

Planning and Preparing for a Web Project

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Many web professionals I know would tell you that the truly difficult job of designing and launching a website is in the advance planning, as you begin to develop a general concept into a more finite one and then whip this into a workable plan.

If you've already spent some time familiarizing yourself with FrontPage 2003's features, you know that it includes an abundance of the tools necessary to construct a decent website that can be as professional and/or as customized as you desire. (And if you're not familiar with those features, I'll talk about some of them in a minute.) You can easily orient a FrontPage-created website to electronic retail pursuits, to provide members-only content or services for your clients or subscribers, to offer information about your organization or cause (or kick this up to a full-blown corporate presence type of site), to set up a work space where team members can check databases and collaborate on documents related to a project, or to offer customer support, among a myriad of other possibilities.

Because FrontPage is packed with everything you need to begin your project, many people find themselves constructing a site before they even give the whole idea a great deal of thought. Therein lies a problem.

A good website takes smart advance planning, and a great website usually takes far more planning. There are questions you need to ask (yourself, if not others), research you need to perform, and decisions you need to make in advance. Failure to do this advance work invariably shows to the site's visitors and may very well end up costing you time. For example, you might not correctly analyze what your users need or you might design a site that requires far more real-time maintenance than is actually necessary.

In this first chapter, the emphasis is on doing your homework before you begin the actual work of designing your website. The topics in this chapter include

- **How FrontPage Helps You Prepare**
- **Questions You Must Answer**
- **Brainstorming Your Concept**

How FrontPage Helps You Prepare

Creating a website does not require any special tools. In fact, many of us developed our first web pages using something as ubiquitous as a text editor such as Windows Notepad. Yet doing so demands that you have a basic understanding of web page creation along with a fluency in the fundamental commands in a markup language such as Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) or Extensive Hypertext Markup Language (XHTML), the basic languages for setting up web pages.

FrontPage 2003 was designed to allow someone with virtually no experience working with web markup or HTML and XHTML to be able to develop, publish, and maintain either an Internet- or intranet-based site. (An *intranet* is often similar in tools and information dissemination to the global Internet, but available only through a private network to those with express access.)

FrontPage 2003 does this by providing these services and features, among many:

- *Compatibility and integration* between this website-creation tool and other key components of Microsoft Office, such as Microsoft Word
- *Wizards* to allow you to create the basis of a full website based on certain standard website types (Customer Support, Project Web, Discussion Web, SharePoint Based Team Web, Corporate Presence, and so on) that you can then edit and customize to your needs
- *Themes* (essentially ready-to-go graphic designs) to grant you the ability to create a consistent aesthetic appearance throughout your website
- *Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)* to give you the ability to add sophisticated presentation features such as font, formatting, borders, and colors and to easily make site-wide changes to these styles
- *Collaboration* tools to allow you to work on the website with others in your team
- *Add-in support* for specific third-party products that allow you to add special capabilities to your FrontPage-created site such as an e-commerce component for handling web sales
- *Automated publishing* lets you transmit and post your website content quickly and easily
- *Management and reporting options* that allow you to analyze, secure, and maintain your website

All of these features and more combine to give you a single-package solution for creating, customizing, launching, analyzing, and maintaining your website. Throughout this book, you'll learn how to use these features to your best advantage.

Yet with any website, great visuals, strong colors, and good intentions only get you so far if you fail to do the most fundamental work involved in setting up a site: planning it with care and attention to detail. FrontPage 2003 alone does much of the work for you, but it can't

decide your goals in establishing your website, or make certain you get the correct message across as you design it, or keep your target audience happy without your careful planning and active participation.

In this chapter, you'll get a look at the advance work you need to do before you sit down with the software, but first, let's talk for a moment about some of FrontPage's limitations.

Where FrontPage Doesn't Always Help

As a long-time FrontPage user, I think it's a very solid package for website development and management, especially for those users with little or no formal training in website creation and HTML. Yet I feel obligated to tell you that there are some limitations with this package that you should be aware of before you get to work.

One of the most common complaints is that for best results working with FrontPage, you have to publish your work to a web server that has been extended or enhanced using something called FrontPage Server Extensions. This software sets up the conditions necessary for all FrontPage-supported features, including the easiest publishing method, to work.

While you can still use FrontPage 2003 and create and publish your website even if you're not working with a FrontPage-extended server, you may find yourself hampered in the ability to use certain FrontPage-specific features, including some web components and the web usage reporting tools. For instance, you can use File Transfer Protocol (FTP) to upload your web project rather than the automatic Publish tool available under the File menu in FrontPage. However, if you're a SecureFTP user, you'll find that this isn't supported.

A bigger issue, however, is that many professional designers tend to prefer packages such as Dreamweaver MX by Macromedia for site designs that are visually complex or that require the development of sophisticated applications to run from a site's server. (These applications are called *server-side applications* because the server runs the necessary applications rather than requiring that visitors download and run the applications.) Such folks argue that one of the tradeoffs for the ease of using FrontPage to build a site is that you're locked into using just one of the two server-side scripting languages for developing applications and enhanced functionality that FrontPage supports: Active Server Pages (ASP) and ASP.NET. This immediately reduces web application options to pretty much only those written in JScript and VBScript.

Don't take from this, however, that you can't add server-side applications and strong professional features and functionality to your FrontPage-created site. You can. You simply don't have these extra tools built directly into FrontPage, so you'll need to augment what you can create in FrontPage in order to do that.

This means that if you or someone on your web development team wants to produce or use applications that are not directly supported by FrontPage, you may be in for a good amount of tweaking or head banging. For this reason, it's vital that you establish what you want to include in your site early on so you can be sure to accomplish what you want using FrontPage as your main web production and management tool.

Questions You Must Answer

As with most worthwhile projects, there are a number of questions that you need to answer to your satisfaction before you can jump into the process and begin your work.

The questions presented in this section are intended to help you shape the scope of your web project before you begin to plan its content.

What Are Your Goals for This Site?

Having a mission statement for any ambitious project is never a bad idea, but you definitely need to map out your goals for such a site before you design it. Such goals can have a direct impact on what you choose to include and how you package it.

If you're unclear about your objectives and the message you want to convey, your design and content may reflect this. It can make it far more difficult for you to capture and keep your core audience.

Your goals need to be realistic, too. For example, if your goal is to open a global website that generates a million unique hits during its first week, there is almost no chance that this will happen. Even by hiring professional web marketers to help spread the word, it often takes between four and six weeks before a new site makes it into one of the major web search engines such as Google (www.google.com) or Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com).

Let's look at an example. Consider an heirloom seed company that has decided to open its first website, complete with an e-commerce component so that it can conduct sales. The company's founder, recognizing that she doesn't have the funds for a massive advertising campaign to drive people to her new site, begins to assemble a list of short-term goals that she feels she can meet, including the following:

1. Get the site up and running in 30 calendar days.
2. Add the company's new URL to all of its print material, including catalogs, order forms, and advertising.
3. Be prepared for at least a modest (5–10 percent) rise in sales during the first 30 days that the website is available for orders.
4. Assign someone from the office staff to monitor web-driven e-mail and comments.

Her long-term goals might look like these:

1. Take measures to try to experience a 10 percent growth in website sales during its first 3–6 months.
2. As sales begin to rise, increase the number of products offered on the site until it approaches 50 percent of the total product list.
3. Develop the site to include a full roster of gardening articles and sowing instructions and institute a monthly web-based newsletter along with monthly special sales.

You need to tailor your list of goals for your particular situation. Don't be afraid to update these goals as needed.

Who Is Your Target Audience?

The rule of thumb with any type of media delivery is that you must know your audience to provide them with the experience they seek. This is true of the Web too, whether it's for an internal intranet or the global Internet.

The nature of your audience—and what you expect from your audience such as joining your organization, buying your product, or contributing to your project—will determine many issues related to site development, including the following:

- The site's overall aesthetic approach
- The writing level and the organization of the site content

Deciding on your site's focus and audience in this initial phase is critical because it goes to exactly what you offer on your site (the content), and how it's packaged. If your audience is very general ("Anyone who happens in with their Web browser"), your tone, look, and content is apt to be quite different from a site catering only to experts and aficionados in a given field.

WILL YOU ACCEPT ADVERTISING?

It's very possible that once your website becomes available, you may be approached by a third party to ask if you will accept advertising.

While this occurs more frequently with heavily trafficked websites, small, information-only sites and vendors find themselves confronting this question, too. Recently, I heard from a corporate intranet administrator who was contacted by a pizza chain who wanted to run target ads that would pop up to employees around lunch time.

You should consider this carefully, taking into account the nature and focus of your site, your objectives, and the types of people who visit your site and their possible reaction. (The company seeking to advertise will likely want to establish the demographics of your site audience before the deal is signed.) For example, so-called pop-up ads tend to annoy visitors.

Also, if your site includes product comparisons and reviews as part of its content, it's possible that some of your audience may question your objectivity, especially in situations where you appear to favor an advertiser's product over a product that's not advertised.

It's important that you don't see third-party advertising sponsorship as a major revenue source for your site either, because the price paid for this may be extremely low. Sometimes the rates are as high as one cent per visitor clicking the ad, and sometimes they are less than one cent per every 10 visitors clicking an ad, but rates can go much higher and much lower depending on the site and the advertiser. This might offset some of the expenses inherent in hosting a site, but only time and experience will tell you whether it's worth it.

Weigh the potential income against the possible costs to you and the nature of your site and audience before you decide.

But there is more to consider.

For example, in some cases, your target audience may be only people on your corporate network or only people using broadband services to access your site. Determining this ahead of time means you may be more free to incorporate elements such as multiple images, Flash, or other animations, or permit searching a large database on a single web page that would normally slow a dial-up access visitor (those connected at 56Kbps or less) to a crawl.

Also, if you want only certain people to have access to the site, make sure that only authorized users (assigned through site-management tools and the use of designated user-names and passwords) can do so.

You can also decide how “open” or “closed” your site will be. An intranet-based site is typically only available for browsing to specific individuals with user accounts on that network (although some people will have the ability to author and manage the site, too). A globally positioned Internet site can be open to all, or open to all but making sure that premium or behind-the-scenes content is available only to those with registered accounts and/or subscriptions. In addition, a global site can provide virtually nothing but a way for people with registered accounts to access the site from anywhere, for example, from a hotel room on a business trip in addition to from a workstation at the office.

Who Is Involved and How Will You Work?

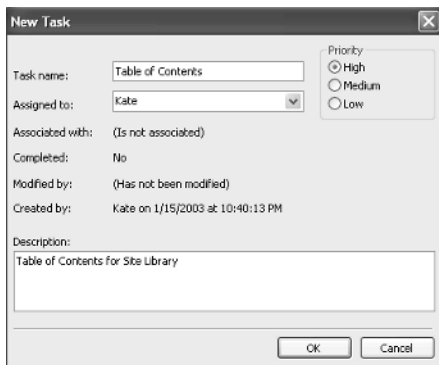
If you’re working with others on a team to develop a site, you need to establish a cohesive game plan for who is responsible for what duties. Be sure to develop a rough schedule of when individual assignments will be completed. FrontPage offers a Task Manager tool for keeping track of this information.

Some teams choose to divvy up the work by sections of a website and other teams by page, although most teams are likely to divide up this work by overall job responsibility such

as content writer, Web application developer, and so on.

As you’ll read about shortly in this chapter, your work with your website usually doesn’t end when you publish it. Make sure to have a plan in place for who will update (or who will update what pages), who will be responsible for regularly checking the site for problems such as dead hyperlinks, and how other roles may change once your site is live.

If instead, you’re working solo to develop a site for a client or party, establish the groundwork for what this person or entity desires, when and how you can deliver it, and what conditions are necessary before the site is approved to go live.



PROFESSIONAL FRONTPAGE WEB-HOSTING SERVICES

Many web-hosting companies support FrontPage web creation, publishing, and site management.

Having that support is critical, because the web-hosting service needs to be knowledgeable about problems that may arise from FrontPage and related issues. They need to keep their web servers up to date with the latest security patches and versions of FrontPage Server Extensions and SharePoint Team Services Extensions in order to work best. The latter can matter significantly, because a host using older extensions isn't going to support the features you may try to implement.

If you decide to use a hosting service, be sure to compare more than just price. Make sure they can handle the bandwidth that a site of your type may require. Bandwidth can run very high for a global Internet web presence where you will actively advertise the site to nationwide or international consumers, or moderate if you're a small organization with just a few thousand visitors each week. To some degree, you're going to need to anticipate whether you expect a high volume of traffic, because many hosting services impose a fee when you go beyond your expected traffic level.

You also need to ask what kind of failsafe mechanisms they employ to make sure that if the host experiences a problem, your site doesn't go down at all or is offline for the shortest amount of time possible. The reality is that every site will be hit by an outage occasionally.

Some major FrontPage web-hosting service companies include (but are no means limited to) the following:

- Definition 6 at www.definition6.com
- FPToday at www.fptoday.com or www.iqtinc.com
- Total Solutions at www.totalsolutionsonline.com

Other sites, such as The Host Index at www.hostindex.com, allow you to search for web-hosting services by specific criteria, such as whether they support FrontPage.

You can find other web-hosting sites by using a web search engine such as Google or Yahoo!. Also, if you know other people who use a professional FrontPage web-hosting service, don't shy away from asking how they like the service.

Microsoft makes a list of web presence providers that fully comply with their FrontPage and SharePoint Team Services web implementations available at www.microsoftwpp.com/default.asp.

How Will Your Site Be Published?

FrontPage 2003 allows you several different options for getting your website published for visitors. You can

- Publish it locally to your own web server that has been extended to work with FrontPage (using FrontPage Server Extensions or through SharePoint Team Services) for small traffic or specific team use.
- Publish it through your company intranet.
- Publish it to a professional web server, either your own or through a commercial web-hosting service that provides you with the space and bandwidth necessary for global Internet access.

What Do Similar or Competing Sites Offer?

Because there are over 155 million websites—and this number is growing rapidly even with the post-boom-era Internet slump—whatever type of website you plan to publish likely has some competition, for your target audience or for actual product or service sales.

Be sure to research sites similar in focus or concept to what you want to achieve. You may find these sites by performing queries on web search engines such as Google and through recommendations from customers, clients, friends, and co-workers. Once you locate similar websites, analyze them to see what features you feel are most effective and then consider how you can incorporate something similar into your own site. But don't just copy; make it your own.

Likewise, analyze these websites to see what features simply don't work. This can take the form of pages that take too long to load or never completely load, add-ins such as survey forms or voting tools that misbehave, or good information that gets lost in a sea of bad colors or too many distracting elements.

You can take this a step further by creating a list of sites you want to analyze and then asking a number of users to visit these sites. Have those users answer a questionnaire that you develop and use the data to determine what others think about the features you might choose to incorporate or avoid. You might anticipate, for example, that your target audience might not care for information presented in tables, only to discover that your casual focus group found the tables exceptionally helpful. Having this kind of information before you fully develop your site helps you reduce the large amounts of work you might put into developing features that are unlikely to appeal to your target audience.

Viewing from More Than One Perspective

While you are analyzing other websites—and later, your own—be sure to look at them not just from your perspective as a website designer but also as a normal visitor. Millions of dollars have

been wasted developing major websites that simply didn't work because the designer never saw past his or her own concept of the site to understand how a visitor would experience it.

The most common example of this occurs when developing the *navigation* for a website, the way a site has been organized to help the visitor move throughout the different features and content areas. The easier you make it for a visitor to successfully reach Point B (a link on your site) from Point A (usually, the home or index page) on your site, the better it will be for you (or your client or employer) as well as for the visitor. All too often, it's possible to create a navigation scheme through a website that makes perfect sense to the site designer who has spent hours mapping it out, while the visitor is left scratching his or her head, wondering how to find the desired information.

A great example of this can be found at various points on Microsoft's own family of product and support websites. At www.microsoft.com, it can sometimes be downright impossible to find your way into the right message base/discussion board where you can post a question. Now Microsoft has no shortage of talented people whose jobs are focused on website design and management. But many users—myself included—are left with the impression that these same folks are not trying to use the site as we are, or they would realize all too quickly that “You can't get there from here.”

If you use the casual focus group idea suggested earlier, you may be able to gather some of the information described in this section from your questionnaire. However, you should still use this bifocused viewpoint yourself as you scrutinize competing or similar sites.

Looking Under the Hood

If you're wondering what another site looks like from an HTML level, use the Source option on your web browser (under the View menu in Microsoft Internet Explorer) to view the HTML code. For example, Figure 1.1 shows the opening page of TheTabletPC.net site, and Figure 1.2 shows the underlying HTML code for the page.

THE “SCIENCE” OF WEB DESIGN

While we tend to think that anyone can create a web page (and they can), website design and functionality has truly grown into a major course of study and expertise all its own as the value and power of the medium has become apparent.

Just as the advent of first radio and then television brought with it dozens of experts to help the industry use the medium to its best advantage, so too has web design, which now offers two distinct sciences under its banner: Usability (or user experience) and Information Architecture (IA).

You can use this option to help you figure out how the site's creator implemented something on the site, such as

- What other similar sites use for meta tags, which are special tags used on a web page to identify its creator and content by specifically chosen keywords that serve as the basis for web search engine classification
- Which meta tags are used for setting character encoding
- The HTML tags used to create a specific table or menu implementation

For example, the first time I wanted to create a web menu that, when a menu option is either clicked or the cursor is positioned over it, opens to a sub-menu (called a *fly-out*), I looked for another site that offers it, such as the one at the Microsoft Office website (www.microsoft.com/office). Once I found the menu type I wanted (Figure 1.3), I used the Source option in Internet Explorer to find the part that creates the fly-out menu by searching through the HTML code (Figure 1.4) for the phrases as they appear in the menu items.

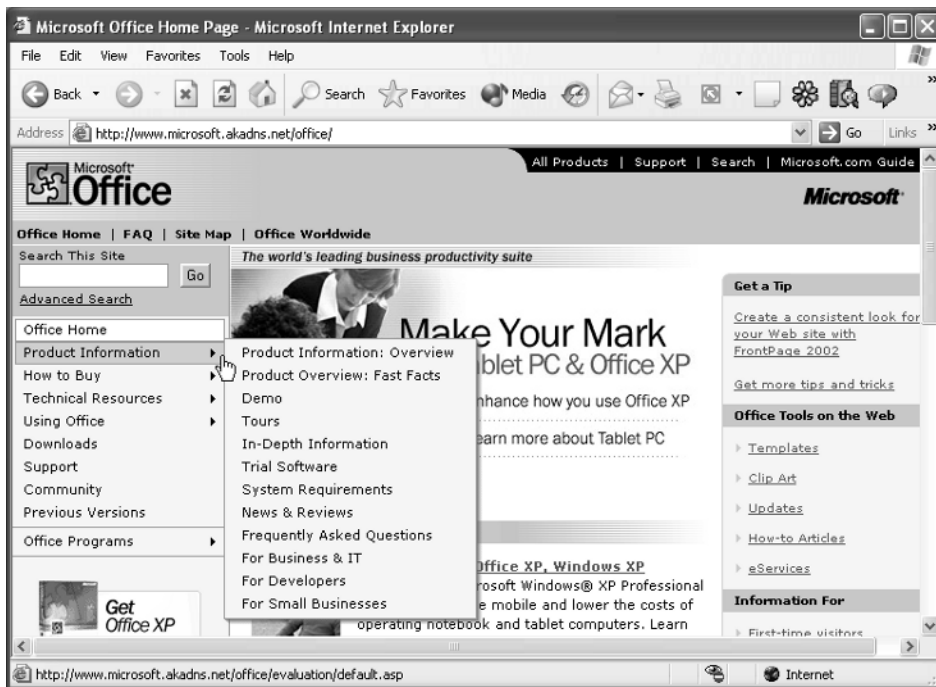


Figure 1.3

Fly-out menu on the Microsoft Office site

Figure 1.4

The source HTML for
the fly-out menu

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office[1] - Notepad
File Edit Format View Help

<table class="flyoutMenu" menudata="/office/inc/mnpxmlDataGen.asp?subroot=default.asp"
width="180" cellpadding="2" cellspacing="0" border="0" style="border-right-style: none;">
  <tr>
    <td>
      <table width="175" cellpadding="0" cellspacing="0" border="0">
        <tr>
          <td class="flyoutLink" ><a
href="/office/default.asp">Office Home</a></td>
        </tr>
      </table>
      <table width="175" cellpadding="0" cellspacing="0" border="0">
        <tr>
          <td class="flyoutLink" handle="1001"><a
href="/office/evaluation/default.asp">Product Information</a></td>
        </tr>
      </table>
      <table width="175" cellpadding="0" cellspacing="0" border="0">
        <tr>
          <td class="flyoutLink" handle="1002"><a
href="/office/howtobuy/default.asp">How to Buy</a></td>
        </tr>
      </table>
      <table width="175" cellpadding="0" cellspacing="0" border="0">
        <tr>
          <td class="flyoutLink" handle="1003"><a
href="/office/techinfo/default.asp">Technical Resources</a></td>
        </tr>
      </table>
    </td>
  </tr>
</table>

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Brainstorming Your Concept

Now that you've answered the questions described in the previous section, you face both the creative challenge of deciding exactly what your site should include and the chore of organizing that material in a design that permits your web audience to move fluidly and effectively through your site. In other words, it's time to flesh out your concept and brainstorm how you will implement it.

Later, as you are working in FrontPage itself, you can begin to add color and character through the use of backgrounds, themes, and font choices; decide whether or not to use borders or frames; and style the actual arrangement of your pages. But first, you need to bring content to your concept.

Preliminary Site Design Elements

Once, while visiting a Seattle-area web design office, I saw this motto posted everywhere: "You can bring people into your site with a great look or a unique idea, but it's superb content coupled with smooth navigation which keeps them returning."

While you can probably name several visually effective and stunning websites because such sites stand out in your minds, it's usually a site's content that makes a visitor bookmark the site, and later return to it to retrieve additional information, to use a tool, or to order a product.

Because FrontPage 2003 takes care of so much of the site's appearance for you (which you can customize to suit your needs), let's focus your attention on content, its development, and its organization.

Planning Your Content

In Chapter 3, "Web Pages Deconstructed," you'll learn more about the typical elements that make up a web page and the common pages used as the foundation for a website.

In the meantime, however, you've probably already got some ideas in mind for what content you want your site to include. Start jotting these ideas down, adding as many details as is appropriate for each item listed, such as "The home page should include..." and "The library of support articles should cover these topics...."

Don't just think in terms of text, although text is often the dominant form of content. Strategically chosen and positioned page objects such as images (digital photographs, drawings, and clip art), audio and video media (sound bites, movies, and live camera feeds), compatible web applets and applications, data tables, PowerPoint presentations, and Excel charts are just some of what can be added to enhance your text-based content. These elements help differentiate a hastily prepared site from one rich in information and user experience.

PRIORITIZING CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

If your planned web project is fairly simple, it may be relatively easy for you to develop your content within a short period of time and publish it all to the Web or to the corporate network intranet at the time of the site's debut.

However, not every website is that simple, and it may be desirable to take a slightly different approach than "all or nothing." Some may opt to wait until all the desired content is ready before launching a site. Others may take a tiered approach, where essential pages and content are available from the start while additional, or second (and third) tier, content is added later as it becomes available for posting.

Should you decide to use this tiered approach, look at your content from the standpoint of trying to determine what content *must* be ready on your site at the time it is launched and what content can wait. In other words, prioritize your content so that you focus on the essential material now, and then move down the priority list to finish the remaining material until it is all made available.

For a simple example, let's say that you want to offer a site that includes the usual main pages (Home, About Us/Contact Us, and so on) plus an extensive collection of photographs and articles as part of an information-based website. In such a situation, you could prioritize your content so that you publish the main core pages immediately, then create your collections of photos and articles, but prioritize them so that you make some of the collection available now, and the rest you add later.

By contrast, suppose you're creating an e-commerce site, where products or services will be available for purchase. Getting your e-commerce component in place at the time your site goes live is imperative, and should always be given top priority over more support-oriented content. After all, few people enjoy visiting a store where they don't have the option of buying, and you're going to want the sales.

But here's a cautionary note: While it can be wise to prioritize content development and to expect that not all content will go online at one time on your website, avoid situations where you create just a home page now and then insert "Under Construction" pages in place of future content. This happens far more often than it should, and such sites often remain unfinished for prolonged periods of time. Marketing research tells us that visitors to a site will not stay long if they feel frustrated by not finding what they need; they'll simply move on to a different site where the material *is* available.

ACCESSIBILITY OF CONTENT

People with disabilities account for approximately 10 percent of the world's population, and some of the issues they must work with may affect their ability to appreciate or even use many websites.

A good web designer should be conscious of this, and try to construct a site that limits the use of features that further challenge such individuals. For example, if you design a site that depends entirely on the ability to navigate by seeing on-screen graphics such as animated arrows without any underlying way for others to use it, it's going to be tough for someone with a visual deficit. A visual disability can take many forms—from the inability to see objects that are too small to not being able to distinguish between certain colors to either partial or full blindness.

Tools exist to help those with impairments use the Web, but these tools often rely on alternate elements within a site to give that assistance. For example, these tools may look for text to describe or explain a non-text element.

Even without a full-blown disability, many older web visitors (and they make up a significant population of users) will find it extraordinarily frustrating to work with a site that uses only small fonts and tiny images.

Considering your ultimate desire to make your site accessible and useful to everyone who visits it, you simply can't afford to blindly ignore options that could keep rather than cost you traffic to your site. In fact, whenever you add a new feature to your site, you should ask yourself, "Is this going to cause a problem for anyone trying to use it?" If the answer is "yes," you need to see if there is more than one way that you can present that feature.

Some of the rules for creating an accessible website include the following:

- Every non-text feature should have a corresponding text equivalent.
- A table of information should have its rows and columns clearly marked for maximum visibility and easy identification.
- Where color is being used to convey a message on a site, you also need to have a non-colored equivalent to assist the user's understanding.
- When a page requires an additional tool to be installed on the user's system to load a page element, this should be clearly marked on that page and a link for downloading that tool should be provided.
- Electronic online forms should be designed so that they can be used by people who employ assistive technology.
- A document shouldn't have to depend on a style sheet to be displayed properly.
- Avoid table-based layout wherever possible since the table may not be interpreted well by assistive technology tools. Make sure to design tables that can transform gracefully when interpreted.
- Offer alternative navigation methods, especially when navigation depends on graphical elements.
- Avoid using elements that may cause a page to flicker when displayed in the user's browser.

These are only some of the rules, but as you can already see, many of them make sense for the general population as well, such as having a link to a tool or application needed to view a particular web page. These rules fit for the general population too, because it doesn't require a human physical disability to have problems accessing or using a web page. For instance, you can have people logging in through remote devices and terminals that don't offer the depth, size, or color of display you would have on a desktop PC.

You can find the complete list of accessibility rules, contained in the Section 508 Mandate of the Federal Access Board, at www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/1194.22.htm.

You can find excellent ideas for increasing the overall accessibility of your site by visiting either the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative's site at www.w3.org/WAI or the Web Accessibility in Mind's site at www.webaim.org. Two other good informational sites can be found at Dive into Accessibility at <http://diveintoaccessibility.org> and WebABLE at www.webable.com.

WATCHING COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL AND OTHER ISSUES

As in any other media publishing environments, which web publishing is, exercise extreme care that you have express permission to incorporate copyrighted material from another source.

In the Internet boom of the late 1990s, respect for the intellectual property of others often went unobserved in a seemingly widespread consensus sentiment of “If it’s available on the Internet, it’s free and available for me to use.” The net result was that many website operators were slapped with copyright infringement suits or received letters threatening legal action for the unauthorized use of materials. Often, the material involved were media files such as MP3 recordings and movie or television clips. But the copyright issue often hit home with the reprinting of published articles and the unauthorized reproduction of digital photography. The law has not always successfully distinguished between blatant infringement (where you know you’re using someone else’s work but you choose to employ it anyway) and more naïve infringement where you grab an image you find on the Internet and use it on your website without checking to see whether it’s considered in the public domain and available to copy.

Some individuals and groups have become quite adamant that you cannot link to their site without specific permission and unless the entity linking to their site meets certain criteria. Requesting such permission is good netiquette for the casual website operator and imperative for those establishing a professional presence on the Internet.

You will save yourself (and your client or employer, if applicable) both time and potential legal costs if you request permission ahead of time. Wherever possible, this should be done on paper so that you have the signature of the authorizing party in your files. If you must seek permission electronically, accept it only if you get a digital signature, because many courts may rightly find that it is easy to fake an e-mail.

CONTENT AND MAINTENANCE

As you plan the content for your website, factor in how often you plan to update this material because this can matter in how you package it for your audience.

When a new site is launched, designers and/or webmasters tend to be very good about checking material and posting new content readily. Over a matter of weeks or months, however, there is a tendency to become less careful, which may leave expired or just plain old content in place far longer than it should be. This can leave the visitor with an impression that the site is not being well tended.

While some of your content may demand daily updating, limit the amount of content you publish that either bears a date or is apt to look dated if it remains in place over a period of time unless you are certain you have the resources to handle massive daily updating.

Of course, there are other ways around the old content issue. One is to keep current information in the form of a weblog that can be annotated daily or many times a day with updated details and links to other pages of interest. Often, weblogs are employed on the home page of a site. They offer not just information, but they convey the sense that the site is fresh, topical, and well-maintained.

Another tool is to use a content management system (CMS). A CMS is special software designed to help track, manage, and retrieve the documents included on your site. Such systems run from the very simple to the extensive and powerful, and may be based on an Extensible Markup Language (XML) database; the price for a CMS can run the gamut too.

By mapping out the site-maintenance issues ahead of time and being mindful in how you implement your content, you can reduce your maintenance and editing time and focus only on the material that needs to be updated more frequently.

EXPLAIN YOUR PURPOSE

One of the first bits of information a visitor should see when he or she visits your site is something that identifies who you (as in the website) are and why the site exists. This can be an entry paragraph on the home page or a separate page available from a primary link from that home page.

This helps define what your site is about for your visitors. It can make the difference between a site that someone remembers and one that gets lost in all the other related sites the visitor may browse in any given day.

AVOID MIXING YOUR SITE'S MESSAGE

One of the hallmarks that distinguishes a professional-quality website from one that has been created with less planning and attention to detail is the latter's tendency to dilute the site's message with off-topic or inappropriate content.

Some glaring examples of this I've seen over the years include the following:

- A shoe vendor's site where attempting to access the e-commerce component to order shoes took me through a forest of features on religion and family and the value of composting kitchen waste before I saw any shoes
- A Midwest medical testing equipment company's site that required users to drill down several levels to find anything besides pictures of the owner's large sailboat and stories of his adventures camping in Canada
- A small Los Angeles-area restaurant's website that devoted some of its home page to discussing the benefits of high colonics offered by a neighborhood naturopath

While you can certainly blend related material into your site and do so quite successfully to enhance your integral content, avoid introducing anything that takes the focus away from the main intent of the site. You want the visitor to leave with a strong impression of what your site is about.

The Information Architecture: Organizing Your Site's Planned Content

Once you have a working inventory of the elements you would like to include on your site, consider how it should be organized, which in turn starts the development of your site's navigation—how the user gets around your site.

There are a number of different ways to approach this. Some might choose to work directly within FrontPage to begin to build the pages and the progression, taking the time to experiment with different looks and page layouts. However, this method can be taxing unless you have a very logical mind and can think about the overall hierarchical structure of the site as you work. FrontPage is little help with this, because it reports back to you what navigation you've set up rather than whether it's the best structural layout for your content.

Let's look at some other ways of doing this that may be more effective for you. In fact, you can use more than one method, as desired, to hammer out your structure.

Remember to share these plans with others on your design team and ask for their input if you're working collaboratively. It's vital that each person is aware of what is evolving in the process.

CREATING A WIREFRAME

A wireframe is a mockup of a concept that shows a progression of information. Each frame represents a page and what content will appear on that page. In this sense, it's not unlike a movie storyboard that presents a story scene-by-scene.

While you can flesh out these frames as much as you wish, it's often as not done with paper and pencil (a pencil, so you can erase and change the frame) and without exhaustive detail.

This is a great idea when you have to present your early concept to a client or an employer for initial approval, but a wireframe can also be enormously helpful to you in further defining your project's scope before you design the individual pages of your website.

CREATING A SITE MAP

You've no doubt been on established websites that offer an option called a site map and, if so, you already know that a site map is often but not always a hierarchical representation of the content found on the site. As such, it can be as elaborate or as simple as you think is required. The site map can include a simple list of site sections with links to them, or it can be a major hierarchical representation where every major piece of content for each page is listed.

Many site maps are similar to a flowchart and are sometimes referred to as *thumbnails* because a common type of site map offers a thumbnail sketch of what is contained on each page in a logical progression. You'll find that FrontPage includes a site-mapping tool, which you'll read about in Chapter 11, "Implementing Your Navigation Scheme."

While you can create a site map readily once the site is complete, it's also an excellent planning tool that can be prepared with paper and pencil to help you establish the structure of your site, including what content (or links to additional content) can be found on each page. Figure 1.5 contains an example of a simple site map.

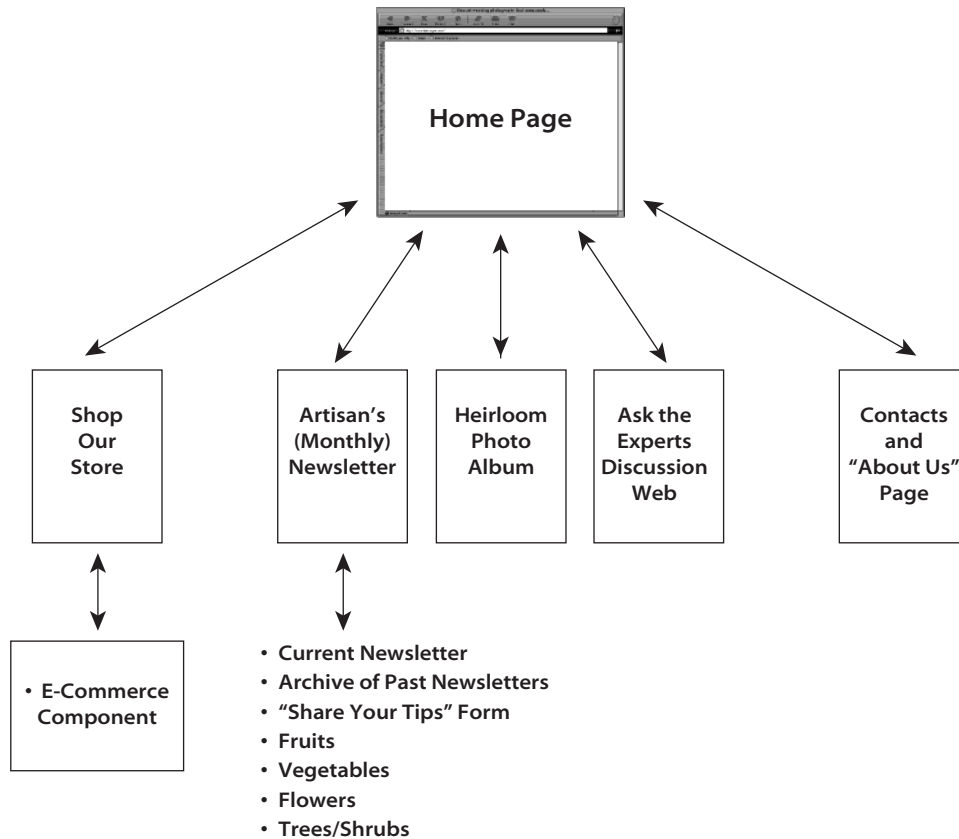


Figure 1.5

An example of a
site map

Understanding the Progression of Work

I remember sitting in a seminar a few years back created to teach entrepreneurs and others the importance of an electronic web presence, and having one of the presenters compare the creation of a site with putting in a garden.

“Just as prepping the soil and planting seeds is only the initial work involved in having a productive garden plot, preparing and publishing your website is just the start of the process on an active website. The garden needs to include the right mix of plants, must be tended and watered and weeded, and you must watch for the right moment to harvest. A website needs to be checked and rechecked for problems, you have to keep the content and overall appearance looking fresh and topical, and you must give your visitors a compelling reason to return again and again,” the presenter said. “Let either the garden or the website languish unattended, and all your work will be for naught.”

It's true: A website of any type needs at least occasional editing and updating. Failure to do so is likely to result in a site that looks dated, static, and is apt to point to more than a few dead hyperlinks to other sites, because you've removed pages that existing hyperlinks still reference, or because you've linked to external sites where the content may expire after a period of time, or because the referring site may wink out of existence.

Your grand plan should also include using others, preferably people not intimately involved in your project, as site guinea pigs during the early stages of publishing your website. Actually, recruiting helpful users isn't a bad idea throughout the "life" of a site because not all the problems are apt to occur in the very beginning. As the old saying goes, "The more eyes see something, the less chance you miss something." More casual eyes are likely to pick up pesky problems such as bad hyperlinks, buttons that don't work, typographical errors, and fonts or colors that don't translate well between different browsers, browser versions, and PC video setups. No single one of these is likely to make or break your website, yet they can affect a visitor's impression of the professionalism and care with which you've prepared your site. This is an instance where sweating the small stuff can indeed matter.

Getting Started

This chapter has given you a great deal to think about, and even more to plan for before you jump into the actual design process. But this advance work is invaluable, especially in creating your first professional-quality website, because it can make all the difference between a site that looks good and works and navigates well from the start and one that does not.

In the next chapter, however, you'll move beyond concept development to the important task of establishing and understanding your workspace on the road to turning your concept into a website reality.