[PDF] Creating A Web Site: The Missing Manual

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Description:

Get everything you need to plan and launch a web site, including detailed instructions and clear-headed advice on ready-to-use building blocks, powerful tools like CSS and JavaScript, and Google's Blogger. The thoroughly revised, completely updated new edition of Creating a Web Site: The Missing Manual explains how to get your site up and running quickly and correctly.

5 Tips for Budding Web Site Creators
By Matthew MacDonald

These days, aspiring Web site creators like you pick up a lot of Web-design theory before you start

working on your pages. But as deadlines loom and the value of "do it right" falls victim to the imperative to "do it right now," even the best of us sometimes toss good practice out the window. That's perfectly understandable and no cause for panic—after all, if Web weavers waited until their pages were perfect before uploading them, the Internet would be a very lonely place indeed. However, sometimes innocent-seeming shortcuts can cause headaches later on. Here are a few pieces of Web advice that site creators ignore at their own risk:

1. Always include a doctype.
Web browsers can translate two languages into Web pages: old-school HTML and today's XHTML. You have to tell the browser which language (called markup) you use, and you do that with a document type definition, better known as a doctype. Doctype is arcane code that looks like this:

< !DOCTYPE html PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD XHTML 1.0 Strict//EN"
"http://www.w3.org/TR/xhtml1/DTD/xhtml1-strict.dtd">

If you forget to include a doctype, your pages will appear annoyingly inconsistent. That's because some browsers, including Internet Explorer, switch into a backward-compatibility state known as quirks mode when they encounter unidentified markup; in essence, they attempt to act like an outdated browser from the 1990s. Common problems that result include text that appears at different sizes in different browsers and layouts that wind up in different configurations depending on your browser.

2. Keep formatting instructions out of your markup.
In a rush, it's easy to get lazy and apply inline styles (or even worse, formatting tags like < font >) to a page's XHTML or HTML. But it's rare for a web site creator to use a particular format just once. Most often, you'll use a design--say for a column, heading, or note box--elsewhere on the same page or on another of your site pages. To ensure consistency across your site and to make it easier to fine-tune the look and feel of your pages, move all your formatting instructions to a central location: an external style sheet. That way, when a browser processes a page, it grabs this central set of instructions and applies them to the page (see the illustration for the sequence of events).

3. Be under renovation, not under construction.
Think of your favorite store. Now imagine shopping there if you had to wander around half-lit floors while dodging ladders, pylons, and heavy-duty construction equipment to find the aisles that still have products on the shelf.

It's a similar story on the Web, where a site with empty pages, "under construction" messages, and vague promises of upcoming content will send visitors away in droves. Yes, it's true that your Web site won't be complete when you first upload it. But make sure that what's there is genuinely useful on its own, and don't draw attention to gaps and shortcomings. Instead, keep improving what you've got.

4. Think twice before you adopt copy-and-paste design.

Typically, Web sites use the same page design across all their pages. For example, noodle around Amazon and you'll always see a menu header at the top of the page and a sidebar on the left.

There's a very special circle in Dante's Inferno reserved for Web developers who try to achieve consistent design by copying and pasting their XHTML from one page to another. It's almost impossible to manage or modify this mess across all your pages without making a mistake, even if you have a small Web site.

If you need a repeating page design, pick a suitable solution from the available options, each of which comes with its own caveat. Your can use server-side includes (which require Web host support), page templates (provided you have a Web design tool like Adobe Dreamweaver or Microsoft Expression Web), frames (which can exhibit quirks), or a Web development platform (if you're willing to take a crash course in programming).

5. Keep an eye on your visitors.

Is anyone here? There's no point in having a Web site if you're not willing to pay attention to what content draws and keeps visitors and what falls flat on its face. Remarkably, the best way to do that is with a free yet industrial-strength service called Google Analytics. You simply copy a small bit of tracking code to each of your pages and within hours you'll be able to answer questions like "Where do my visitors live?", "How long is a typical visit?", and "What pages are their favorites?"

About the Author Matthew MacDonald is a developer, author, and educator in all things Visual Basic and .NET. He's worked with Visual Basic and ASP since their initial versions, and written over a dozen books on the subject, including The Book of VB .NET (No Starch Press) and Visual Basic 2005: A Developer's Notebook (O'Reilly). He has also written Excel 2007:The Missing Manual, Excel 2007 for Starters: The Missing Manual, Access 2007:The Missing Manual, and Access 2007 for Starters: The Missing Manual, all from O'Reilly.

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