What Do You Need Besides HTML?

by Jane K. Starnes

There are some pretty obvious things that most of you have figured out by now:

- HTML isn’t all that hard to write.
- Bad HTML is even easier to write.
- Writing HTML isn’t enough.

This article offers a few hints about what you need after you have the HTML. It’s a lot more than most people anticipate. I group these in three categories: Customer Needs, Owners Needs and Political Realities.

As you will see, creating and maintaining a Web site is a lot of work. The relative ease of the beginning step lulls us into thinking the whole process is easy. Good planning for all the ramifications of moving onto the Web at the outset will make the process easier to survive through to the end.

Political Realities

There is no free lunch. You can write HTML on the cheap, and maybe even find a place to serve it, but ultimately somebody pays. Servers cost money; somebody has to run them and they do not work for nothing; the software that runs them reliably and intelligently is not free. If you are going to run your own server, you need to budget for it realistically. If you are not going to run it yourself, be prepared to share the cost with your ISP—they will bill you for at least a “fair share” of the operational costs.

Probably the single most important piece of running a server is the human being you need to take care of the beast. Equipment can be scrounged, recycled or diverted from other uses. The software involved is not extremely expensive. But headcount is a lot harder to get. If you do not have somebody to groom and feed your server, it will bite you.

As you build a site with information that is useful to your customers, you will find lots of people wanting to jump on your bandwagon (or hijack your bandwagon and rebuild it into a vehicle for intergalactic travel). Prepare yourself early to have an enforceable means of deciding who or what gets to join your effort and who needs to be sent elsewhere. Make sure your management is fully supportive of your design and goals.

You may get some dazzling offers for somebody else to do large chunks of the work you were hoping to bring onto the site for you. Leverage those as much as possible. Be lavish with your gratitude and generous in sharing credit. But also make sure you have a commitment for ongoing support of whatever they develop. If it breaks, needs data updates or enhancements to functionality, you’ll be up a creek without a boat if you don’t have access to the developer who brought you to this place.

You may get some amazing demands for you to do something that doesn’t seem even vaguely related to your goals for the site. Be open to good ideas that come in this way and ready to reject any that will change the tone and direction of your site. Show a lot of sorrow at not being able to accommodate every request, but keep your focus on your goal.

Unless you really are the CEO, somebody higher up the organizational chart will be making decisions that affect your Web site. It is in your own enlightened self-interest to make sure that these decision makers actually have a browser installed on their own desks and know how to use it. Make sure they get copies of every positive comment you receive about your site. Copy them on the complaints when you provide a prompt response or explanation that resolves the complaint. Use those usage reports to let them know how well their customers are being served by this site they are enabling.

Intranets and genuine customer communication on the Internet are still relatively infant ideas. Everybody is in a learning mode on how to do it. Everybody wants a piece of the action. Everybody thinks they’re a little ahead of the average curve. You really are ahead of the curve if you realize that nobody knows it all and can sort through the resources available to you to get the right combination of knowledge and appropriate resources, and can make sure that the right person/group/department is doing the right part of the job. You don’t have to reinvent every wheel and gizmo. Build on what is already there and use your energy to push the pace of development instead of on duplicating existing efforts.

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Customer Needs

You probably need to know a little bit more about browsers and how they use HTML. Very few of us are privileged to work in completely homogeneous environments where everybody uses the same browser, with monitors all of the same resolution, and nobody is color-blind. If you aren’t one of the lucky ones, you need to know:

- What is the lowest resolution display used by your customer base? Make sure that your graphics and page layouts don’t exceed the capacity of this lowest common denominator. Users who can’t fit all of your graphic image on their screen tend to be cranky and not to appreciate the elegance of your design and the richness of your content.
- What browsers are being used by your customer base? Netscape may be the only browser you ever heard of, but there are over 60 different browsers available, three of which have substantial portions of the market. A page that is laid out using all the bells and whistles of the Netscape table extensions will display in Mosaic and Internet Explorer, but will not look like it does in Netscape. It’s best to view your page in all the browsers used by your customers and decide what’s really acceptable in each one—another lowest common denominator emerges.

How do your users really look for information in your site? If you find that a high percentage of people are viewing your Contents file, wonder why. Are you using a cute pictorial metaphor on the top level which isn’t understood by the users? Are your graphics so numerous or frivolous that your customers are browsing with graphics turned off to get faster response? Do you have so many layers to work through that people are desperate for the short cut?

Do you know what the user satisfaction level is? Some users will be thrilled to get anything, others will never have enough. You need to steer a steady course on being responsive to user needs and being whipped by user demands.

You need to document what you’ve found out and what decisions were made based on your learning and then communicate this to every author who is loading content for your site. In a site of any size, there will be more than one author involved. Establishing some rules and guidelines up front will help give your site a more consistent presentation and more reliable delivery of services.

Owner Needs

As the owner of a Web site, there are some things you need from the server which delivers your page. If you are running your own server, you need to figure out how to make these things part of your server management. If your page is hosted on a server run by somebody else, you should expect (demand) these services from your Internet (Intranet) Service Provider (ISP).

Reliability. Your customers will be very frustrated by a site that is sometimes there and other times not. Get a service level agreement that guarantees up time, forbids testing during the active hours of your site, requires advance notice of maintenance downtimes. If you are running the server yourself, observe these rules. Take care of your customers or they’ll abandon you.

Usage monitoring. Your ISP should be able to tell you what the peak usage times are for the server (and maybe even for your specific content on the server). This is valuable information in figuring out who your customers really are. If a high percentage of the use of your site is between midnight and 8 am, your non-U.S. customers may be a more important part of the customer base than you thought. If usage spikes in the hour after shift changes, you may find that your site is less management-oriented than you thought. If your site is only used on the morning of staff meeting day, that’s a clue to what is most important on the page.

And overall, usage monitoring will give you an early warning of server overload and time to split or mirror your content.

Access monitoring. Your ISP should be able to tell you where your users are coming from. Granularity for this kind of data varies widely, but it’s very revealing. If 20% of your customers are in the Midwest, but they are only 4% of the usage of your site, you have identified a marketing need.

Access monitoring can identify which browsers are being used to access your site. If you’re writing pages for Internet Explorer and most of your customers are using a different browser, you probably need to rethink your authoring style.

File access monitoring. A close look at the usage statistics on how many times the various files on your site are accessed will tell you what’s important to your customers. If they never look at your mission statement, you may want to remove it or incorporate it into a page they all have to look at. If they are looking most at your Contents page, you may have an information organization problem on your site.

File management. It is incredibly easy for multiple versions of HTML documents, graphics files, etc., to accumulate on your server. Links and graphics can be eliminated from your pages, but the files remain on the server. Backup copies of files pile up. Your ISP should be able to give you reports on when files were last updated and last accessed, allowing you to do a rational cleanup. The best servers allow you to set a future expiration date for a file so it’ll disappear automatically or at least be offered up for review.

Regular and complete backups. The ISP must know how to restore from a backup. You should not take for granted that the two are necessarily linked. After all, if all your prayers are answered, you will never actually need to restore from a backup.

All too frequently in the rush to the Web, page owners see the goal as getting the site out there when the goal ought to be communicating something to some target group. The overhead spent on site management and monitoring is worthwhile in helping you understand how your site is actually being used which can be substantially different than what you planned or expected. Appropriate server management can result in better system response time and cost savings from postponing storage capacity increases.