So You Want to Be a Web Designer?

In This Chapter

▶ Understanding team member roles and responsibilities

▶ Getting started on your Web design career

The Internet industry has been exploding since its inception — from Web sites to wireless, the opportunities are endless. This is great news for you if you're thinking about becoming a professional Web designer. The industry is still relatively new, and a lot of territory remains uncharted. Exciting, rapid developments are around every corner.

Web design is not just about creating a single Web page that looks pretty. In this book, I show you how to design a whole collection of pretty pages that also link together in a way that makes sense to the user. Modern Web sites can consist of hundreds of pages. As a professional Web designer, your job is to know how to integrate design and navigation using the myriad of technologies and techniques to build an effective site.

Does this task sound daunting? Never fear, that's what teams are for! People who can do everything from HTML coding to programming to graphic and interaction design are rare. If you want to be a Web designer, you simply need to understand enough about the entire process from start to finish, and the role that every team member plays, to enable you to focus on the fun stuff — design.

In this chapter, I introduce you to the different players that you'll surround yourself with on your journey through professional Web design.

The People Involved

Designing Web sites is such a huge undertaking that to do it right, you really need a team of people. Here is a sampling of the major players, their roles, and when you need 'em.

Business folks

In the early days, you could get away with sticking a Web site up on the Internet and expect to get reasonable traffic without much further effort. In the crowded Internet highways of today, however, you really need a business strategy and a marketing plan. The business folks must be involved with the Web site from the very beginning. They are in charge of the following responsibilities:

- **Setting the goals for the site.** You must always understand the business goals of the site and the profile of the end user so you can craft a Web site that fits the customer's needs and achieves business objectives.

- **Reeling in the visitors.** The marketing folks' biggest task is to figure out how to steer Web surfers to your site. In the Internet business, *getting eyeballs* (fun industry jargon for getting people to look at your site) is not as easy as it sounds and involves search engine optimization (SEO), partnering with other companies, and an integrated online and offline campaign strategy. For these reasons, marketing folks need to get crackin' on their plan right away.

Producer folks

After you get clients excited about a Web project, their eyes tend to get bigger than the budget. Among many other responsibilities, the producer's job is to set and manage client expectations so the project stays on track. Using a variety of tools such as Microsoft Project, shown in Figure 1-1, the producer must keep the project, the team members, the client, and the budget on track from start to finish.

One of the most common problems a producer must address on a project is *scope creep.* Features and functions that you did not plan for have an uncanny ability to find their way into the design. Either project team members are trying to prove themselves by gold-plating their contributions, or clients are scrutinizing the site and suggesting way too many changes. In either case, constant noodling can add up to more time and money than you had planned, so either plan for it, or catch it and stop it before it happens.

	Task Name	Cost	Duration	Start	Finish
ⓘ	⊟ **Design Conference Web Site**	**$447,554.55**	**75 days?**	**Mon 8/1/05**	**Fri 11/11/05**
	⊟ **OVERHEAD**	**$274,859.10**	**75 days**	**Mon 8/1/05**	**Fri 11/11/05**
📝	Project Team Oversight	$124,859.10	75 days	Mon 8/1/05	Fri 11/11/05
📝	Contingency	$40,000.00	0 days	Mon 8/1/05	Mon 8/1/05
	⊞ **External costs**	$110,000.00	0 days	Mon 8/1/05	Mon 8/1/05
	⊞ **DISCOVERY PHASE**	**$0.00**	**27 days**	**Mon 8/1/05**	**Tue 9/6/05**
	Discovery complete	**$0.00**	**0 days**	**Mon 8/1/05**	**Mon 8/1/05**
	⊟ **PRELIMINARY DESIGN PHASE**	**$172,695.45**	**75 days**	**Mon 8/1/05**	**Fri 11/11/05**
📝	Team resources	$172,695.45	75 days	Mon 8/1/05	Fri 11/11/05
	⊞ **Internal project kick off**	**$0.00**	**1 day**	**Mon 8/1/05**	**Mon 8/1/05**
📝	**Internal kick off meeting**	**$0.00**	**1 day**	**Tue 8/2/05**	**Tue 8/2/05**
	⊞ **Preliminary wireframing**	**$0.00**	**8 days**	**Wed 8/3/05**	**Fri 8/12/05**
	Preliminary wireframes complete	**$0.00**	**0 days**	**Fri 8/12/05**	**Fri 8/12/05**

Figure 1-1: Most Web producers use project tracking software like Microsoft Project to manage schedules, resources, and milestones.

Visual designers

The Visual Designer works closely with the team to craft not only the site's structure, but also the navigation and user interface design. Additionally, the designer is in charge of the appearance of the site — integrating text, graphics, and animation to create a unique look that suits the client's goals and branding, yet is easy to use and practical to implement technically.

I find that many Web designers are print design expatriates. If you're transitioning from the print design world, the hardest thing you need to learn is how to maximize the technologies and navigation options at your fingertips to design effective Web interfaces.

Project management

Kelly Goto

Principal, www.gotomedia.com

Successful project management is keeping the members of the Web development team "on the same page" throughout the project. Balancing the needs of the client, the goals of the site, and the reality of scope and budget are challenging tasks. Establishing clear communication means understanding the needs of the client and individual team members. Following a process and understanding the overall goals and objectives of the site from the onset is also critical to the success of a project. The goal is to maintain clear objectives through each phase of development, to manage *scope creep* (the tendency of projects to expand in size), and to predict the future.

Many print designers create graphically heavy, magazine-like interfaces that certainly look cool, but are not very practical for the Web. They download slowly and are hard to automate or update. The Web page in Figure 1-2 is 8½ x 11 inches and has huge graphics. This page has navigational choices at the bottom, but they aren't visible because the page is larger than the browser window, which requires the user to scroll to see them. Compare this to the design in Figure 1-3. In Figure 1-3, the main navigation is clearly set apart and is high on the page. To be an effective Web designer, you must understand how Web pages are built so you can maximize usability and page efficiency.

Figure 1-2: This design is graphic-heavy, the navigation is not obvious, and it is difficult to build and update in HTML.
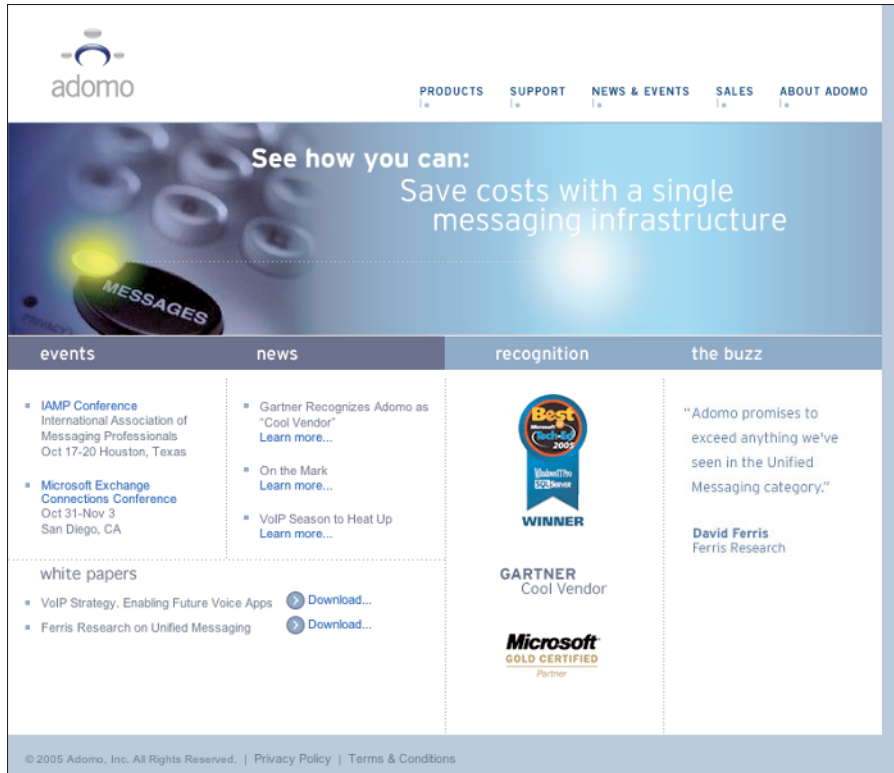
Figure 1-3: This modular design is easy to create and update in HTML, and it clearly outlines the navigation options for the user.

Information architects

This impressive-sounding title goes to the person whose job it is to sit down and figure out how the whole site fits together and how people will navigate from one page to the next.

One of the first tasks of an Information Architect is to design a *site map* diagram, like the one shown in Figure 1-4, that shows all the main sections of the site. The IA, as this person is often referred to, then dives into the page-level detail and creates a series of *wireframe* diagrams, like the example shown in Figure 1-5, that show the content and navigational elements that go on each major page of the site. Between the site map and the wireframe diagrams drawn for each page, the Information Architect, in effect, builds the blueprints for the entire site.
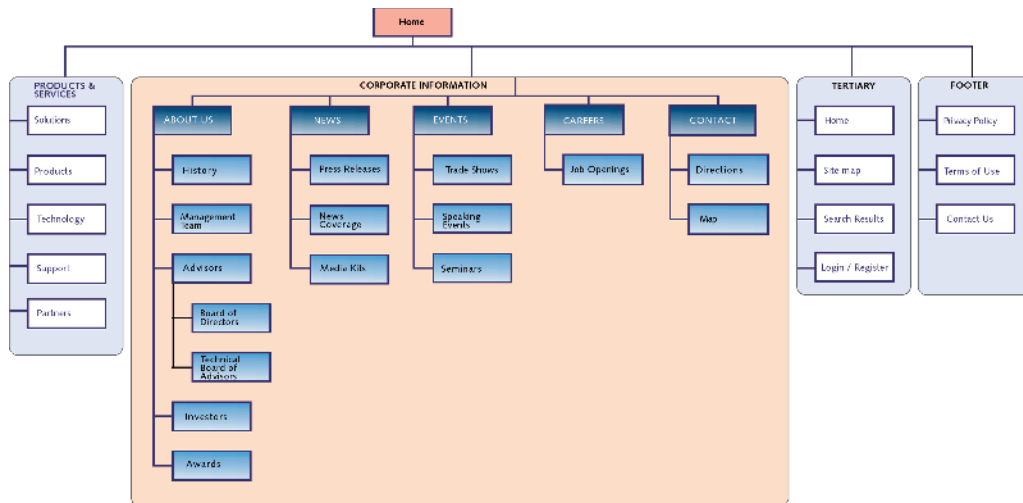
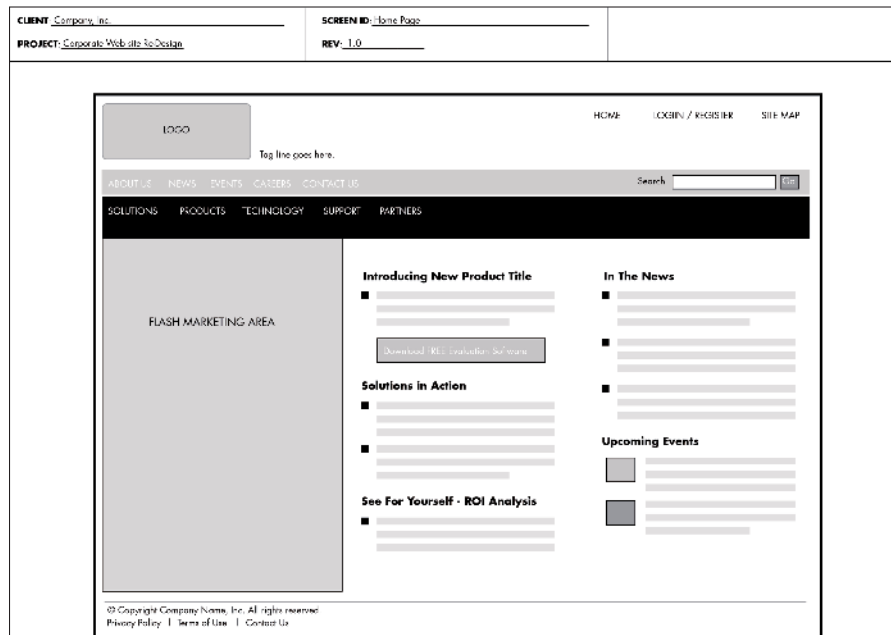**Figure 1-4:** A site map is like a bird's eye view of your Web site showing all its sections.

Figure 1-5: A wireframe shows the structural layout and content plan for a page.

Content designers

The content team is in charge of all the text on a Web site. These days, some Web sites have as much copy (a.k.a text) as a magazine or a book, and like a magazine, must be designed in such a way that they can be updated on a regular basis without reinventing the page layout each month.

For this reason, a Web project often has two roles:

- ✔ **Content Strategist:** The person who identifies the chunks of copy needed for each page — for example, headlines, bullet lists, and descriptions — and the rules for each, such as character limits and word counts.
- ✔ **Copy writer:** The person who actually writes the text for each chunk.

Writing for the Web is a whole other animal. Firstly, no one likes to read text-heavy Web pages, so the Content Strategist and the writer have to convey the most impact in the least amount of space. Secondly, you need to lead off with the real meat of the message — the conclusion first and then follow with a few supporting details in case people get that far.

You have, at most, about three to four seconds to get your main message across with words and graphics to hook your visitor. If visitors don't get it, they're off to the competition. After all, it's just as convenient to type their URL as it is to type yours.

Media specialists

No modern Web site would be complete without a splash of video, Flash, or audio media. With so many specialized media formats and compression schemes, however, it's best to leave media design to separate professionals. This is especially true for Flash development. Flash is a software application that can create highly interactive, game-like applications and animation (look for Flash at www.macromedia.com). The program is so powerful that Flash design has become its own highly sought after profession.

HTML slingers

A variety of titles — none of them standard — denote the people who assemble Web pages in *HTML* (HyperText Markup Language). "Technical integrators," "technical producers," and a few other titles come to mind, but the most amusing title I heard while working at eBay was HTML Slinger. This funny title made sense because the folks who specialize in this stuff are creative programmers who have hands that can type HTML faster than you can say "draw."

Although HTML is a coding language, being able to use it well involves a lot of creativity. For one reason, different browsers interpret code differently, which can really screw up your page layout. Good HTML slingers are great at finding workarounds for these browser incompatibilities — all the while maximizing a page's download performance.

Programmers

WEB SPEAK

Modern Web site projects would not be complete without a team of program-mers. These folks can really give your Web site a turbo boost by making it dynamic. (In the industry, the word *dynamic* refers to an automated Web site that connects to databases for displaying and storing content and/or con-nects to applications to process input.)

A Web site often consists of hundreds of pages — well, that's only a half-truth. Programmers can help you build a few template Web pages that you can use again and again throughout your Web site. This way, you can quickly create a Web site consisting of hundreds of pages, as shown in Figure 1-6. An online database *populates* (industry term for *fills in*) the template with different information to create each new page.
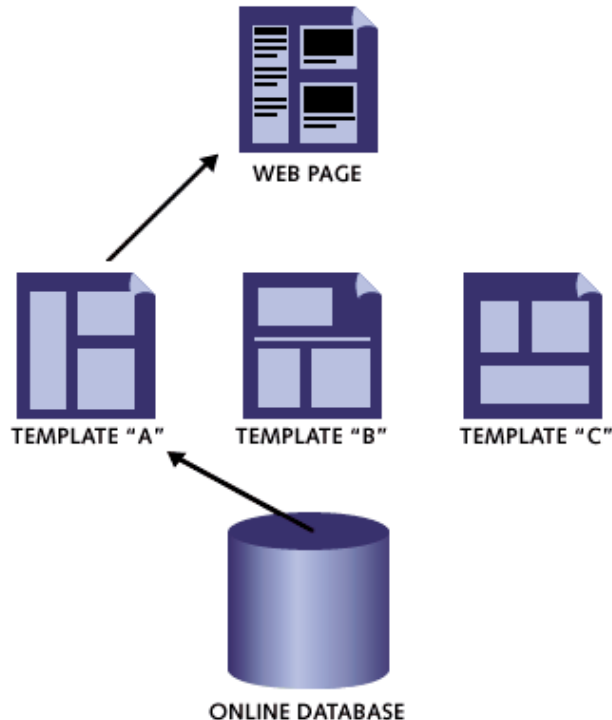

WEB PAGE

TEMPLATE "A"   TEMPLATE "B"   TEMPLATE "C"

ONLINE DATABASE

Figure 1-6: A few HTML template pages and a database can create hundreds of Web pages.

In addition to coding the template Web pages with techie software develop-ment packages like the scripting language PHP (*Hypertext Preprocessor* — go figure), ASP *(Active Server Pages),* and ColdFusion, programmers also create the online databases that house all the information. Building databases can

be so complex that many times you need a specialized database dude or
dudette for that task alone!

Getting Started in Web Design

Now that you have a feel for the different types of professionals you'll be
working with — or become yourself — it's time to start taking steps toward
your own Web future (or interactive TV, mobile design, DVD) by educating
yourself on the production process.

The rest of this book dives into the nitty-gritty of the Web design workflow so
that you can understand how a site is built from start to finish. The following
are the kinds of questions you need to answer before you embark on your
career: Where do you begin building a site? How do you organize informa-
tion? How do you design a site that's easy to navigate? How do you design
and build graphics? And finally, how do you build a site in HTML and what
do all those technical acronyms stand for?

Getting Experience

The classic chicken and the egg question comes to mind yet again: How do
I get experience without having a job, and how do I get a job without having
experience? The answer I think is to go out and create your own experience
and then present it in a nice portfolio ready to show to a potential client.
Here are a few ideas for you to consider:

- **Help out a friend.** All of us have friends who need a Web site designed
  for some legitimate purpose. First read *Web Design For Dummies* cover
  to cover and then offer to design a simple site for a friend that can show-
  case your strengths. No one will ever know that Suzie's Seafood was a
  site you designed for free for your best friend.

- **Partner with other Web professionals.** After working on Suzie's Seafood,
  you'll realize that building a Web site is not a one-person job. Now that
  you have a taste, try to expand the complexity of your next site by part-
  nering with one or more Web professionals. Again, offer your talents free
  of charge.

- **Create a portfolio.** Design and build your own Web site. Make it a show-
  piece that exhibits your work in the best light. You may need to call on
  some favors from other Web professionals to help make it what you
  want it to be.

- **Learn from other sites.** The Web is the best place to get new design
  ideas. Scour the Site of the Week listings at `www.designinteract.com`.
  Not only can you get a lot of visual and interaction design ideas, you can
  often get HTML and JavaScript code samples by viewing the source.

When you feel confident you've developed enough skill level to take on a paying customer, start looking online for different opportunities. Craig's List (`www.craigslist.com`) is a fantastic resource for finding local freelance design work.

Designing an award-winning site takes years of knowledge coming together. Not to state the obvious, but sell yourself appropriate to your skill level and comfort zone. I have heard many clients groan about inexperienced Web designers who got in over their heads and could not deliver. Better to start small and build up experience and a solid reputation.