standard “look and feel” among the TSPs’ Web sites? Clearly one impetus has been the frustration experienced by the customers of multiple TSPs when trying to conduct business through the multiple proprietary EBBs, with their variety of communication methods, user interfaces, underlying business rules, etc. Considerable business inefficiencies resulted, including significant training and technical maintenance demands.

Even if major progress has been made by the gas industry in addressing these concerns in the areas of access methods and business rules, some user interface issues remain. Providing that certain requested distinguishing features (e.g., identification of the TSP on the report) are present, the multi-TSP customer believes the greater the similarity in appearance and access method, the better. From this point of view, the ideal would be to provide identical navigation, drill down levels, format, and so on, with respect to all the required TSP reports.

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### ***B. TSP Aspirations***

On the other side are the TSPs, especially the smaller ones such as PGT, who have endeavored to provide the best EBB they can, within budgetary constraints, for their particular set of customers, and to modify and enhance functionality in direct response to their customers' changing needs. PGT and other like-minded TSPs hope to continue this tradition of customer responsiveness in the Web site arena.

### ***C. The Big Question***

Is there any way to satisfy the aims of the multi-TSP customer without impairing the customer responsiveness of the TSP? How can we best meet the needs that lie behind the request for design standards, most cost effectively, while minimizing any adverse impact on innovation?

## **I. PGT's Proposal**

Web technology provides a remarkably simple solution, easy to implement and maintain, that was unavailable in the EBB arena:

A GISB-maintained repository of TSP URLs for the required reports, in the form of a Web page of links organized by TSP, identified by report name. Once established, this repository provides the multiple-TSP customer with the following options:

- (1) Copy the URLs of selected providers and paste them into their own browser bookmarks (or “favorites”);
- (2) Paste the links into their own custom-designed page, developed to look and function exactly the way they want (whatever format, drill-down levels, navigation approach, color, font, etc.);
- (3) Continue to use the GISB-provided page to access the reports.

This approach is more efficient for both the TSPs and the multi-TSP customer; the TSPs would thereby avoid any necessity to re-do their current approach or create an alternative one, and the multi-TSP customer avoids the need to access the individual TSP home page prior to accessing the desired reports.

More importantly, this approach would not diminish the TSPs' ability to respond flexibly and creatively to customer needs, nor inhibit Web site innovation beneficial for the entire gas industry.