

Chapter 1

Planning the Perfect Web Site

In This Chapter

- ▶ Pinpointing your Web site goals
 - ▶ Understanding the benefits of developing a plan
 - ▶ Stepping through a project plan
 - ▶ Accommodating new ideas while sticking to your plan
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If a potential partner approached you with a “great new business idea” guaranteed to make you money, you would probably ask a lot of questions before you even considered writing a check to get things started. You would probably also develop a business plan, or at least explore in detail how the new business would work, how much it would cost you, and how much money you could expect to make in return.

If you’re considering creating a Web site, or redesigning the one you already have, I recommend taking the same cautious approach. A good Web site is an extension of your business and, in many cases, a new product, service, or storefront that deserves the same level of planning as any other serious business venture.

This chapter is designed to help you carefully consider the many aspects of planning a Web site before you start building. In the following pages, you’ll find a series of questions to guide you through the early development process.



If you can complete the exercises in this chapter with a business partner or someone who provides a reality check, I recommend it. You know what they say about decisions made in a vacuum: They generally suck. If you’re reading this book, you’re probably sold on the idea of creating a Web site, and you even have some ideas about what you want to do. Now go see whether you can sell it to someone else, and take the time to do some careful planning before you dive in.

The planning process for a Web project should include these tasks:

- ✓ Take time to determine your goals and objectives.
- ✓ Organize all content you want to include on your site.
- ✓ Set a realistic budget and schedule.

To get you started — and inspired — the first section of this chapter describes some of the successful ways Web sites are being used personally and professionally.

Evaluating the Many Reasons to Create a Web Site

Before you start working on your own Web site, take a little time to explore what other people have done on the Web. Oh, sure, you surfed the Web already, I'm sure you did, but did you really study other Web sites? Did you analyze the way they're organized, study their front page features, and determine how their main navigation and even subnavigation features work?

One of the best ways to prepare for developing your own Web site is to take some time to explore related Web sites (and not-so-related sites) for ideas.

My goal in this book is to help you create not just a Web site but also one that truly serves your goals, whether you want to launch a new business on the Internet, promote the business or organization you're already working with, or stay in touch with distant family members. Here are a few types of sites that people like you are successfully using on the Internet:

- ✓ **Portfolio:** Photographers, graphical designers, and artists use online portfolios to showcase their creative work, provide online references, and attract new clients. In Figure 1-1, photographer Jasper Johal showcases his photos in an online gallery that makes it easy to view a collection of images all displayed on the same page: As you roll your cursor over the images on the right, they're displayed on the left. This type of navigation is a helpful way to present a gallery.



Figure 1-1: Portfolio sites can showcase photos or artwork, like this gallery on Jasper Johal's Web site.

- **Online profile:** Consultants, authors, attorneys, dentists, and other professionals are well served by online profile sites that include biographical information, a list of services or specialties, references and testimonials, and links to completed projects, writings, or other works. To promote my own books and my speaking and consulting services, I created an online profile site at www.jcwarner.com, shown in Figure 1-2. You can also access my site at www.JanineWarner.com. (In Chapter 2, you find tips about registering multiple domain names for the same Web site.)

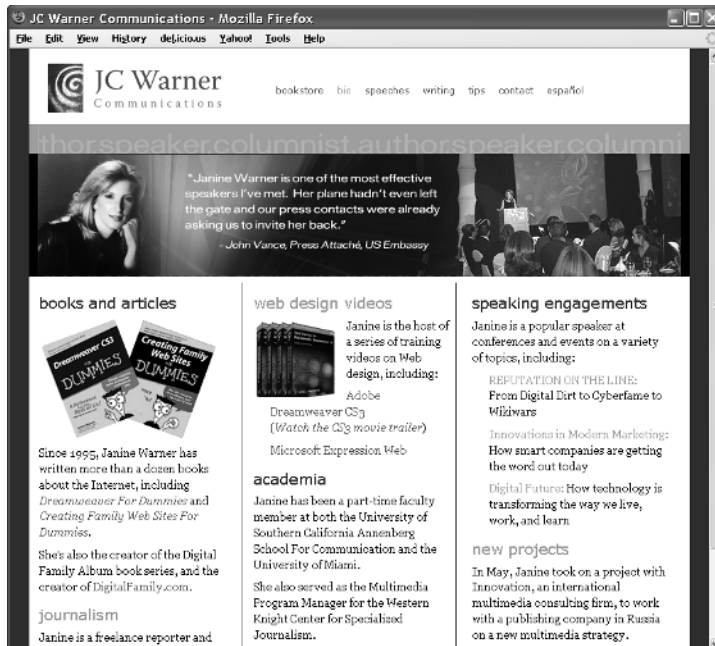


Figure 1-2: You can find my full biography, writing samples, and more at my online profile site at www.JCWarner.com.

- **Club or organization:** Better than a bumper sticker, a Web site like the one shown in Figure 1-3 is an excellent way to showcase your favorite clubs, charities, after-school activities, hobbies, and more.
- **Small business:** Whether you're a sole proprietor, like the dressmaker featured in Figure 1-4, or you have a rapidly growing, soon-to-be big business, creating a Web site can make all the difference in your success, online and off.

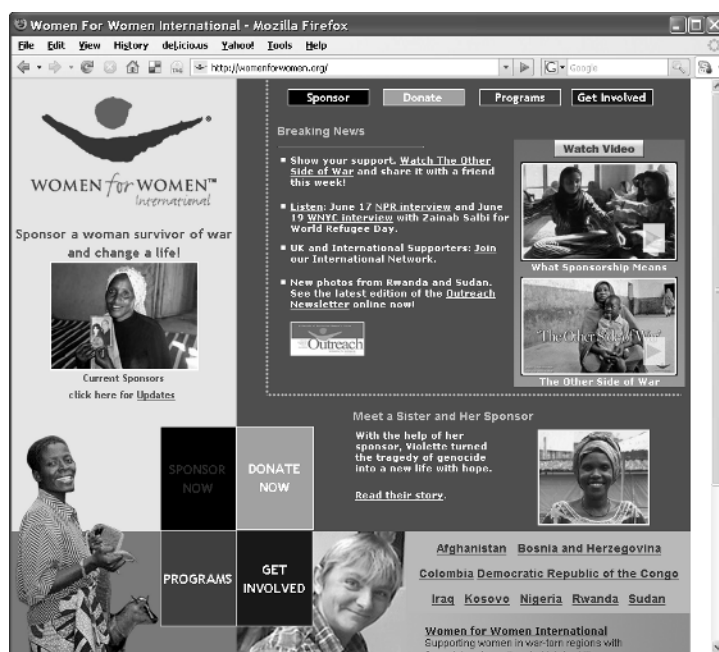


Figure 1-3: Women for Women showcases its programs and success stories, and makes it easy for you to participate in its unique sponsorship programs.



Figure 1-4: Niche businesses, such as this dressmaker who specializes in making custom ball gowns, are especially well suited to the Web where it's easy to search for hard-to-find services.

Building, testing, and publishing a Web Site

In a nutshell, building a Web site involves creating a *home page* (often called the *front page*) that links to other pages representing different sections of the site. Those pages, in turn, can link to subsections that can then

lead to additional subsections or individual pages. Once you've created a Web site, you can test all the links on your own hard drive and then upload the pages to a Web server when everything is ready and working well.

- ✓ **Family and wedding:** Before couples say “I do,” more and more of them are building wedding Web sites that feature invitations, directions, guest registries, and more. And, as a family grows, building a Web site is a way to help everyone stay in touch, which is the goal of the site shown in Figure 1-5.



Figure 1-5: Showcase your wedding photos, and keep your family members feeling connected with a personal Web site featuring those you love.

Developing a Project Plan

As with most project plans, a good Web site plan is made up of a series of tasks, a budget, a timeline, and a list of the resources and materials you need. Taking the time to create a detailed project plan gives you a structure within which you can work with greater confidence, and a much better chance of meeting your original goals on time and on budget.

The following list provides a step-by-step approach to creating a project plan:

1. **Define the goals and objectives of your site.**
2. **Create a content list.**

3. **Create a task list.**
4. **Set a timeline.**
5. **Establish a budget.**
6. **Determine how to handle maintenance and updates.**
7. **Assemble a team.**

In the sections that follow, you find out the details involved in each of these steps.

Defining goals and objectives

The series of questions you find in this section is designed to help you assess how a Web site can best serve you, your business, or organization. Taking the time to answer each of the questions should help you define the goals of your site and create a guide that you can use as you organize and prioritize the development.

Before you start sketching out the home page, it's good practice to define the most important aspects of a Web site and identify what you really need. Remember that you can always start small and develop a Web site over time. There's no rush to get the site up as fast as possible — the Web isn't going anywhere, and the best uses of the Web are the ones that will be around for a long time.

Before you even start, make sure that you and your staff (or friends and family) are clear about why you're creating a Web site and what it will take. Spend a little time answering each of the following questions, and use your responses to shape the planning and implementation of your Web site. Creating an outstanding Web site takes effort, and that effort can take time away from other things that are important. The more you plan, the more you have time left over for a little fun and relaxation (at least once in a while).

✓ **Why is having a Web site important to you?**

Separate the pipe from the dream and get clear on your true motivation.

✓ **What are your objectives?**

Determine whether you will use your Web site to promote your business, sell products or services, cut costs, showcase clients, provide customer support, stay in touch with friends and family, or do something that no one else has ever done.

As you go through the planning and development process, write down your top goals and refine them until you have two (at most, three) clear objectives for your site. Then keep your list somewhere so that you're forced to look at your objectives regularly, like the edge of your computer monitor or the bathroom mirror. Whenever you have a question about any aspect of the design, content, or development of your site, refer to your list of goals and make sure that your decisions remain true to your objectives.

✓ **How will you measure success?**

You won't achieve success with your Web site project unless you can effectively measure its results, so be sure that you can voice your objectives in measurable ways. The more specific and quantifiable you can be, the better. For example, rather than just state, "The goal is reducing the telemarketing





staff,” assign an amount and a time frame to make an objective quantifiable, such as, “The goal is reducing the telemarketing staff by 20 percent in 6 months.” Doing so helps you make sure that you’re taking the necessary steps to achieve that goal.

✓ **Whom do you want to visit your Web site?**

Consider your audience above all else. If you’re creating a sales site for real estate investors, you should probably take a different design approach than if you’re creating a game site for 12-year-olds. If you’re not sure what 12-year-olds want on a Web site, round some up and ask them.

Clarifying the target audience of your Web site should be a key factor in how you plan and develop your site, from the vocabulary you use to how public you make the information. For example, a site for doctors might include complex medical terms, whereas a site for patients needs more common language. Similarly, an architect might create a Web site with a public section where potential clients can view photos of completed projects and testimonials, and also create a password-protected section where current clients can view plans as they’re being developed.

✓ **What do you want a user to gain from visiting your Web site?**

One of my favorite benefits of a Web site is instant information at 1 a.m. without having to talk to anybody or wait on hold. Take time to consider what you want your visitors to learn from your site, and then make sure that the information is front and center in your design and development plans.

✓ **What do you want users to do after or on visits to your Web site?**

The more specific you can be about what you want visitors to do on your site, the better. Do you want visitors to buy a product, hire you to perform a service, join an association, call and ask for an appointment, sign up for a newsletter, or just tell their friends and family how cool your Web site is? Whatever you desire, you want your site’s design to encourage visitors to take that action and to make it as easy as possible for them to do so.

✓ **Do you expect to make money on your Web site?**

If your answer is “Of course I do!” that goal should shape everything you do as you design the way visitors will use your site. Pay special attention to the

Fred’s Fine Furniture defined goals

To help you appreciate how the planning process for a Web site could work, I’ll use the fictitious business, Fred’s Fine Furniture, as an example. After you complete the initial questionnaire earlier in this chapter, you should create a list of goals that looks something like this:

- ✓ Promote Fred’s furniture store.
- ✓ Describe and showcase Fred’s custom furniture services.
- ✓ Help customers easily find Fred’s contact information, store hours, and location.
- ✓ Encourage site visitors to register their tastes and furniture wish lists.
- ✓ Sign up visitors for Fred’s e-mail newsletter.



section “Establishing a budget” later in this chapter, to make sure that you see a return on your investment.

Besides being potential cash generators, Web sites can help you be more competitive, advertise your store or services, schedule and inform staff, and reduce travel and other types of expenses. Some of the most successful Web sites are designed to save money by reducing long-distance phone charges and other customer-support expenses.

Creating a content list

All the text, graphics, and multimedia elements that you want to display on the pages of your Web site are commonly referred to as the *content* of the site. To help guide your work and planning, your content list should include all photos, graphics, biographies, product descriptions, maps, and other items that you might want to feature on your site.

The best way to start creating a content list is to brainstorm all the things you think you might want on the site, such as contact information, product descriptions, logos, photos, graphics, and biographies.

The content list is a valuable tool that you can refer to as you develop your project plan, site map, and task list. As you continue to develop the project plan and ultimately the site, you'll probably discover more things that you want to add to the content list, so make sure to create it in a way that's easy to add to and edit as you progress.



A program like Microsoft Word (or, if you prefer, Excel), is an excellent tool for this task because you can easily make additions and move content around as you develop your list.

Use the content list as you organize your site content (see Chapter 3) and you're likely to think of additions to the content list as you work on that step. For example, as the About Us page is created on the Fred's Fine Furniture site featured in the

Fred's Fine Furniture content list

Continuing with Fred's Fine Furniture as an example, a content list might look like this:

Company logo

Contact information

Photos of each piece of furniture

Descriptive paragraph for each piece of furniture

Pricing and ordering information

Photos that provide a tour of the showroom

Map to the showroom

Credit policies

Welcome message for the home page

Description of the newsletter and invitation to sign up

Company description for the About Us page

Biography and photo of Fred

sidebars, Fred might realize that he wants to add a picture of the store, a map to the store, and some text describing the company.

Creating a task list

The task list should be the heart of your project plan. It's the list of tasks that must be accomplished in order to meet your goals and launch your Web site.

You can create a task list in many ways, including a few software programs designed to help with project management. If you're creating a relatively simple Web site and have a very small team, you need only a list with a few notes and dates attached to each task. If you're working on a more-complex project with a team, you might want a program like Microsoft Project, which includes a variety of features designed to make it easy to plan and track tasks over time.



When you create your task list, keep in mind that gathering your content is among the most time-consuming aspects of your Web site project. Many people underestimate how long it takes to gather all the photos, text descriptions, biographies, and other elements you may want in a Web site. Break down the task of gathering content this way:

- ✓ **Gather existing content:** You might already have much of the content you need in brochures, press releases, or other materials related to your company or organization.
- ✓ **Digitize your text:** If you're including existing content in your site, you might still have to do some work to get it all in *digital format*, where text is converted into a word-processing or other text file.
- ✓ **Digitize images:** If you already have photos you want to use, those images might have to be scanned. Even if you already have digital photos, before you can add them to a Web page, they must be in the correct format and

Fred's Fine Furniture task list

Register a domain name for the Web site.

Evaluate and select a Web site hosting company.

Create a list of all the main sections and features of the site.

Identify which products to include.

Create and gather descriptions and photos of furniture.

Design a few special offers and coupons to be featured.

Create a registration questionnaire for the newsletter.

Write the first three e-mail newsletters to send to registrants.

Create a site map that details the main sections and subsections and describes how pages will be linked.

Design the front page, each main section front, and the internal pages.

Optimize images and integrate content into the page designs.

Test, test, and test some more.

Prepare and implement a marketing plan.

optimized, a process that helps them to be downloaded as quickly as possible over the Internet. (You can find step-by-step instructions for preparing and optimizing images for the Web in Chapter 4.)

- ✓ **Create new content for your site:** For example, you might want to create a photo tour of your shop (to feature on the front page) or write or update biographies of key personnel.

Setting a timeline

With your task list ironed out, you're ready to create a timeline. Several popular programs can help. Microsoft Project can help you define a task, specify how long it should take, and then associate it with other tasks on a timeline. If you don't want to spend the money on Microsoft Project or take the time to learn this somewhat complex program, you can create a simple project plan in any calendar program or even in a spreadsheet or word-processing program.



Your main goal is to create a timeline that can be adjusted if someone misses a deadline or if a project takes more (or less) time than expected.

Setting and enforcing deadlines can help you stick to your timeline: Even if you're working on a Web site by yourself, or with a very small team, setting deadlines can be one of the most important parts of your project plan — and your best chance of finishing. Most good Web sites are never-ending projects because you can always add more content and develop them further — although you shouldn't let it keep you from getting your site launched. Set a deadline for at least the first phase of development, and then hold yourself to it.



Be sure to give yourself a realistic timeframe to do a good job, and factor in a little more time than you think you need, especially if you're new to Web design. Tying a deadline to a special event or occasion, even if you're creating a personal site, can help make you stick to the date. For example, set a launch date for a family Web site on an occasion like your grandma's birthday so that you can make it a surprise for her. Or, plan to publish the redesign for your small-business site in time for a trade show or annual sales event. When a deadline has a specific date and a clear goal associated with it, it's easier to take the deadlines seriously.

Establishing a budget

"How much does a Web site cost?" is often the first question asked by someone who decides that they want a Web site. But, if you think about it, it's a little like asking how much it costs to build a house — the answer depends on how many rooms you want, whether you want a marble or cement staircase, and whether you want a swimming pool in the backyard. You may have no idea how much it costs to build a home. After all, different contractors provide different price quotes based on how experienced they are or the kinds of materials they plan to use. If you're planning to build the house yourself, it becomes your job to figure out whether the features you want are reasonable and affordable.

Fortunately, most Web sites, at least the kind you're likely to build yourself with the templates and instructions provided in this book, don't cost nearly as much as a house. Before you can set a realistic budget, you need to break down the project into

pieces (by following the steps outlined earlier in this chapter) and then start adding prices to the task list in your project plan. Determining the cost of each element of a Web project helps you manage the cost and scope and estimate the overall costs. Among the key costs you can expect are the ones in this list:

- ✔ **Web hosting:** This service can cost as little as a few dollars a month or as much as a couple hundred dollars, if you plan to include audio and video files, which require more space on a server and more bandwidth to download.
- ✔ **Domain names:** A domain name costs about \$5 to \$10 per year, although you might want more than one domain name for the same site. (You can find tips about hosting and registering domain names in Chapter 2.)
- ✔ **Your personal time:** If you're building a site yourself, one of your biggest costs is likely to be the time you spend working on it.
- ✔ **Software programs:** The tools used to create a Web site can range from free to expensive. At the very least, consider getting an image-editing program like Photoshop CS3 (\$650), or Photoshop Elements (\$99) — a fine alternative if you are not working with a lot of graphics. For Web design, I find Adobe Dreamweaver (\$399) is well worth the price.
- ✔ **Consulting services:** Another major cost for do-it-yourselfers is any consulting service you use to augment your own skills. For example, you might hire an editor to review the text for your site or hire a programmer to create complex, interactive features, like a password-protected section where you keep clients informed as you work on their private projects.
- ✔ **Shopping system:** If you want a shopping system, compare the costs of a few and then include a rough estimate until you make a final decision. (You find recommended services in Chapter 14.)

As you put together your budget, start with the clear-cut costs, like paying for a domain name and hosting, and then move on to other items specific to your needs. After you have a price quote for each element and begin putting the pieces together, you can distinguish the more-expensive features and better decide which ones you can afford now and which ones to add later.

Preparing for updates and maintenance

The Web provides a powerful vehicle for businesses and nonprofit organizations to present their own side of any story and to get the word out quickly when tragic events, bad press, or other crises arise.

Don't wait for an emergency to happen to find out whether you're prepared to add new information to your Web site quickly, and don't fool yourself into thinking that just because you don't manage a daily Internet newspaper, you don't have to worry about making speedy updates.

With a little planning and some key systems set up in advance, you can be prepared for events that require timely information — whether an international crisis stops air travel, a flood closes your nonprofit, or an embarrassing event makes your CEO cringe and forces the real story to be told as soon as possible.

Most organizations develop Web sites that are updated weekly, monthly, or even annually. More sophisticated sites might link to databases that track inventory or update product listings in real time, but even high-end sites are often ill prepared to update special information quickly.

Here are a few things you can do to be prepared for timely updates on your site:

- ✓ **Make sure that you can send new information to your Web site quickly.** Many Web sites are designed with testing systems that safeguard against careless mistakes, but these systems can add hours, or even days, to the time it takes to add new information to your Web site. Work with your technical staff or consultants to make sure that you can update your site quickly if necessary. You might have to create a new section that you can update independently from the rest of the site or override the regular update system.
- ✓ **Ensure that you can easily update important sections of your site.** Consider building or buying a content-management system that uses Web-based forms to post new information to your site. This type of system can be designed to change or add information to a Web page as easily as filling out an online order form. You need an experienced programmer to develop a form-based update system. Many Web consultants offer this kind of service for a reasonable fee. For example, this method works if you're a real estate agent and you need to change listings or a calendar event. Include password protection so that you control access to the form. As an added benefit, a form enables you to make updates from any computer connected to the Internet, so you can update your Web site even if you can't get back into your office.
- ✓ **Identify and train key staff to update the site.** With the right systems in place, you don't need to have much technical experience to make simple updates to a site, but your staff needs some instruction and regular reminders. Make sure to also develop a schedule for retraining to ensure that no one forgets emergency procedures. An extremely serious emergency could happen tomorrow or might not happen for years — you never know, so being prepared pays off in the end.

Assembling a team

Don't go it alone! The best Web sites are developed by a team of people with a variety of skills, including writers, designers, programmers, and multimedia producers. If you're developing a relatively small, simple Web site, you might not need a lot of people with specialized skills on your team, but the more you can divide the work among experts, the better. Although the instructions and templates included with this book are designed to help you do it yourself, you occasionally still have to seek out specialists — like a good editor to ensure that your text is well written or a programmer who can create advanced features, like password-protected sections of a Web site. Throughout this book, I've worked hard to give you the best and easiest ways to create a Web site on your own, but I would be remiss not to point out that hiring a specialist or two once in a while can be a helpful way to complement the work you do yourself. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it.