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Professional Website Design, Development and Applications
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Working with your Webmaster

Knowing the basics will get you the most out of your Web project

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Introduction

“There are those who know they know, there are those who know they don’t know, and then there are those who don’t know that they don’t know.” – Author Unknown

The “Information Technology (IT) Era” has brought us and ever increasing dichotomy between tech-savvy “geeks” and the rest of mankind, comprised of intellectually-challenged “jocks” and brilliant but, technology-challenged “arrogantsia”. While there always has been a division, the present day bifurcation has never had such a devastating impact on technological neophytes. These individuals, who have not fully embraced IT or taken time to study it, find themselves more and more isolated in society.

“I love the ‘Computer Revolution’ - it’s the ultimate ‘Revenge of the Nerds’.”

It has been said that many otherwise normally intelligent people, fail to learn or even attempt to employ the basics out of fear of the technology. Perhaps they view IT as a deep dark abyss to be avoided, or, perhaps what they are really afraid of (and fail to admit) is looking stupid or making mistakes in front of others, something they are generally unaccustomed to doing. Geeks, on the other hand, perhaps due to their smaller egos, know that making mistakes is how you learn.

The precipitous drop in intellectual achievement, and, in particular, technology skills and society’s regard thereof, is attributed in large par, by myself, to the growth and acceptance of ‘Jock Culture’ in the United States.

As a consequence of our beatification of individual physical accomplishments and through the use of opponent annihilation as the only measure of worth, our nation will lag further behind others in education and intellectual acumen and spur on the downfall of our society. If you believe I exaggerate, know this: the most watched television shows in America today are wrestling.

Definitions

A few terms you should know:

SEO – “Search Engine Optimization” Manipulation of code and other complex methods to make a webpage or an entire site search engine friendly in an effort to obtain a better listing or ranking in the search engines, such as google.com

Web Designer – Works with the overall layout, graphic design, images, creativity and usability, think: “artist”.

Web Developer – Works with the webpage code and “develops” applications to work with a website, think “programmer”.

Web Monkey – A largely unskilled Web worker - one with a passable understanding of code, but little else.

Webmaster – Possesses the skills of a web designer and web developer and knowledge of web servers, e-mail servers, databases, networks, intranets, extranets. Charged with the overall maintenance and marketing of website(s). Think: “project manager”.

ICANN - Internet Corporation For Assigned Names and Numbers

Welcome to the Wild, Wild Web

“Surf with care; nothing is free and everything is a lie.”

In this unregulated and generally misunderstood industry where any twelve-year-old may call herself a “Webmaster”, perplexed, frustrated and dissatisfied website owners and surfers abound. Like the snake-oil merchants and highwaymen of the old West, today’s Internet Superhighway teems with everyone from well meaning, however, ill-trained, entrepreneurs to outright scam artists.

“Most calling themselves Webmasters, are benevolent ‘wannabies’; many are web designers, some are web developers. Few are true Webmasters.”

Frustration Incorporated

“Webmasters are from Venus; clients are from Mars”.

Many excellent sites have been “ruined” by website owners, some of whom were my clients. Friction between Webmasters and their clients develop chiefly because of the client’s lack of knowledge or misunderstanding of the complexity as well as the amount of material and information required by the Webmaster to create a well thought out, properly designed, effective website. On top of this, few take the time to familiarize themselves with even the rudimentary aspects of websites at the same time insisting that they know exactly what they need done.

A true cynic could claim that technophobes have actually developed an adversarial relationship with web-savvy individuals. At a minimum, we may agree at times, these groups appear to occupy different worlds.

“At the rate technology is shaping our lives, coupled with its ever increasing complexity, soon everyone will be working for a geek.”

Clients’ Bill of Rights

“Clients Are Entitled To:

1. Good estimates
2. Honest, constant communication
3. A written contract
4. Immediate notification of delays, problems and extra expenses
5. Pay only for work authorized
6. Audit hours if paying by the hour
7. See [sic] the project as it develops
8. Reasonable turnaround and response
9. Reasonable security and privacy precautions
10. Deliverables that work as described in the contract
11. Own all appropriate rights to the site”

- Source: *Secrets of Successful Web Sites*, David Siegel, Hayden Books 1997

Traits of a Good Webmaster

Just as the kid who reads every rule to “Monopoly” printed on the inside the cover of the box, grows up to become a great lawyer, Webmasters are people who read the manuals to all the stuff before putting it together.

A good Webmaster:

- Rarely goes to bed before 3:30 AM
- Does not know what “football” is
- Can program any VCR by intuition
- Actually enjoyed art and English in high school
- Can read/write “On” and “Off” in the binary system

Recently I was being examined by a physician and an intern who asked me what I did. I told them I was a doctor.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, I’m a ‘CD’.” Pause5 for effect: “Doctor of Computers.”(I replied proudly.)

Both giggled.

“Being a CD is more difficult than an MD.”

(Both smirking now.) “Oh yeah? Well, how would you like it if each of your patients got different organs every couple of years?”

Consulting vs. Selling

Would you ask a barber: “Hey, do you think I need a haircut?”

Can you say “commitment”? Most reputable, tech-savvy consultants *want to help you*. They perceive themselves as advisors and mentors and, as such, do not want to “sell” you a website and walk away. Rather, they desire a long-term relationship. A good consultant differentiates him or herself from others by adopting a client’s goals, advising and assisting the client all along the way. Consultants strive to become your partner and help you use the technology to give you a competitive edge, now and in the future.

Bring your car to Jiffy Lube and they happily take your money. Bring your car to a consultant and he tells you to save your money and come back in 3,000 since the manufacturer’s instructions say to change your oil every 6,000 miles, not every 3,000 as you have been doing previously.

Increasing Business Through Internet Marketing

“There’s been so much hype about what a Web site [sic] can do for a small business. Many people think that once a site goes on-line, the work is over. But in reality, that’s when the work begins.”

– Source: If you build it, will they come? 21 tips for realistic results by Mary Gillen
(<http://k9-webdesign.com/webdesign/marketing2/marketing2.html>)

A website can be engaging, and may encourage visitors to make purchases or to contact the website owner or business. However, the Webmaster cannot guarantee an actual increase in sales. Rather, realistic goals should be set and the website should be viewed as an integral part of an orchestrated marketing campaign.

Remember, your Domain name is not a military secret! It does not have to be your company name or have any relationship to what you do. It should, however, be easy to spell, say, type and remember, even better if it contains a keyword or two. Put it on everything from coffee cups to your voice mail. If a website owner complains to me about lack of traffic the first thing I do is look his business card and print media, many times the URL to his site is nowhere to be found.

If you are sending or receiving e-mail using hotmail, AOL or other like services, you are unwittingly promoting *them*. Why not advertise *your* domain? Dump AOL!

Search Engines and ‘SEO’ (Search Engine Optimization)

“What is it about the phrase ‘search engine optimization’ that makes people go crazy? Is it because the phrase itself doesn't really make sense? As Bob Massa from SearchKing is fond of saying, we don't optimize search engines, we optimize Web pages. [sic] So perhaps that's part of the reason why people have a hard time agreeing on what SEO actually is.”

“More likely it's because there are as many ways to optimize a site for high rankings as there are optimizers...” - Internet Search Engine Database, (www.isedb.com)

Successful Search Engine placement and ranking is achieved via Search Engine Optimization (SEO). SEO is the art and science of making each webpage “search engine friendly” by manipulating the underlying code as well as editing the text in an attempt to achieve better or higher “ranking” in the results. This is done in association with Key Word Sets (KWS). The time, (and therefore the cost) of SEO varies for each page. SEO is usually most important on the homepage, however, all aspects of the entire site are taken into consideration by the search engine when its ‘spider’ or robot visits a website.

The bottom line is, if you truly want good rankings, the Search Engine has to be viewed as exercising control over design, content and text. What would ordinarily be viewed as great design, function and as excellent prose, may be killing your chances from the point of view of the Search Engine. In other words, you can't just take your brochure and toss it up on the web. ‘Writing for the Web’ and SEO takes an individual with very specialized skill and experience.

Search Engine Submission

There are many services out there that offer to submit your site to “...thousands of Search Engines”. These are mostly scams, or at best, misleading. The fact is that there are only about three or four Search Engines that matter. These are broken down into two types: those that accept your submission for free and those that want you to pay a fee. Fees can be broken down

into three types: fees for merely listing you; fees for “premium listing” or high ranking; and fees for keyword(s) click.

I personally have an ethical reason for opposing paying a Search Engine for merely listing a website. It seems to me that is a conflict of interest for a Search Engine to charge for listing. This is because for a Search Engine to be effective, it should list the most sites possible. Logic dictates if it turns sites away by charging a fee it cannot then be a good Search Engine. To illustrate my point, the most successful Search Engine, Google, is free and it has surpassed others that charge for listings.

“Do you realize if it weren't for Edison we'd be watching TV by candlelight?” - Al Boliska

Registrar Requirements

“One day in the fifth grade at Runkle School in Brookline, a student asked our math teacher, Mr. Walsh, if it was possible to perform division with negative numbers. We immediately became best friends.”

Domain names are purchased from and subsequently registered via a *registrar*, one that is accredited with ICANN. I have a very poor opinion of one particular Registrar, VeriSign formally Network Solutions, for many reasons, not the least being they charge about double the fee.

Beware too, of the differences between registrars and the services they provide. Beyond initial price, services may become important at a later point, especially if you need other DNS services.

Once a hosting provider is selected, the Registrar will have to be contacted and the information concerning the ‘Name Servers’ used to “point” your domain name to your hosting provider will have to be entered or updated. Absent the correct information in the registrar’s database, your domain name will not function.

Often, the Registrar uses the administrator’s or registrant’s e-mail address as a method of authentication before they will allow any changes. Therefore, it is extremely important to be sure that the domain name account information in the registrar’s database, (commonly called “WHOIS”), is up-to-date and the e-mail address (es) listed are working properly and checked regularly.

In the absence of a specific arrangement to the contrary, the client or registrant (owner) is responsible for ensuring that his or her domain name(s) are properly managed and do not expire. The renewal fee(s) are usually the responsibility of the registrant or website owner.

Beware too the many scams both via e-mail and official-looking “junk” mail that appears to be from *your* registrar scaring you into believing your domain name is about to expire or billing you for services you don’t need, disguised as renewal fees.

As mentioned above, be sure the registrar you select is ICANN accredited. Bottom line? If you are not completely sure of what you are doing, consult with a qualified Webmaster before making any changes or selecting a registrar, or before choosing a domain name in the first place.

“The difference between e-mail and regular mail is that computers handle e-mail, and computers never decide to come to work one day and shoot all the other computers.” – Jamais Cascio

Domain name Selection

Domain names themselves are taken into consideration with respect to Search Engines and keywords. Of chief concern in domain name selection is the ease with which the proper spelling may be conveyed as well as how easily it can be remembered and typed correctly. Avoid including other words within your domain name that may be puzzling to the ear. For example, avoid domain names with the “*kill word*” “the” in them like: “thebestflowershop.com” as everyone will be confused about whether they should include the “the”. Furthermore, “the” is considered one of many “*kill words*” because if you use them, they kill your chances to be found in search engines. Bottom line? Consult with your Webmaster before choosing a domain name.

Print and Other Non-Web Graphics and Images

Oftentimes graphics such as company logos that were made for print media, such as stationary and brochures while fine in print, may look awful on the web. Furthermore, just because a graphic is designed for *the web*, it may not be right for *your* website.

Think twice before using different graphic designers for print and web work. A skilled Webmaster will have a designer that can handle both in a coordinated manner. Handing your Webmaster a new graphic or photograph without consulting him *in advance* and expecting him to “put it on the website” may be a mistake.

Design, Graphics and Changes

Creating the initial design of a website is usually the most difficult and the most important to the graphic identity, branding and impact of the site. Most often website design begins with a color palette or chart. The colors are sometimes taken from an existing logo, graphic or image; or sometimes created from scratch. In any event, the colors are coordinated and painstakingly tuned to work together just as a piano is tuned key by key. Many sites that look “busy”,

“annoying to the eye” or are “unfriendly” simply have too many different colors, or have not been designed using a coordinated color scheme.

Once the colors are selected, their hexadecimal equivalents are obtained for use in HTML code, Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) and other programming formats. These colors and code are used in your website for backgrounds, borders, shading, graphics, logos and icons. Your color palette breathes “life” into your website. The same colors are replicated for all sorts of uses throughout your site.

Caution must be exercised from the beginning, since changing the colors on a whim, is an expensive alteration. That is why a “mock-up” consisting of a page or two are made first. Once accepted by the client, the agreed upon colors have to remain the same unless a full “re-do” is ordered.

Web designers spend hours looking through thousands of photographs and images to find just the right ones for your project. About 10% of the images viewed are actually used. Oftentimes, each image is painstakingly manipulated and edited to suite your website. Many website clients are unaware that any of this tedious work takes place at all.

Content

Content is to a Webmaster what a manuscript is to an editor and publisher. Content is the text and images that goes into your website. Usually, supplying the raw content is the responsibility of the client. However, because content is “seen” by search engines and ultimately effects SEO, content editing should be left to a qualified expert. In addition to editing content for SEO, a qualified Webmaster is also experienced with *usability* issues, such as the unique method of “writing for the web” required to make webpages user friendly.

“Webmasters have a lot in common with dentists; it is like pulling teeth to get content out of their clients.”

“The first of ‘The seven false economies of web design’ is: “Web design is an extension of our current marketing collateral – we can reuse the text and graphics from our print pieces.”

– Source: Secrets of Successful Web Sites.

Images

I maintain that there are four types of images:

1. **Custom Graphics:** Images or photographs created by your Webmaster or graphics department. Custom Graphics are usually specific to one website or project and generally

follow a particular color scheme. Custom Graphics are used for things like page headings, icons, button faces and backgrounds.

2. **Stock Graphics:** Images or photographs produced elsewhere, which are generally mass-produced and royalty free. These may be found on many websites. Stock Graphics are usually used as icons or theme images to convey meaning or emotion. They are usually selected and supplied by the website developer, generally at no extra charge.
3. **Licensed Graphics:** Images or photographs for which you have purchased a license. They may also be seen elsewhere, however, they are less common than Stock Graphics that are royalty free and widely used. An *Exclusive License*, however, is different in that you are the sole owner and therefore the only website that has the right to use that image. Licensed Graphics are used for significant images that have a branding element much like a logo. Generally, you want to limit the use of these images by others. The costs for Licensed Graphics vary widely and, if required, are paid for by the client as an “out-of-pocket” expense.
4. **Commissioned Graphics:** Photographs or artwork done by an individual, usually a professional, hired for a specific reason or project. The client usually agrees to hire a professional under a contract for a fee.

Image Optimization

Image optimization is the process of manipulating an image or photograph so as to achieve maximum efficiency for website publication. An efficient image strikes a balance between appearance (quality) and download time or file size, (weight). All images on all webpages have to be optimized for the Internet.

A webpage is a visual experience. I cannot overemphasize the importance of obtaining professional images for your site. Images become part of your branding; you want to use unique images on your site just as you would want your company logo to be unique.

Your website is your ambassador to the world, please take my advice and hire a professional photographer to take pictures unique to your organization such as your staff, your office, your vehicles, your products and so on.

Copyright and Intellectual Property

Beware the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. You cannot copy and publish on your site anything to which you do not hold the copyright.

Often I am asked to re-publish (on client's websites) newspaper and other previously published articles relating to website owners, or their activities. Even articles they may have written themselves. I have to inform them, sadly, that they don't hold the copyright and it would be a violation to put it on their website.

"On October 12, 1998, the U.S. Congress passed the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, ending many months of turbulent negotiations regarding its provisions. Two weeks later, on October 28th, President Clinton signed the Act into law.

The Act is designed to implement the treaties signed in December 1996 at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Geneva conference, but also contains additional provisions addressing related matters. As was the case with the 'No Electronic Theft' Act (1997), the bill was originally supported by the software and entertainment industries, and opposed by scientists, librarians, and academics." - Source: The UCLA Online Institute for Cyberspace Law and Policy

The DMCA contains very, very severe penalties for violators, as well as the unusual legal tenet that the burden of proof of ownership is placed upon the party being challenged, i.e. "you".

There are different types of ownership and publishing rights. Tip: Before you submit anything to a publisher ask about ownership of the material, specifically "digital rights" (the rights to publish on a website) not just print rights.

To put it plainly: You can purchase a painting to hang on your wall and be under the impression that you are the "owner". You cannot publish the same painting on your website because you do not own the "rights" to the image.

"One day my mother called me up said that she thought someone had sent her a terrible virus in an e-mail attachment, she didn't know what to do, so she sent it to me."

Maintenance

Keeping a website updated and looking new and exciting to the viewer or visitor is important to your return on investment. Visitors will leave quickly if they find incorrect or out of date information. I strongly urge you to view this as an ongoing mission to update your website(s) on a regular basis.

Some people want to be able to update the site themselves; after all it looks so easy. Looks can be deceptive, I urge you to allow only a professional access to your website to perform maintenance.

A professional Webmaster wants to establish a relationship with you beyond launching your website and would be happy to perform any additional work as needed. Work can be performed pursuant to a new proposal, maintenance contract or fee for services, usually in accordance with the appropriate hourly billing rate.

“The internet is a great way to get on the net.” – Bob Dole

Forms

A form is a component of a webpage. The viewer uses the form to answers questions, make selections and enter information. The results of the form are then processed by a script called a “form handler” which is programmed to act upon the data it receives.

For example, the results of the form can go to a database, or, more commonly are sent to an e-mail address. Other components of the script can check the form for errors on the client side or server side using scripting languages such as JavaScript or VBScript. JavaScript is most widely used on the client side to check the form for errors before it is sent to the server to be handled in the desired manner.

The cost of the form depends upon both the size of the form, (that is the number of form “elements”) and what is to happen with the results of the form. Since each form element has to be individually programmed, the greater the number of elements, the longer it takes the Webmaster or Developer to develop the form and program the form handler. If the data is going to a database, for example, the database also has to be programmed to accept the data that is sent. The greater the complexity of the form the more expensive it is to implement.

Pixeldust and other Tarradiddles

“Pixeldust”! I often use this term I coined in response to: “Wow, that’s amazing. How did you do that?” especially when asked by a neophyte. Students of mine and other Webmasters-in-training often remark that they had a tremendous misconception of what it takes to actually build a website.

An accomplished Webmaster usually has significant training and several years of experience. Webmasters offer you their intellectual property in exchange for your paying a fee, which is usually based upon the time it takes to accomplish the task.

“I always knew I was different, after all, I was the only eleven-year-old that went to school with a slide rule instead of a baseball bat.”

Garbage in Garbage out

This saying holds true for websites. Your web project will reflect the effort and resources you put into the task. The more knowledge and understanding *you* have of the technology involved, the smoother the relationship will be with your Webmaster or Developer, consequently your web project will benefit.

“One day at a client’s office I was handed many sheets of hand-written legal paper. Looking perplexed, I was informed that this was the content for her website. I said well, “ this will have to be typed”. She said “ the website is your responsibility”. I said, “ Yes, I will be happy to bill you \$75 an hour for typing”. I was told to come back tomorrow. The next day when I arrived, I found fifty pages of neatly typed paper on the counter. The final page was still in the IBM electric typewriter, right next to the computer.”

About the Author

Jonathan M. Shubow is the president of *Internet Development Consulting, Inc.* of Boston, Massachusetts (www.idevusa.com). He has a Certificate of Web Production and Management from Emerson College and a Certificate in Client/Server VB/ASP Development from Clark University’s Computer Career Institute. Jonathan teaches web design & development and has endeavored to make computers obey him for over twenty years.