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WHY & QUALIFY

I wrote this article to help YOU. Please do not take any of this personally, it is meant to be constructive. Lately I have noticed a proliferation of poorly built web sites. It is not that the intent was poor, just that so many of us are diving into something we know little about. We have a great story to tell, but the WAY we tell it may be lacking. It is all about Mass-Communications. Never in history have we been able to communicate with so many. Here is where I come in and hope to help.

I am not going to sell you software or direct you to any web sites. That part is for you to figure out. I intend to write about generalities and to get you to think from a different perspective. If you really need personal help, drop me an email and I'll see what I can do.

You may ask- "What qualifies me to tell you how to build a better web site?" The answer is: Not much. If you want real help, hire a webmaster. You can get a good one for less than a thousand dollars for less than a weeks work. For free, use me. I have built 3 sites over the years, and my most recent one gets thousands of hits a week. I will write about many issues you can come across and for each rule I give you, I still break them from time to time. These are not laws of physics but ideas toward an end.

ORGANIZATION

The biggest mistake we all make is lack of organization. It is difficult to maintain logic and structure in a full grown web site. We as humans like to have things grouped together in an orderly sequence. This allows us to digest a big subject with small bites of related information. But as we build a site our mind wanders. It jumps from idea to idea. So, it takes practice to do organizational activities.

If your site is about, say as an example, your stamp collection; you could organize it by the cost of the stamp. Or you can group them by subject (on the stamp). After thinking about it, you may realize that the reason you have a web site is to sell stamp display frames. In this case you might want to organize by size or shape. The point is, consider all your ideas that you want to present on your site and think about how they can be displayed. You may want to organize by the highest common denominator.

PAGE LENGTH

Some of the best web sites start as a single page. The problem is, it just keeps getting longer and longer. To get any viewer ship you have to catch the web surfers' attention and keep it. In today's fast paced world, you only have a second or two to do this. If the surfer has to scroll down very far, you have lost them. I don't know what the correct page length is. I try to keep mine at about one or one and a half screens full. There are times when this can be stretched. If you have some ones attention and they are intent on your chosen subject, let'er fly. Just remember that attention span is short. I'll say more about those first two seconds and how to optimize that time in a later subject.

KNOW YOUR VIEWERS

Is your site for kids or college professors? How your site looks and reads may drive your web surfer away. Flashy bright colors are great for kids, but well formed grammar with an artistic touch will more impress a learned crowd. Remember who you are writing for.

BACKGROUND & BORDERS & BANNERS

Many web sites use a simple background picture. This adds pizzazz to spruce up a site. It also helps identify to a returning surfer that they have indeed come back to the right site. A novice webmaster just uses a picture, any old picture. That is fine unless the background interferes with the content of the page. If you can't read the words, what good is the background? Getting a background picture to work just right is beyond the scope of this article. It might be better to just use a blank background. There is a problem with that too though. Different browsers show colors slightly differently. The same is true for layout, page width and text alignment. You should check these with several different web browsers and on different computers to be sure it displays like you think it does. More about that later.

Boarders are blanks regions or margins to improve eye focus and concentration. No newspaper puts print on the edge of the paper. No TV station zooms into a news reader to clip off their ears. There is good reason for this. Otherwise it just looks un-natural. Please treat your web site the same way. Don't allow your typeset or pictures to BE the boarder. Use a blank space or background image to frame your words or subject.

What is a banner? That is the part of your website that is uniquely YOU. It identifies your site instantly for all surfers. This is very important for returning customers (you ARE providing them a service). Typically a banner is a logo, trademark or graphic placed at the top of the web site home page, or every page, to identify its ownership. If you don't have one, get one. It doesn't have to be fancy. Even your name can be used as a banner. On professional sites the banner is a drawing or picture, often a company logo. It should take up less than 20 % of that page. More than that is too over powering to get your message across.

STYLE & CONSISTANCY

I will not tell you how to get 'Style'. I will tell you to think about how you want your site to look and then use that style consistently though out your site. Use the same size and shape of fonts for titles and headliners. Use the same background, border and shapes. This way, a web surfer knows intuitively when they have accidentally left your site. Humans are visual by nature. Our minds key on pictures and shapes, not on sentences.

LINKS ARE UNDERLINED

Sorry, I see SO many sites where the author wanted to stress a word or two. On paper (or word processor) this is easily done my underlining. In web surfing, that is a big No-No. It has special meaning to surfers. It has been this way since the invention of the World Wide Web. One of the key ingredients of the web is hyper-text. Yes, that is why HTML stands for hyper-text markup language. Today we just call it links, but what it does is links one document to another or site to site. **In the beginning was the link and all links were underlined. And only links were to be so marked.** They were marked to stand out, as a link. Today there are several ways of identifying a link. You can use buttons, mouse-overs or colors that stand out. You can also use a title tag like a pop up message. It might be best to use two ways of identifying a link, just to make it obvious to hard headed viewers like me. The point is, be careful about underlining and when you finish your web page, please proof read it for proper Web-Grammar.

UPDATE - UPDATE – UPDATE

As you start a site you may have NO idea where it will go or what it will become. The only thing constant is: CHANGE. The only way to keep up with change is to work at it. This is hard to do. It takes up lots of time. It is important.

Let me give you a tip. Date your pages. There are two reasons for this.

1. To show off to your web surfers that it HAS been updated.
2. So you know WHEN it was last updated.

I find it convenient to put the date with a copyright notice at the bottom of my pages.

EDITORS ARE TOOLS

Dump Microsoft Front Page. How is that for direct?

This is the problem that caused me to begin writing this article. Microsoft did not invent the World Wide Web. Nor did they invent PCs, HTML or hardly anything else of importance. They ARE the defacto ruler of PC operating systems, but they keep making the same mistakes. They insist that everyone is as dumb as an ox. Wait, before I go off on a rampage, let me get back on subject. The worse web sites I find, crash my browser. Most of those sites were written (hastily) using Front Page. A lot of Front Page tags only work in Microsoft Internet Explorer. To have a well built web site, our code needs to stick to proper syntax, be valid and work on most browsers.

HTML editors like Dreamweaver, Nve or Front Page are simply tools. If you use them, well fine, but; don't let the tool drive your creativity. A painter doesn't use just one brush. A machinist doesn't use just one wrench. Please use your HTML editor only for a draft, and then fine tune it with your skill and knowledge. If you have none, learn it. It is not that hard. If I can do it, you can too. My web site is mostly done using notepad. If you must use Front Page, please use a newer version, it is now better than what it was a few years ago.

JUST THE FACTS JACK

You have 2 seconds to grab someone's attention. After that, it is won or lost. In those 2 seconds you don't have time to mess around. No frilly stuff. Your page has to load fast and show the important stuff first. If you have a T-1 high speed connection, great; but most of your readers will be using dial-up speed. After you have their attention, then you can impress them with whiz-bang animation or scripting. Please put the slow stuff on another page of your site. Use your main page (home, index) as a landing site or table of contents.

Hey, a bit about pictures. Most pictures on the web are of two types, gif or jpg. There are others like png or tif but they are rare. Without getting technical (which I could), let me just say to use gif for backgrounds, repeating elements or blocky constructs. Use jpg for photographs of people or curvy things.

Something else about pictures and speed; there is a difference between actual size and apparent size. This is important because of downloading speed. Yes, a picture one half the width will take up 1/16 th of the file size and download time. But, the HTML tag for image allows you to specify the apparent size even if different that the actual size. It is a bad idea to use this feature of HTML. The photo should be edited before it is posted on your site so that the picture size is the same size you want to appear on your web page. I have seen several web sites (probably written on Microsoft Front Page by a beginner) where a picture looks small, but the real file size and download time indicate that it is huge. This is a case where the web writer is only fooling himself and proving his lack of HTML knowledge. The poor web surfer has to wait for the picture to load before he can read what else is on the page. If you forget to use the IMG tag correctly (with size information), the browser will load the image before displaying the rest of the page. The average web surfer will not be back any time soon.

What about graphic compression (other than size). You compress jpg by making it loose its clarity. You compress a gif by assigning fewer colors to its pallet. Either way you don't get something for nothing. There is a lot more to this subject that I don't have room to explain here. If this applies to you, try consulting your graphics editing program help files, or do a search on the web.

ROBOTS, SEARCHES & FAVICONS

If you don't know what these things are, you need to learn about them, more than I tell you here.

Robots are a fact of life. They are here and will not go away. A Robot is an automated data collection device, used by search engines to catalog the internet. You need to use robot tags and files in your HTML to limit them and to make them work for you. If you can do this, the robots will reward you by listing your site on that search engine.

Do not pay to be added to a search engine. Write well, use robots wisely, follow my advice and you will be on more search engines than you can shake a stick at. It doesn't hurt to trade links with another site though.

A favicon is a Microsoft invention to use an icon in your favorites. It must be installed on the web site by the web master for it to work. If you don't have one, do a search on the web to learn more.

COMPATABILITY

I have touched on this before, but it is important so it deserves another angle. MS won, damn it. There is nothing as universal as MS Internet Explorer. I hate that, but it is true. Still, not every one uses it. Not every one has the same PC. More importantly, most users have not upgraded. Some are still using I.E. 4 (I don't know why). If you use a tag or function that only works in the latest version, do it in a way that does no harm. Tell your audience that the next page may only work for someone using that X-thing. Offer others a less dramatic alternative. There are even ways for your site to test what browser is being used, and direct that user to an alternative page. Don't lock out half of your possible audience by using non-compatible HTML.

Another part of compatibility is screen size. Not everyone has the same web browser or even the same size monitor. The screen resolution is probably the key thing here. You don't know what resolution your web surfer will be using. Please test your site using these resolution settings:

640 X 480 800 X 600 1024 X 768 1152 X 864 1280 X 1024

800 and 1024 are the most common so build your site to look great using them, but your site should be usable on all of these settings. PDA or Cell phone users of the web will have even lower resolution.

Remember that typically if the screen size is increased, the number of useable colors may decrease (depending on your hardware). Different browsers take up some of this space for scroll bars and tools bars so the viewable size of a web page is always less than the resolution size.

2 Cents On Web Site Design

It will be impossible to make everyone happy, but you can do your homework to minimize harmful effects. When you are happy with how your site looks, try it on yourself with a different screen resolution and a different web browser. Then have a friend or co-worker try it with a different computer. Just because your system is best for you, don't think that everyone has the same opinion, because they don't. You should have noticed that I keep telling you to use multiple browsers. I keep saying it because it is that important. Most of them are free (or have a free version). Please download, install and use them. Even old versions of browsers will help you make your site usable for more people.

W3C OR NOT

Who sets the standards? Well, really no one does. The official body is the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) at <http://www.w3.org> . Unfortunately they would like the world to follow their lead but, they never lead. Someone else (Microsoft, Mozilla, Apple, whoever) is at the cutting edge introducing something new all the time. So, the W3C is forever playing catch up. In an ideal world I would recommend the W3C. They should be the group you turn to for validation of your web site. In the real world, I just do what works.

Why do I have to learn HTML the hard way since my program does it all for me? Why do we have to study English in school? Because when we're off in different parts of the country (The USA) if we didn't study a common language, we'd never figure out regional dialects (southerner's or slang or people from Minney-soda that sound really funny). Knowing what makes up the language of HTML enables web designers to communicate with the browsers more easily. Each dialect or browser behaves slightly differently. Knowing the rules of the language and how the browser reacts to them makes us better communicators.

DOMAIN & SERVERS

A World Wide Web server is the computer your web site files reside on and from which, is delivered to your viewers. The domain is a unique name that points to your site. If the URL (address) of the site includes a suffix with a "/"; this indicates that this site is piggy-backing on someone else's domain. The "/" is not part of the domain name, but is the rest of the address inside the domain.

You can own a server or a domain or both, but they cost money. Each is separate. The domain must then be registered, which also costs money.

Beginning web sites usually start on a "FREE" server. That is not the best, just the cheapest. Generally you get what you pay for, generally. Free sites usually are paid for by ads or by subscription like from your Internet Service Provider. Your I.S.P. might provide some limited information. These have a URL such as:
"www.company.com/yoursite".

2 Cents On Web Site Design

It is all a matter of money. How much are you willing to spend? If your site grows enough or becomes important enough, you should think about getting your own domain (or server). I can guess pretty well how good a site is just by reading the URL to see if the site is paid for or not. There is a lot more to this. If you are interested, contact me please.

NOW YOU KNOW

Before we even begin to design a web site, or write a line of code, we should understand a little bit more clearly the importance of useful content, good design, the intended audience and all sorts of compatibility issues. Once these things are understood then we can go on to design a successful and highly visited site.

CREDITS

I claim none of these ideas as my own. (The copyright notice below is there to prevent my words from being misused.) This work is simply my observations of what I see done wrong, from what I have learned from others more intelligent than myself. I wrote it to help you revise your site to make it better. Now that I have written this, I think I'll go back to my site and revise it too. I wish you good luck doing yours. Have fun.

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