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# “And Another Thing...the Current Site Is in German”: The Final Project in an International Digital Business Consultancy

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## **Abstract**

Between 1996 and 2001, large international Internet consulting firms built many Web sites and applications. These firms combined the disciplines of business strategy, technology and design into one service offering, capable of creating businesses and launching business initiatives using the Internet.

This paper portrays a project completed by one of these companies, Viant Corporation, in 2001, at a time when they were starting to suffer from a severe economic downturn. It portrays the project's design process in detail, and how it was affected both by Viant's culture and business model, and the project's economic context.

A team of mostly non-designer consultants adopted new roles, design processes, tools, and work environments to fulfill the role of interaction designers. The case serves both as a vivid example of adapting design processes and standards to adverse circumstances, and as a historical snapshot of a business context that may never reappear.

## **Keywords**

Concept Design, Design Planning, Ethnography / Ethnographic Studies, Experience Design, Experience Strategy, Information Architecture, Interaction Design, Multidisciplinary Design / Interdisciplinary Design,

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Organizational Culture, Organizational Planning, Participatory Design, Process Improvement, Service Design, System Design, User Experience, User Interface Design, User Research, User-Centered Design / Human-Centered Design

### **Industry/category**

Financial services, consulting, international design, Internet products.

### **Project statement**

There are really two projects to talk about here. The first is the effort by large Internet consulting companies, and Viant in particular, to integrate strategy, technology, and design into super-capable global firms in order to quickly conceive, design, and build complete internet-based businesses and products.

The second is the client engagement carried out by the Viant project team for Consors, a German company that owned and ran a large European retail trading Web site, [www.Consors.de](http://www.Consors.de).

This paper conveys the design environment of this project, as well as others at Viant and its competitors. The Consors project is a particularly telling one for a number of reasons. First of all, it occurred at the very end of the dot com economic boom, when cost pressures had begun to mount for companies across the industry. Second, it epitomized the dynamic of working in these large companies, largely by virtue of it being a high-profile project on a fast pace and staffed by a team that hardly knew their roles, or each other. Also, the project itself was particularly challenging, being a pan-European trading site based in Germany, with the site itself being in German and the project

conducted in English. But perhaps what made it most interesting was that it represented an effort by Viant to commit to user-centered design (UCD) as an organizational practice. At the very least, it makes for an interesting case study on how to design products among the special constraints and opportunities afforded by a large international consulting company.

If design is primarily about developing a viable solution within a set of constraints, then project management can be viewed as a form of design, and in cases like the Consors project, a very creative form. This project's outcomes are significant, not necessarily for the design solutions, which were competent but by no means extraordinary, but for the ways in which the solutions were developed, and in which the project was managed in the face of overwhelming adversity. The project was very successful, even though much of its impact was hindered by a poor economic climate.

The intent of this paper is to capture what was done, both as a historical reference and as an example of how to proceed when facing similar circumstances.

### **Project participants**

The following people played leading roles in Viant's Consors project team:

**UCD Evangelist:** Richard Anderson

**Client Partners:** Dr. Andrew Toal, Andreas Boerner

**Project Manager:** Kai Warszas

**Technology Lead:** Rob Goldie

**Design Lead:** John Armitage

**Functional Analysis Lead:** Rhonda Ruhbach

### **Project dates and duration**

The project began November 2000 and ran through February 2001. Originally staffed for ~8 full-time consultants, the team used up to 14 people before it was over. The price was well under \$1 million, discounted from what would have exceeded \$1 million as recently as 6 months earlier.

### **Practice detail: Viant**

The process of this project is an important part of the overall case, because the main message here is that there is no one ideal design process and design standard, only a number of processes and standards available to be applied in different cultures, projects, and circumstances. So, I will paint a detailed picture of Viant, how design functioned in its teams, the Consors project context, and the project itself.

Viant in 2000 was a 5-year-old, 500-person Internet consultancy, headquartered in Boston, Mass., and with offices in nine cities in the US and Europe. It offered strategic business strategy consulting, design services, and technology implementation for building Internet-based businesses. Its value proposition was the ability to conceive, design, and launch complete Internet-based businesses in 9 months for a fixed fee, which was usually several million dollars. Clients included Kinko's, Bank Boston, Charles Schwab, and Sears, but much of the work was for Internet startup companies flush with venture capital and offering exciting new business products and services, like Ecast's Internet jukebox. Unlike Viant's main competitors, like Scient, Sapient, Razorfish, and MarchFirst, Viant did not grow by buying scores of smaller companies. Instead it grew by hiring individuals via a rigorous hiring process that stressed cultural, personality, and character values

over other factors like relevant experience or industry connections. Viant's employee strategy was to hire very young, outgoing, energetic, flexible, hard-working, team-oriented, resourceful people, able to solve problems with little supervision. These qualities were often at the expense of deep technical or industry experience, and much of the motivation came from very high salaries, lavish benefits, and stock options that were necessary in order to compete for the best employees. All new hires went to the same 3-week training course covering all aspects of the business.

The company was structured on the product organization model [4], also known as the "Tiger Team" model, where employees work intensely in close teams on one project at a time, and have little or no association with a fixed, discipline-based departmental hierarchy. Employees served almost like "free agents" within the company, having a strong association with a home office but otherwise jumping from project to project, based on the need for their particular role, and reporting to the project leadership for the project's duration. Reviews and promotion were based heavily on peer review, as individuals virtually had no persistent boss, except for loosely reporting to their office manager along with the other 90-some office members. Office layouts were open, without individual offices, and consultants shifted workspace locations to sit with the project team as a group. An abundance of conference rooms were used for private, focused meetings of the team and for smaller groups. The culture was very focused on the home office and the project.

The basic service model had three modular project types: **Envision** was a strategy project that specified what the business would be. **Experience** came next

Many business consulting firms rely on the “pyramid model” for their profitability [5]. In this model, consultants are billed out at a rate higher than they are paid, while being supervised, mentored, and developed by a firm’s senior partners. The greater the number of lower-paid consultants the firm can support, the more money it can make. Over time, consultants either are promoted or forced out of the company. The effectiveness of the junior consultants is based in part on the ability of the senior partners to share their knowledge and experience through company-wide best practices.

The Consors project is an example of Viant’s fledgling effort to enable UCD to occur on a broad scale. Its approach was to try to put simple, rule-of-thumb systems in place so that less-experienced team members could be assigned relatively simple tasks and deliverables to allow quick successes. This would build confidence, support, and productivity more quickly. These small pieces would be assembled into larger systems for delivery.

and designed the Web offering upon which the business was based. **Launch** came last, and built the Web offering and brought it to market. Ideally, Viant would sell all three to a client, but they were often sold independently. Eventually this model developed variants to reflect changing client buying patterns.

Viant’s strategy was to integrate these three core disciplines and get them to work closely together, creating synergies that would result in better and more integrated client businesses and products, as well as process efficiencies and more motivated teams. For the strategy to work, the culture needed to overcome a major weakness of the Tiger Team approach, which is that in the absence of formal discipline-based departments, skill sets and best practices of individuals within disciplines are not shared and developed adequately. Tiger Teams are great for achieving quick, dramatic, and very creative results, but this often comes at the expense of the long-term growth and sophistication of the organization. Viant suffered from this, even though it eventually put efforts in place to encourage best practices, not only within disciplines but across them as well [1] [2].

To generally describe Viant’s project work and capabilities: teams were good at integrating and pulling together big projects that worked, were released on time, and had reasonable quality. Viant solutions sacrificed precision (doing specific project pieces very well) for accuracy (choosing the right things to do). Achieving integration among such diverse disciplines is not easy. Each discipline needed to compromise, or dumb-down, its elite best practices in order to integrate and share with the other disciplines. Hopefully, the final products would reflect this integration in the form of

being reasonably viable, appealing, and reliable as opposed to excelling at only one or two of these virtues at the expense of others. Although this process had successes, it came at a high price. The higher-level efficiencies resulting from integration resulted in lower-level inefficiencies that eroded productivity and frustrated individuals who were forced to work below their abilities. Viant’s compensation for this effect was the attempt to provide a supportive, fun, participatory, and profitable culture to work in.

This weakness becomes acute if, for example, client needs change from favoring speed to favoring price or quality. Such a shift puts companies like Viant at a disadvantage when contrasted to smaller boutique companies, for example, who are more specialized. Although this started to happen, the overall business environment deteriorated so quickly in 2001 that clients stopped buying altogether.

A Viant consultant’s experience was driven by the staffing process, which was inherited from that of other large consulting companies. Viant’s mature offices had ~100 staff representing every key role needed by projects. This staff worked primarily on projects for clients in that city or nearby. When an office needed particular roles to handle extra work, they could temporarily borrow staff from other offices, or assign someone from another role to fill the needed spot. Cases of the latter were called playing a “stretch role.” This was based on the assumption of a cross-company standard of competency for roles, allowing staff to be relatively interchangeable within projects and offices company-wide. Although there was considerable skill variance within roles, this system worked fairly well.

However, when consultants travel too often under this arrangement, they tend to lose motivation and “burn out.” Because this is a problem at many consulting companies, Viant’s policy was to limit travel time for its consultants at ~20%, making them more productive and serving as a strong recruiting incentive for Viant. This policy relies on there being enough work in home office cities to keep staff busy; if there is not, the staff travels more, or, eventually, is laid off.

As a designer at Viant, if you worked on a project in your home office, it is likely that you worked with and were led by familiar teammates, which was generally good because you could leverage shared assumptions to work more efficiently. It was also likely that your team would include someone from another office. This was good because it caused ideas and methods to spread quickly, and allowed staff to make friends and build networks throughout the company. Problems were more likely when a team, or its leadership, consisted primarily of unfamiliar, new, or traveling staff. These situations required more effort and learning in order to become productive, especially because Viant’s projects were done very quickly. Viant’s training and culture tried to account for these challenges.

**Envision projects** delivered a business strategy in the form of a report that specified what the business would offer to the market and how it would operate and make money. Often including product concepts, Envisions were led and staffed mostly by “strategists.” Designers served to beautify PowerPoint presentations and visualize product concepts, and technologists helped build demo prototypes, provided ideas, and assured that technology assumptions were plausible.

**Experience projects** delivered a design for the Internet product offering, in the form of a design specification. They were led and staffed mostly by “creatives” or designers. Strategists assured that the product followed the strategy, and technologists built proof-of-concept prototypes and assured that designs were practically implementable. Sometimes these projects involved branding work, and at other times the sites followed existing brand guidelines.

**Launch projects** delivered a working system, in most cases a Web site/application, and were led and staffed by technologists, with help from designers primarily in a production role to build the product front end.

One attempt to improve the quality of Viant’s offering by bringing the disciplines together was the move to adopt user-centered design (UCD) practices. Unlike competitors Sapient and Scient, Viant did not embrace UCD until 2000. The movement started with the recognition and embracing of the Information Architect (IA) role, and continued with the hiring of a skilled but unsupported company “evangelist,” who was tasked with infusing UCD practices into project work. Unlike Sapient, who simply formed what was essentially a “UCD department,” or Scient, who had particular roles responsible for user research and usability, Viant’s was a grass-roots effort to transform the outlook of each employee on a project-by-project mentorship basis via a network of “UCD Masters.”

The three disciplines—Strategy, Creative (the name reflecting its advertising roots), and Technology—had their own role hierarchy. Creative roles included Junior/Senior Creative Developer (who built product front ends), Junior/Senior Graphic Designer,

The fourteen Viant consultants participating on the Consors.de project were drawn from Viant offices in Munich, London, Dallas, TX, Chicago, IL, and San Francisco, CA.

Team members’ country of origin included the US, Canada, the UK, France, Denmark, Switzerland, Germany, and Hong Kong.

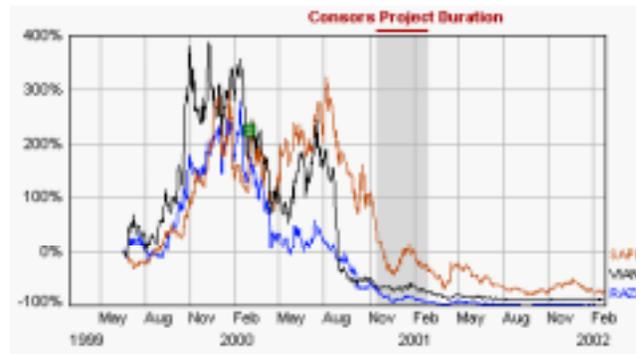
Information Architect, Design Lead, and at times, Creative Officer. A related role, characterized by its almost equal affiliation with all disciplines, was the Functional Analyst, who served a key role as the “glue” to help integrate the disciplines on a project.

### Practice Detail: Consors Project

The project for Consors was a bit unusual for Viant in that it was only the second project in Viant’s six-month-old Munich, Germany office, and that it came at a time when the faltering economy was starting to slow business investment worldwide [Fig. 1]. Shrinking demand was lowering consulting prices, and clients no longer needed entire businesses created—they needed more specialized and limited services, primarily to refine and optimize the large volume of work that had been done in the previous five years.

In the user research recruiting effort, Consors’ Spanish affiliate refused to ask any of their customers to “allow two foreign strangers to visit their home and watch them manage their stock account,” which is understandable. Interestingly, both French customers asked to be interviewed in restaurants versus in their homes.

The Swiss interviews led to the recruiting of a key Lead User who later traveled to Munich for extensive design reviews.



**Figure 1:** Stock chart of Viant and 2 competitors

Consors was one of these clients. Consors.de was the most popular retail equity-trading Web site in Europe, akin to Etrade.com in the US. They were located in Nuremberg, ninety minutes by train from Munich. Funded by Schmidt bank, one of the oldest private

banks in Germany, their revenue came primarily from online trade commissions. Consors.de was successful and powerful, but it had been assembled so quickly and grown so large that it was in danger of failing technically, let alone becoming incomprehensible and inconvenient for its users.

Consors approached Viant’s Munich office for help. This case may represent the first client that came to Viant with a true usability-oriented redesign project. Viant’s UCD evangelist helped sell the project, even though the client was reluctant to involve end users in discovering less obvious design problems. Consors was also in the process of localizing their product for Spain, Switzerland, Italy, and France, and thus the new design would have to account for any cultural or process differences in these countries.

In the project negotiations, Consors wanted a complete site redesign, but at Viant’s rates could only pay for a much smaller effort. Because the Munich office was so desperate to get work, and wanted to start and finish the project as quickly as possible so as to get paid and stay in business, the office agreed to an immense amount of work for a three-month timeframe and a team of eight. The project as sold should have been given twice the time and resources. The client agreed to start the project and to support up-front user research, but was skeptical enough to retain the right to stop the project after one month. Adding to the pressure was the client contact’s claim that his supervisor was very skeptical about the project’s value, and was proceeding merely based on faith in his subordinate.

Although the language of the Consors.de German site is German, English was used for the project and its design deliverables. Besides allowing the team to work in a language common to all its members, this approach provided a neutral language from which to perform later translations into French, Spanish, and Italian. Translations were not included in Viant's project.

Regardless of this, when I realized that the language of Consors.de was German after I had already traveled to Munich, I immediately declared the project unimplementable and requested to be sent home and replaced with any German speaker. However, at the end of the next day, we had found Alta Vista's Babelfish online Web site translator and added two more German speakers to the team, and this allowed us to make progress.

The project as sold was a very general site redesign, but ended up being ~15% research, 65% IA and UI design, 15% technical architecture, and 5% graphic design. The scope included:

- A thorough analysis of thirteen competitors
- A new organization and design for the site's current offerings
- A technical architecture to support the new design
- A detailed report of Viant's UCD process so that Consors could duplicate the results on their own in the future
- A technology and design solution for how future upgrades and additions could be made to the product without disrupting the new user experience design

Consors insisted on seeing strong rationale to support all recommendations.

This being an IA-heavy project, I played a pivotal role as the design lead, particularly because so few of the others on the team had UCD or IA experience. Part of this role was choosing the creative team for the project, as the 20-person Munich office had no IAs or Graphic Designers. Out of 500 employees at the end of 2000, Viant had only fourteen qualified IAs, and five of these were at the Design Lead level and unavailable. Several of the IAs had less than six months of experience in the role.

Although the Internet boom was famous for risky business plans and over-promised consulting engagements, the number of risks for this project, listed in order of increasing severity, was unprecedented:

1. Much of the team was working in a strange office, country, and language (four core team members from the US).
2. The client was in a separate city from the design office.
3. Only two team members had ever worked together on a significant project.
4. We were designing for a culture that was foreign to many on the team.
5. Five team members had been with Viant less than six months, and it was the first Viant project for four of them.
6. The client was skeptical about the usefulness of user research.
7. The client partner could only dedicate 30% of their time to the project and would be in town only one day per week.
8. No team member had brokerage design experience.
9. The project was 80% research and IA work, and the team only had one researcher and two IAs.
10. Five key project members were non-German speakers, and the site language was German.
11. The project scope was large, open-ended, and vaguely defined.

The overall plan for the project was to conduct field research in Germany, France, Switzerland, and Spain. The goal was to get a pan-European sample of users, note local differences, and recruit lead users for more project interaction later. Using customers provided by Consors, we planned home visits for these individuals. We did four in Munich, two in Zurich, and two in Paris. The team's only trained ethnographic researcher was

accompanied by another team member who took notes and photos.

While the research was being done, the team leads planned the rest of the project and negotiated deliverables with the client. What we proposed was:

1. Use our research, combine it with the market research provided by Consors, and create personas [3] to represent archetypical customers.
2. Write user scenarios that these personas would undergo with the site.
3. Design how the new site would support these scenarios in the form of wireframe storyboards.
4. Involve four Lead Users, chosen from the initial research group, via participatory design sessions and informal tests.
5. Create a competitive analysis of thirteen comparable sites in Europe and the US.
6. Propose a new technical architecture to better integrate all current features and data, focusing on security and login issues.
7. Revise scenario storyboards interactively, then choose one scenario for high-fidelity rendering in a high-level appearance design.
8. Write user case documentation to support designs.
9. Present project summary to Board of Directors.
10. Write process and design scalability report for Consors to use as a guide in the future.

After having conducted our field research, competitive analysis, and analysis of Consors' marketing segmentation model, the research team set up a "war room" and spent a week creating seven personas to

represent Consors' customer base. Each persona had one or two scenarios describing particular cases of the persona using the site.

We also created a framework to explain how personas, scenarios, and future deliverables were connected to users and their desires [Figs. 2-4]. This served to guide our design efforts and to form a foundation for our recommendations to Consors, regarding both the relevance of our work and how Consors could grow its site while maintaining its user-centered design.

	Form:	Modeled with:	Such as:
<b>User Desires</b>	<b>An Experience Hierarchy</b>	<b>Work Products / Deliverables</b>	<b>These Examples</b>
Goals	Relationships	Personas	Anke, Investor
Intents	Sequences	Scenarios/ Mockups	Six-Month Asset Review
Activities	Actions	Use Cases	Viewing a Stock Chart
Steps	Events	Use Cases	Entering WKN

**Figure 2:** The Experience Matrix

The Experience Matrix presents a hierarchy of user desires mapped to their experiences, our deliverable types, and specific deliverables. For example, goals are carried out through a relationship with a brand (Consors), and are modeled with a persona, of which "Anke, Investor" is one example.

The Experience Hierarchy established a user-centered way of cataloging site capabilities. The high-level user goals (stated in a description of the desired relationship) are made up of intents (modeled with scenarios), that are in turn made up of activities and

Dynamically translating German Web sites into English netted about 30% readable content. Funny gibberish was common. For example, "initial public offerings" translated as "new eating ions" [7].

In a day-long workshop when we presented our personas and scenarios, the client proposed that we add two personas, and we immediately sketched out their profiles. Later in the meeting, when determining the scope of what Viant would need to design, the client decided to leave out designs to support two personas. The personas were relevant and needed to remain, but the design work to support them was deemed less important.

What had happened in this meeting was that a scoping decision had been made based on personas, which was a significant sign that our user-centered approach was being adopted by the client.

steps (modeled with high-level and low-level use cases). Intents could support multiple goals, activities could support multiple intents, etc. Documenting and tracking the site’s capabilities with these modular “experience objects” would link all features to a small number of persona-based user goals.

Goal	Intents	Activities	Steps	
To have one source for references, news, and status of one's entire financial situation. "Comprehensive, one-stop shopping for an overview of all financial information and targeted news." (Anke)	Periodic Review	Log into a customized homepage	Enter User Name Enter password	
		View charts on how stocks have performed	Click Chart Button Enlarge chart	
		Read targeted news stories on what has affected individual stocks in the last 2 months	Get news for stock ---	
		View charts on how funds have performed	---	
		Compare fund performance to other comparable funds.	---	
	Fund Asset Transfer	---	---	---
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**Figure 3:**  
The Experience hierarchy



**Figure 4:**  
Scenario map

The Scenario Map presents columns of experience factors (location, intent, horizon) and one of system features (charts, quotes) as a map in which to draw out scenarios. In this case, Anke, an investor in Germany, is validating and trading stocks and sectors quarterly, using quotes, charts, and customization.

Because we did not have the time or resources to redesign everything on the site, we focused our efforts on several Key Components that were standard mainstays of retail sites and that our research told us were important. These included the homepage, trading form, watchlist, equity search, equity view, and customized news. We also needed to reorganize the global information architecture of the site, and decided to start this effort later in the project, after we had designed the Key Components.

Because the Key Components presented the greatest design challenges and were relatively independent of each other, we chose this “bottom-up” approach to allocate more time to their design. Once they were designed, it was easier to decide where they should go, what they should be named, and how they interrelated architecturally. In this sense we “started in the middle.”

Ideally, we would have had a team of six experienced IAs and designers to practice the UCD process and create the wireframes. Instead, we had only two IAs, with one actually being a usability engineer with few design skills. My coordination duties as Design Lead, and the sheer workload, prevented me from participating as an IA except in a leadership role. We needed people to figure out how the site worked and make drawings to show how to improve it. Fortunately, we had an office full of non-designers with no other

The project's development pace during the design phase was so fast that we adopted perhaps the most unorthodox practice of the entire project. The Consors client representatives visited the Viant office on Tuesdays and Thursdays for design presentations. At this pace, the three teams were working on their designs up to the final minute, which prevented their review by the design lead and project manager before presentation.

As the Design Lead, I was often seeing designs for the first time as they were being presented to the client. This was particularly awkward early in the project when the team members were learning how to use the tools and how to design. I adopted a role that was almost mediation, sometimes forced to critique designs during the presentation.

Although this is not a recommended practice, we had no alternative. The client, seeking to learn more about the design process, actually felt more a part of the team as a result. We also did not want to burn out the team. Throughout the project the team probably averaged 10-11 hour workdays, with one or two weekend days over course of the project.

work to do, who were eager to help (and learn), so our only option was to try to create IAs by combining the skills of multiple people in stretch roles.

Our solution was to form three "IA teams" in Munich, and another later in San Francisco, who were each assigned to design scenario solutions for 2 to 3 personas. Out of a pool containing 2 IAs, 2 Creative Developers, 2 Functional Analysts, and 1 Senior Strategist, the IA teams each had a skilled Adobe Illustrator user, a German speaker, a user research participant, and a competitive research participant. Personas were assigned based on the presence of Key Components to the persona's scenarios, so that each team would have two components to design.

These teams set up "war rooms" in conference rooms so that they could spread out, pin up ideas, and "save the state" of their workspaces. Two conference rooms remained for the rest of the office. The teams designed screen wireframes to depict their scenarios.

My main role as Design Lead was to coordinate and guide the efforts of the teams, particularly when their design work overlapped. One of the main reasons for dividing the overall team into sub-teams assigned to specific personas, scenarios, and components, was to minimize the need for complex coordination among the entire team, as would be needed in a top-down design approach. We knew we had to solve lots of low-level problems, so we decided to solve them first, compare different approaches and share good ideas for consistency, then assemble the pieces later and organize them into a site structure. I would review and support each team's progress independently, and when one team had a good idea that was relevant to another

team, I provided that connection. Later, when the storyboards were assembled, a team's scenarios would often require another team's components. At this point the teams shared and explained their designs, and the inheriting team then depicted the component in a way that supported their scenario.

I took responsibility for forming the overall site IA, informed by my exposure to what all teams were doing. This task became urgent when the teams reached a point where they could not proceed without this plan.

Towards the end of the project, we had too few resources in Munich to design the trading component. So, we assembled a team of two in San Francisco, one of whom was an experienced equity trader. Although this generated good ideas, working at such a distance was too difficult and we had to return the effort to Munich. For the final two weeks, a graphic designer from San Francisco joined the Munich team to design high-fidelity screens of one scenario. These screens would serve as both guideline for our appearance design recommendations, and as a final presentation to the Consors Board of Directors.

## Results

As I mentioned, the designs we developed were not revolutionary. We had some innovative ideas, but the primary effort was to fix major problems, align Consors with its customers, bring Consors.de to parity with the major US sites (with the obvious adjustments for the unique aspects of the German equity markets), and to demonstrate a repeatable process. The solution in this case goes beyond the designs to include the work plan, deliverables, and design process we used to achieve the project's success [Fig 5].

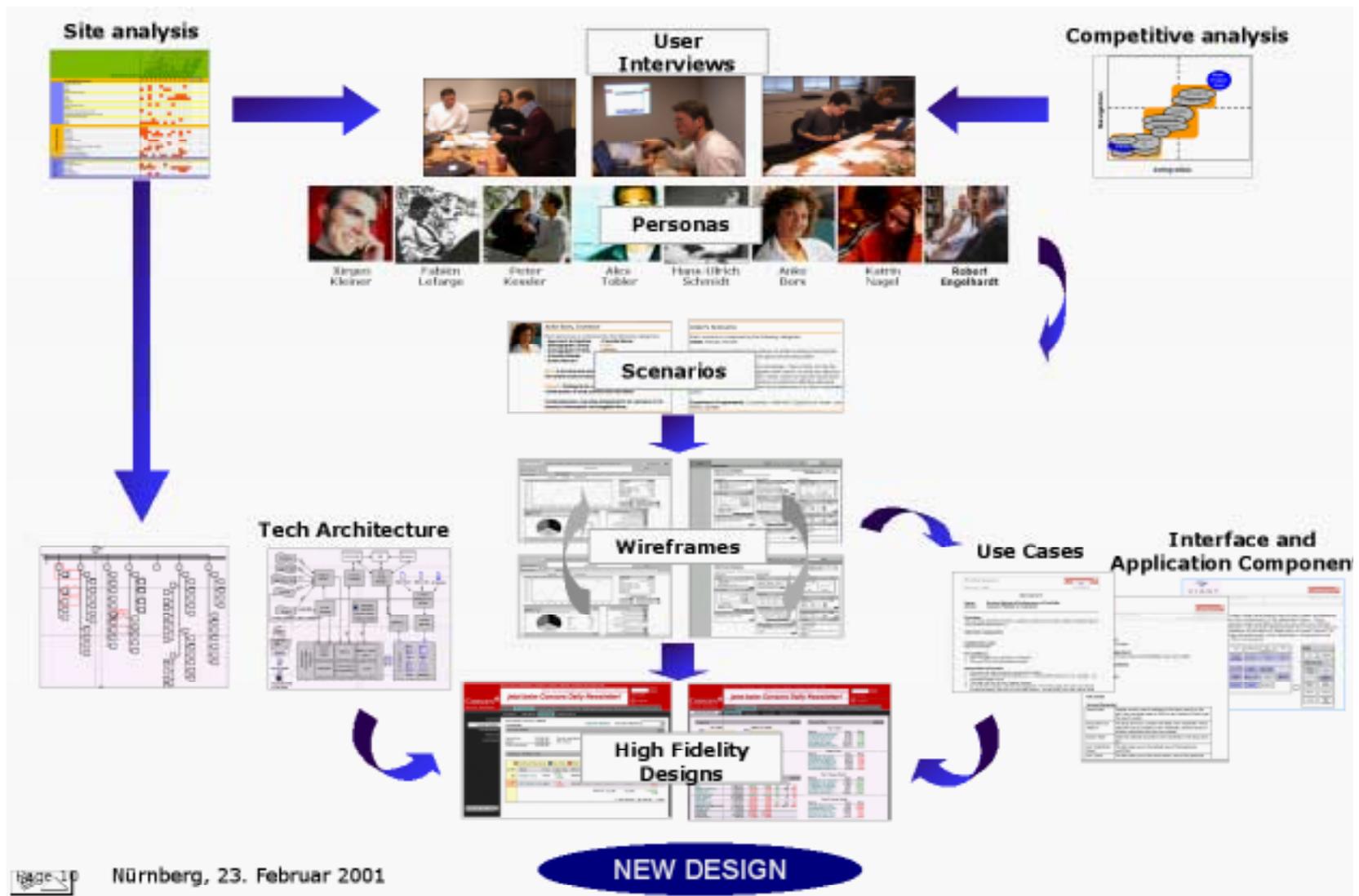


Figure 5: Process/deliverable map (credit: Andreas Boerner)



Figures 11-14 show the original, redesigned, and current (January 2003) versions of key components.

When the project began, Consors.de suffered from poor usability and appearance. To use all its capabilities, users needed six separate logins. Information displays were dense and confusing, the visual design was overbearing and inconsistent, and the homepage was dull. The site was particularly intimidating for beginners, who constituted the most promising new market segment. The biggest problem was the site's tendency to provide too much detailed information in key screens, such as search results and watchlists.

To improve users' ability to find and recognize content and features, and to reinforce Consors' strategic direction towards more long-term, comprehensive customer relationships, we recommended a multiple hierarchy menu system based upon nouns and verbs. Nouns were used for the persistent menu navigation structure (Home, News & Research, Community). On the homepage, an extra menu of verbs (based on the relationship lifecycle: Begin, Find, Trade, Track, Share, and Improve) provide access to the same set of site features and pages as the nouns. Each, however, offers a different way of entering, using, and thinking about the site.



Figure 11: Homepage original, redesign, current



Figure 12: Stock view original, redesign, current

A major weakness of the Consors.de appearance was the overuse of its signature red for links and divider lines. This diluted the effect of red when used for functional purposes, such as to indicate declining equity values.

The UI was also cluttered with redundant and inefficient controls, such as the blue/red buy/sell buttons placed in every search results line.

Most of the project's design effort involved detailed interactions within the components, such as setting up a watchlist or customizing a news page. Although this paper's limited space prevents much of this detail from being presented, some of the overall design is apparent in the images at right.

Our design kept the logo, banner style, and slogan at the top of the pages fairly intact, as our visual design focus was the area below the banner. Our overall design featured a dark left-column background, simple 3-tier navigation system with primary and secondary layers in horizontal rows, and tertiary in the left column. This scheme freed display space for when tertiary was not needed, and provided the tertiary level with the needed room to expand.

In the implemented designs, Consors replaced the banner ads and slogan with our dark band, minimizing the overwhelming red and providing balance and depth.



Figure 13: Search results original, redesign, current



Figure 14: Watchlist original, redesign, current

Unfortunately, the worsening economy in Germany halted Consors' planned ongoing projects and eventually, due to a dramatic drop in trading commissions, led to Consors being acquired by BNP Paribas, a major French bank. This came after Schmidt Bank, a family-owned private bank for the last 174 years and the key investor in Consors, almost went bankrupt and had to be bailed out by five major German banks. When the new bank needed to consolidate redundant Web holdings, it decided to adopt the redesigned Consors site (and team) based on its superior technology and customer loyalty. As the new design was implemented, anecdotal evidence of its success appeared in the form of reduced help desk calls and unsolicited e-mail praising the new design [6].

Despite the Consors project's success, Viant closed its Munich office, along with five others, within five weeks of the project's end. Within eighteen months, Viant would be acquired by Divine, another consulting company, after a number of layoffs. Divine applied for bankruptcy protection in February 2003 and is facing fraud lawsuits.

Our work was very well received by the Consors Board of Directors. During ensuing discussions, our designs were strongly supported by the board member who was initially the most skeptical. Consors declared Viant to be "on a different level" than any consultants they had worked with before, and immediately stopped work on another project being done by a major consulting company and assigned the project to Viant [6].

As of January 2003, Consors has implemented versions of many of the team's basic designs. A surprising result was Consors' enthusiastic embrace of the project personas. Personas seem to have satisfied a large unmet need in the organization, as there was high demand for them to be used as a guide for future strategy [6].

In hindsight, although our international user research added validity to our work, the considerable time and effort involved did not provide a good return on investment. Except for minor differences in local trading practices, results matched what we would have found from further research in Germany. However, had we found sharply different use patterns in the other countries, the research would have paid off immensely. But alas, had we known the results ahead of time, it would not have been research. We did learn about how to do research in multiple countries, and a deeper design effort would have benefited greatly from more of such research. We also should have used Director instead of Illustrator for the initial wireframe work. Once the team learned Director, they said it would have been easier to use from the start.

The case demonstrates several lessons, including 1) How to deliver design value within severe constraints

(stretch roles, work overload, cultural differences, etc.), while leveraging opportunities (patient and supportive client, resourceful and unselfish team) to get the job done, 2) How personas and scenarios can play a major role in focusing a complex design task, 3) How to structure the difficult task of user-centered IA design into small parcels, able to be carried out by non-designers, and 4) How team members that are chosen, trained, and incented to cooperate as a team can overcome obstacles and inexperience through structured task assignments and determination.

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