**GET THE SCOOP ON...**
Your Web site objective ▪ Your audience ▪
Types of planning ▪ Content considerations

# Designing Your User Interface

**Y**ou are creating a Web page or site for one reason: to communicate something to someone. You may be trying to sell beach balls, or creating a showplace for your limericks, or building a fan site for your favorite supermodel. You must think about the visitors to your site and what you are trying to say, and realize that the Web site content and navigation are the ways you will be bridging the gap. This seems obvious, but a lot of Web designers never spend any time planning. Visit some random sites on the Web for a few minutes, and you'll see what I mean.

As important as it is to pay attention to what other Web designers do, both good and bad, there are other useful bits of information you can take away from the sites you visit. Pay attention to the different types of Web sites. Is the site you are visiting selling some product? If so, does it sell it effectively to you? Are you the target audience for this product? Begin noticing what other sites do well, and then extend that new knowledge to your own site.  Even just a few minutes of planning and research can help you end up with a much more effective Web site.

# Figuring out your purpose

There are four categories of Web sites you may want to build. Macromedia Dreamweaver provides special site development features that are especially useful for each particular type of Web site.

## The sales site

On the Web you'll find sites selling literally everything; from toasters that imprint images of the Olsen twins on bread to sparkling new Porsches. If your site is selling online, you will want to have links to your e-commerce pages easily accessible from your main page. You may also be selling your products indirectly, by describing them and providing links to your resellers.

Dreamweaver has some page design suggestions designed to help you get a quick start creating catalog pages (see Figure 1.1).
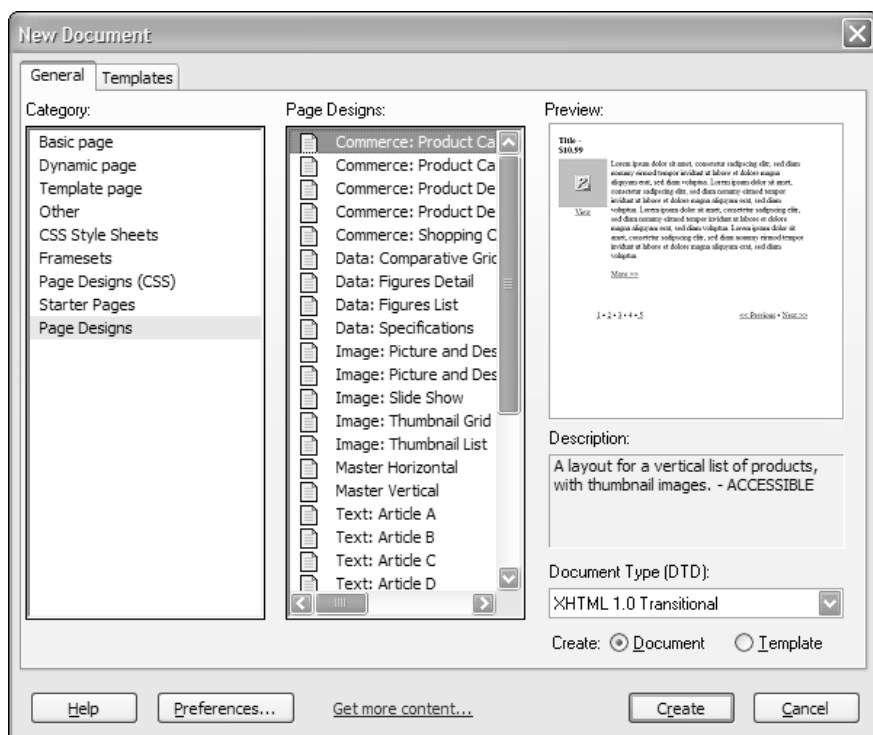


**Figure 1.1.** Dreamweaver offers many page design suggestions.

To access these page designs, start the Dreamweaver program and choose File ⇨ New. The dialog box shown in Figure 1.1 opens. From the Category options on the left, click Page Designs. The adjacent Page Designs list displays a number of Commerce page designs.

## The company site

Most companies today have an Internet presence. Their Web sites are important for increasing business. They can also benefit the company by providing consumers information about the company's products, assistance, company history, and the location and hours of the office. A well-built, attractive Web site is like a nice storefront. A shoddy, unattractive site can be more detrimental to the company than not having a Web site at all.

Dreamweaver has included a few starter pages that can help you get some ideas for your own corporate Web presence. Figure 1.2 shows the New Document dialog box with a starter page selected.
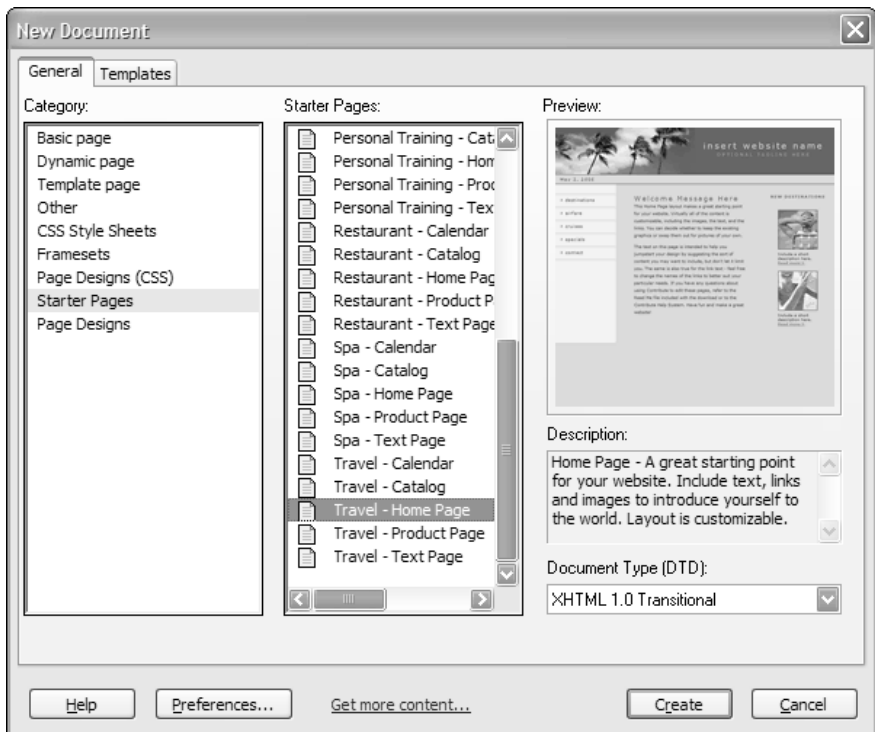


**Figure 1.2.** Starter page of New Document dialog box

**Bright Idea**

It isn't easy to tell what the starter pages actually look like without selecting one and clicking the Create button. Try creating a few and take a closer look at them. Keep in mind that fonts and colors can be easily changed to suit your taste.

To access these page designs, choose File ⇨ New. The dialog box shown in Figure 1.2 opens. From the Category options on the left, click Starter Pages. The adjacent Starter Pages list displays a number of page designs. Selecting one of these opens it in the Dreamweaver interface. These pages are easily customizable.

## The dynamic information site

Dynamic information sites are listed as a separate category, but clearly sales or company sites can contain dynamic information. Any site with information that changes frequently (such as sale prices) fits in this category. Often the pages are filled with content stored in databases and are automatically generated with scripts. Dreamweaver provides templates for dynamic pages created in a number of different languages. These pages provide the basis for setting up a live database connection. Dreamweaver also provides tools to help you set up a live data connection and allows you to view the live data while you are designing the page.

To access the dynamic page designs, choose File ⇨ New. The dialog box shown in Figure 1.2 appears. From the Category options on the left, click Dynamic page. The adjacent Dynamic Pages list displays a number of different language templates. Selecting one of these opens it in the Dreamweaver interface.

While viewing the New Document dialog box, also take a look at the page designs for text pages. These are useful for article layout.

## The fan or club site

The Internet is a fantastic place to meet people with common interests. Having a site devoted to your cause or passion can give you a great way to communicate your thoughts and allow others to express theirs. Some of the features a fan or club site can have to facilitate meeting and communication include a bulletin board, member directory, and live chat program. Users typically have a login on these sites if they wish to participate. Dreamweaver sample page designs include a login page and a comment form.

To access these page designs, choose File ⇨ New. The dialog box shown in Figure 1.2 opens. From the Category options on the left, click Page Designs. The adjacent Page Designs list displays a number of user interface (UI) page designs.

# Understanding your visitors

From the visitor who accidentally finds your site to the customer who is looking specifically for your site, you have to decide to whom you are trying to appeal. While your site can't offer everything to everyone, knowing what your visitors will expect can help you target the most desirable ones. I have divided Web visitors into five groups:

- Random visitors
- Bored workers
- Window shoppers
- Buyers
- Information seekers

## Random visitors

By random visitors, I mean those who stumble onto your site inadvertently. They may have clicked a link to your site by mistake, or incorrectly typed a URL. Chances are good that your site won't keep their attention and they will quickly leave. In your Web log you will be able to see that they visited one of your pages and then left, sometimes not even staying long enough for all of the images on your page to show up on their browser. I only mention this group to help you account for all the users you will see. When your site first goes online, these may be your most frequent visitors.

## Bored workers

Every office and school has them. These are people who are taking a break from what they should be doing and trying to amuse themselves the only way they can as they sit in front of a computer in the office: Web browsing. This group is looking for entertainment. They look for jokes to e-mail friends and relatives, and Macromedia Flash animations to send around the office. Any site that provides interesting, frequently changing content is attractive to this group. Some sites that they might enjoy visiting include The Onion (theonion.com), American Greetings (americangreetings.com),

and Disney (disney.com). Also extremely popular are any sites offering online Flash or Java games. There are also the temporarily popular sites. Sometimes the location of a funny Flash movie or odd Web site will be passed from one person to another until everyone in the huge company has seen Oolong the rabbit balance food on his head.

Is it worth your effort to try to capture the attention of this group? It may be, it depends on your purpose. Some sites encourage heavy traffic because their revenue comes from advertisements on the page. The more eyes that see the ads and the more clicks on the ads, the more money they make.

If you do capture the interest of bored workers, bear in mind that they are looking for variety. Your site will have to change frequently and maintain the same level of entertaining content that drew people to it in the first place.

## Window shoppers

Window shoppers are looking for bargains. If you are selling something, you will be visited by window shoppers. They are thinking about purchasing, but need to be convinced. They will not give you much time to convince them before going to your competitor's site. Think about how your product looks on your Web site to the window shopper. Here are a few questions to ask yourself:

- Does the page look professional?
- Is the product presented in a clear, attractive, but quickly loading photograph?
- Are the features of the product presented accurately and concisely?
- Is the price competitive?
- Can viewers easily see how to purchase this product?
- Would you have confidence buying this product from this company?

Being able to answer "yes" to these questions will help you convert window shoppers into *buyers*.

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**Bright Idea**

Spend some time visiting Web sites that you personally buy products from online. Notice how easy some of the best ones make product searching, researching product features, reviewing user ratings, and ultimately purchasing products.

## Buyers

After researching a product, window shoppers eventually turn into buyers. Buyers coming to your site expect to be able to locate the product and purchase it as quickly and easily as possible. They don't want to be distracted by other unrelated products. Some of the best sites do try to interest buyers in other products, but they do it in an unobtrusive manner. Product listings on Amazon.com, for example, contain links to related products, but Amazon puts them after the product information. The link to purchase is always easy to find. Take a look at Figure 1.3.

I've circled the Add to Shopping Cart button, prominently located on the upper right of the page. I've also circled some other product recommendations. These are located below all the most important information on the current product.
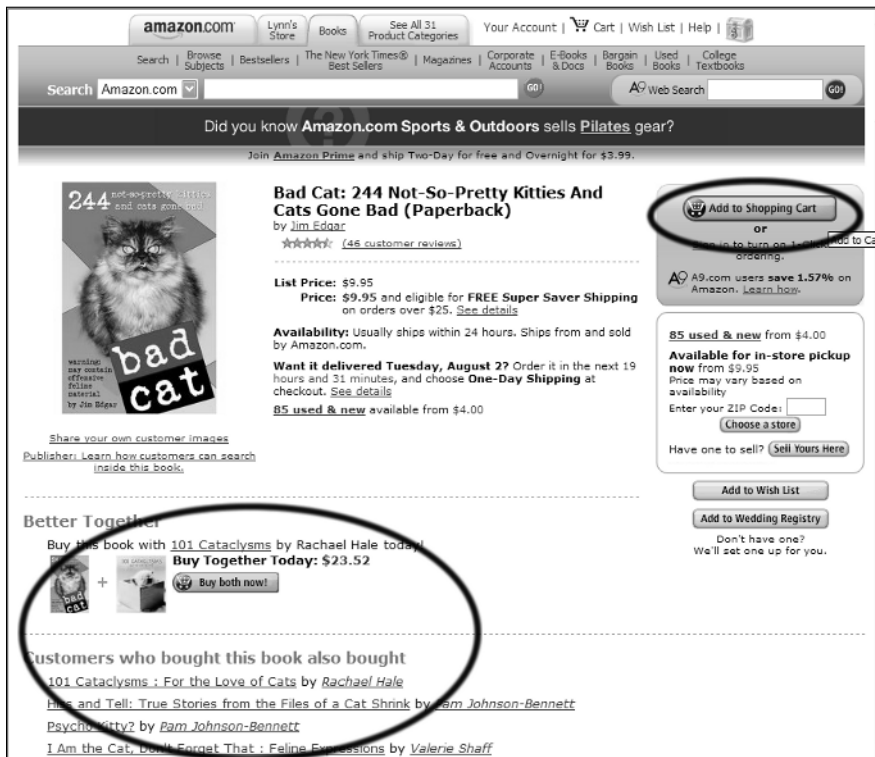


**Figure 1.3.** Amazon.com product page

> **Inside Scoop**
>
> I find that presenting information in a number of different formats is the best approach. While it does take more time to present your matchbook collection both chronologically and geographically, for example, you will attract more visitors and your site will be more comprehensive.

## Information seekers

Window shoppers are seeking information about a product, but information seekers are researching less specific things. Information seekers want to know who wrote the screenplay for *Soylent Green*, the current analysts' ratings of Google's stock, and information about Amish quilt patterns. They want to know everything. Information seekers use search engines constantly. No matter what your site is like, information seekers will visit it.

The key to attracting information seekers is providing lots of accurate information and keeping it current. For example, if you are running a site devoted to your favorite hobby, collecting matchbooks, think carefully about how your information is presented. Will it be less confusing to your visitors if your information is presented chronologically? Or geographically? Ask people who share your interest their opinions of the best approach.

If you know what groups you want to attract, you can build a Web site more likely to attract those groups. Here are some things to keep in mind while planning your site:

- Decide who you are trying to attract.
- Figure out what they are looking for and how they locate it on the Web.
- Ask your friends who are members of this group what attracts them to sites like the one you are planning to build.
- Survey existing sites and pay attention to what works and doesn't work. Incorporate the best ideas.
- Design for your audience, not for yourself. Keep your audience in mind at all times.

## Creating a site structure

Now that you have considered both the purpose of your site and your audience, you need to plan your site structure. You may have a clear understanding of the type of site you are creating and who your audience

is, in which case your planning may be quite simple. However, you may need to merge several types of Web sites if you seek to attract several different types of visitors. For example, you want to create a corporate identity site that offers customer support for products, provides investor information, and even sells products. Trying to satisfy the different visitors to your site can make your planning tricky. Breaking your planning up into stages can help.

## Strategic planning

Knowing your audience and what your site needs to contain to appeal to that audience is the first part of strategic planning. Knowing what your competitors are offering your audience is the next. I can't stress strongly enough the importance of knowing what is already out there on the Web that is succeeding. And knowing what is failing will help you too.

Here's one more thing worth keeping in mind as you plan your strategy: If you know your audience and what you're trying to communicate to them, you will have done a good job. If you want people to visit, you have to offer them what they want. Simple, right?

Not really. Large companies spend millions of dollars a year trying to analyze what their audiences want. Throwing money at the problem and hiring firms to conduct studies certainly improves their accuracy, but sometimes it's the kooky creative idea that is wildly popular. I am not saying that you should make your site something completely new and different. I am saying that while you are sensibly addressing the obvious desires of your audience, leave a little room to play with new ideas. If they don't work, discard them and try something else.

## Resource planning

Just as important as knowing your purpose and audience is knowing how much time and money you can afford to put toward the creation of your site. Unless you have free access to a Web server, your Web hosting will cost you money. Online transactions will cost you money. Large numbers of people viewing your content may also cost you money. You may also need to purchase graphics or content or hire additional help to build parts of your site. Also, think about the time involved with creating and maintaining each part of your site. It's easy to dream big, but try to be realistic. It's probably best to not include that message board if you can't spend time monitoring it, or that company news page if it will be updated only every two years.

> **Inside Scoop**
>
> If you don't have time to finish a Web page, think twice about putting that page on the Web. "Under Construction" gives your visitors the message that the site is dusty and defunct. If you must indicate that a page is not finished, at least include a date that it will be finished — and stick to it. Or better yet, finish the page before putting it up at all.

In planning your resources, break down the pieces of the site you are building and pencil in how long each will take and how much money each will cost. Be realistic. These numbers will change, but having them in front of you can help you prioritize the most and least important parts of your site. You will know which you should build first, and which you may want to reconsider including at all. Your Lance Armstrong Emulator program might sound wonderful, but if it takes two months to build it, you might want to put it off until version 2 of your site. Look at your Web site as an ever evolving project that can grow and change.
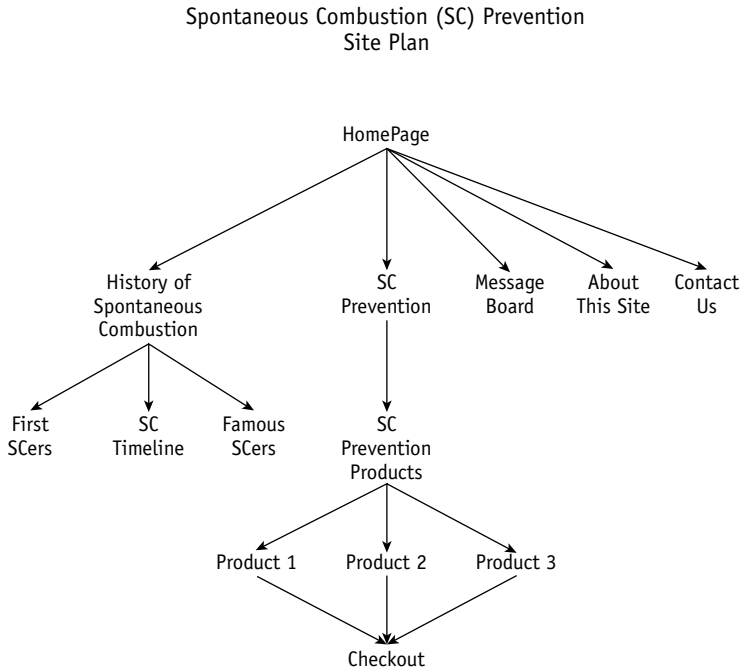
## Site architecture

The simplest way to begin planning the architecture of your site is to sit down with a few sheets of paper and create a simple flowchart. Figure 1.4 shows a very simple diagram of a site.

The Spontaneous Combustion (SC) Prevention Web site serves as an historical reference about spontaneous combustion, an online store selling products to keep it at bay, and a community where interested visitors can talk about it on the message board. Each line simply means there is a link on the page that will take you from one page to another.

This is a good way to begin planning. Create a list of all the pages your site will have and map them out. This flowchart doesn't tell you everything, however. For example, it doesn't make clear that all the top-level navigation (History of Spontaneous Combustion, SC Prevention, Message Board, About This Site, Contact Us) have links to each other. Figure 1.4 represents only the links from the home page to the other pages. Each page should have its own flowchart, showing all the SC Prevention site links on the page as lines to those pages. You could also indicate with different colored lines or arrows things like dynamic pages, pages that access databases, or multimedia. You can find software, such as Microsoft Visio, that will help you design sophisticated flowcharts.

**Bright Idea**

If a page is important to your audience, don't require them to navigate to it by clicking links on three pages in a row to get to it. Make it one of the top-level pages, and make the link to it highly visible. Overall navigation of your site should be simple and hassle-free.

Spontaneous Combustion (SC) Prevention
Site Plan



**Figure 1.4.** Creating a simple flowchart can help you plan your site architecture.

## Technology planning

If you think you will want dynamic data, now is the time to research databases. If you will be selling your product on your site, you should be setting up a process to handle credit card transactions securely. If you think your site will be popular, don't automatically assume that your host can handle it.

There are many small but important technological aspects of your Web site that you should begin researching. Here are a few considerations:

■ Which operating system would you prefer on your Web host?

■ How much disk space will all your Web site files take up?

- Will your visitors need a shopping cart?
- What languages will you want? Dreamweaver offers support for a number of languages, including PHP, ASP, and Cold Fusion.
- Will you need any databases? What kind of database — MySQL? Microsoft SQL? Others?

## Good content design

If I visit a Web site and I see misspelled words, I cringe. It's just too easy to check your spelling these days, and *not* doing it tells the viewer that the Web designers or programmers weren't careful. Using a lot of animated cartoons might seem cute to you, but think of the repeat visitors to your site. Do you think they want to see the same little dog running across the page again and again and again? What irritates me the most, though, is music used in Web sites. When you are in your car, stuck in traffic, and forced to listen to music coming from the car next to yours, you probably don't like it, do you? Maybe you like country, and the car next to yours is playing heavy metal. The same goes for music on Web sites. The bottom line? Don't assume everyone shares your taste. The following are a few simple rules for creating a professional site that won't drive away your audience.

### Less is more

The best Web sites are often the simplest-looking ones. Look at Google (`www.google.com`), for example. Figure 1.5 shows the Google home page.

Google's main audience consists of people searching the Web. The Google search takes center stage. The other services Google offers are simple links above the search box. There are no confusing buttons with nondescript icons. It isn't particularly beautiful, but it is a simple and extremely effective site.

**Watch Out!**

If you are planning to include advertising on your Web site, now is the time to make some important decisions. A little advertising goes a long way. Too much will drive away visitors. Especially fight the urge to include obnoxious, intrusive pop-up type ads as well as floating, DHTML ads that obscure your content.

**Figure 1.5.** The Google home page

## Simplify navigation

Always make the most important Web pages in your site accessible by the fewest clicks from your users. Take a look at the Yahoo! (`www.yahoo.com`) home page in Figure 1.6.

Every single page of Yahoo! contains a link back to the home page. The most popular Yahoo! sites are given large icons on either side of the logo: Finance, Music, Travel, Mail, My Yahoo!, and Messenger. Unlike the Google page shown in Figure 1.5, this page is a bit busier. The main mantle section contains 27 links to Yahoo! services and properties. This is an enormous number of sub-sites, and yet in this instance, it makes sense. The most important sites are shown next the logo, but if you frequently visit Yahoo! Maps, for example, the link is easily accessible.

**Figure 1.6.** The Yahoo! home page

Keep in mind that Yahoo! is a huge site, and this is an extreme exam-
ple. In spite of its size, Yahoo! keeps its navigation relatively simple. If you
visit one of the sub-sites, the navigation becomes more to the point.
Yahoo! Shopping is a good example. Once you click the shopping link,
you no longer have those 27 links within view. Now all the links on the
page are focused on shopping. Still, any time you wish to go to another
Yahoo! site, you are just two clicks away. Click the upper left-hand text
link that says "Yahoo!", and then from the home page click whichever of
the 27 links you want.

## Use images and Flash carefully

Not everyone has a fast Internet connection. You have to carefully bal-
ance the effectiveness of your images against the time it takes to down-
load them. How long is your audience willing to wait? Secondly, while
images are great for illustrating points and polishing a page, too
many images distract from the text. One well-placed topical image is
more powerful than five.

Flash has a few additional features you need to be cautious about. It allows you to break any rules of good design you wish. You may also embed sound, which most users absolutely hate. You have such power in Flash, and the temptation to abuse it is great. If you are going to use Flash, try to use it sparingly. Ask yourself if an image instead of a Flash movie would accomplish the same thing.

## Check your spelling

Always check your spelling before you publish your page! It's very easy to do in Dreamweaver. Figure 1.7 shows the Check Spelling dialog box.

To check the spelling in your Web page, choose Text ⇨ Check Spelling. When Dreamweaver finds a word it thinks is misspelled, it opens the Check Spelling dialog box and gives you the opportunity to change the word.
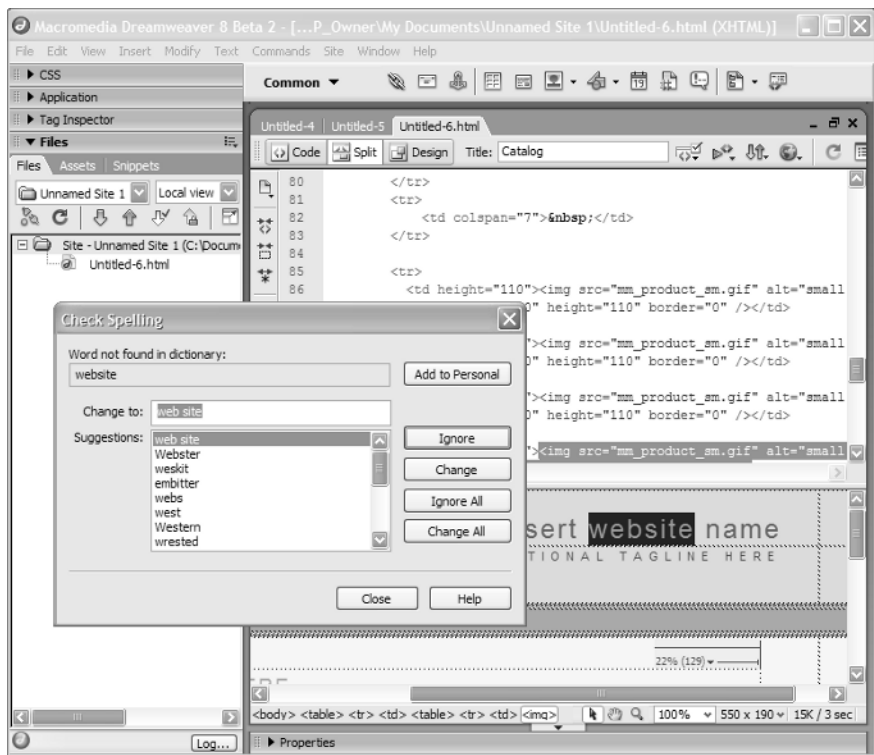


**Figure 1.7.** The Check Spelling dialog box

> **Watch Out!**
>
> The Spelling Checker won't catch misplaced apostrophes or homonyms. The most common apostrophe mistake by far is confusing *its* and *it's*. Watch out for homonym mistakes, such as using *there* instead of *their*. It's worth taking a few minutes and looking for these. You should also recruit another pair of eyes to look over your text.

## Say what you mean

When you begin to write copy for your Web site, keep your writing simple. The best copy expresses ideas using common words. Not everyone will know that highly technical term for elbow that you do, so use the word *elbow.*

Avoid over explaining. By that, I mean don't explain the same thing again and again. What I'm saying is once you've explained something, you shouldn't explain it again in different words. You don't need to explain the same thing more than once if you've done it right the first time. Get it?

Unless it is appropriate for the audience of your Web site, watch out for slang, clichés, and extraneous expressions. You know what I mean? And please don't use IM-style shorthand writing and no punctuation (u know who u r lol).

## Borrow (but don't steal!)

The best place for you to learn about good and bad site design is on the Web. You can get great ideas for your own site by seeing what works or doesn't work on other sites. You can also see if that brilliant idea you had exists out there and if it is successful. Don't be afraid to follow the lead of good sites. Take notes on what you like about them. Consider using similar features in your own site. But be careful. I am not suggesting you go to a Web site and steal their navigation system. Instead, figure out what you like about it. Think about it as a concept, see what other people are doing that is like it, and build your own, better navigation system, suited to your site. However tempted you may be, never copy the source code of a page and put parts of it on your own. You may be violating their copyright, and it's more fun to write your own.

## Just the facts

- Understanding the different types of Web sites can help you decide on the best type for you.
- Different Web visitors want different things. Know what your audience wants.
- Plan ahead. Consider your objective, audience, resources, and available technology.
- Plan your content carefully. Inform your audience and avoid common mistakes that will leave them with a negative impression of your site.