



# Web Design for Internet Business Owners



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## **Introduction**

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### **Who Should Read This Book**

Web Design for Newbies introduces several theories behind developing a successful website, and at the same time it presents more than a few practical ideas for development. It's appropriate for those who are new to Internet business and web design in general, as it explains the "why" and "what" behind web design rather than the "how."

In developing the book, we assumed that its readers have no prior experience or knowledge in either Internet business or web development since it is a work that's designed to teach what could be done with minimal to no familiarity.

## Part 1: Setting Website Goals

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### The Website as Today's New Necessity

For those of us who've spent any real time on the Internet, it's hard to imagine a business without an online presence. Almost everywhere we look, we find a business URL plastered somewhere on a coffee mug, novelty pen, or refrigerator magnet, and there are several good reasons why.

#### New Times Require New Approaches

In a virtual place called "cyberspace," geographic restrictions are removed, while global access to billions of consumers literally changes the way and pace in which traditional business is performed. Sales opportunities increase while transaction costs decrease. And computer automation enables the selling processes 24 hours a day, 7 days a week while products are delivered within minutes (and sometimes even instantaneously) at a fraction of conventional delivery expenses.

These are some pretty compelling reasons for any business to set up an online camp; however, the most compelling reason of all is that today's consumers demand it! Never before has there been a more information-hungry market than what we have in this generation of net-connected consumers, and never before has there been such a demand to satisfy consumer queries than now.

Failing to provide a 24-hour automated shopping and delivery service that accommodates the interests of a worldwide market contributes to the success of your competitor. But the benefits of owning a slice of cyberspace aren't exclusive to the consumer market. Owning and operating a website is beneficial to the businesses that run them as well.

#### Business Websites Benefit Both Consumers And Companies At Once

Business websites also improve the internal processes of the companies that manage them. Customer-to-business communication improves, inventories update in an instant, and even advertisement ROI's manifest quicker -- in real time -- for meaningful results.

The explosion of the Internet has undoubtedly surpassed skeptics' expectations and it has become a forceful component in the way we do business as both producer and consumer. The only next parameter to deal with is molding and shaping its economic potential into an experience that is profitable for the business owner because the potential is seemingly inexhaustible.

But we can not expect to succeed online by using yesteryear's methods. As a society, we must instead change our business into one that is flexible, and embraces non-traditional means. The most effective way to do that is with a website.

**TIP:** *Can you name more than three well-known businesses that don't have a website? Consider this a challenge and try to name a few of the most popular companies without an Internet presence of some sort. Chances are, you won't be able*

*to!*

## **Not Just Any Website Will Do**

### **People Still Judge A Book by Its Cover**

When we talk about websites, we're not talking about simple web pages that look like the efforts of the local nerd or enthusiastic script-kiddy. Nor are we talking about the retro websites of the early nineties either. Serious businesses require serious websites.

We've come a long way in technology but some habits are hard to break. One of those habits is judging a book by its cover. Time has proven over and over that online consumers are more apt to shop from a website that "looks" professional. But the problem with taking advantage of this inclination is that we can have a hard time defining what exactly "professional" is and what it "looks" like. For what's deemed professional in the eyes of some is labeled tacky or over-the-top by others and vice versa.

### **Who Gets to Define "Professional"**

The graphics design industry has always struggled with defining the "professional look" because while its clients want to look professional, they also want to maintain individuality and creativity: two dynamics that contribute to the quandary at hand.

Is there a feasible way to incorporate individuality and creativity in an environment that depends on a professional atmosphere? If we asked this question thirty years ago or more, we would have been told, "no." However we are again, facing a new generation of consumer demands. Today's consumers demand fresh, innovative approaches, yet they will not accept anything that's less than professional. As online merchants who want to satisfy current consumer demand, we are left to define "professional" as whatever it means to the buying market.

### **The K.I.S.S. Principle**

Fortunately through extensive surveys, user feedback, and behavioral analysis, we've come to understand what consumers regard as "professional." Surprisingly, none of it sacrifices creativity or innovative solutions the way that it could have a couple of generations ago. This is because in the minds of billions of online shoppers, "professional websites" are built according to the most important principle of web design, and that principle is simplicity.

Over time, consumers have consistently demonstrated a strong propensity toward websites that are simple to read, to navigate, and of course, to use. And since the ultimate goal behind business websites is to process sales, the successful ones are crafted in such a way that they completely eliminate anything that could interfere with that goal.

Nothing on a simple website distracts visitors, while everything in its entire design leads visitors along the path of making a purchase. And whatever choices are made available, you can bet that each one of them enables visitors to accomplish some sort of sales-oriented task.

There are numerous reasons why complex websites don't contribute to the success of the online entrepreneur, but for the most part, it's because they overwhelm potential consumers and dissuade sales. In fact, the more complicated a website appears, the more likely it is that a visitor will leave it. Websites that deviate from simplicity slow down the impulsive nature of the online consumer, and, in the worst case scenario, could completely alienate themselves from the very markets that they're attempting to serve.

***TIP:*** *We've got another challenge for you! If you've already got a website up and running, take a look at it's homepage, and see if you find anything that could potentially distract a visitor from completing a sale. If you didn't build the website according to the K.I.S.S. principle, you just might find more than expected.*

## **Giving A Website An Audience-Oriented Focus and Direction**

### **Audience-Oriented Business Goals**

At the very least, history has determined that a professional website must strive to reach at least 5 specific goals:

1. To appeal to a global market
2. To operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
3. To instantaneously deliver its products and/or services
4. To automate its back-end operations
5. To work within a simple interface

Although these goals are rather broad in scope, their specifics are what give a website the complete focus and direction that it needs to be successful. Some of those specifics include setting up a secure ordering system, providing customer support, advertising, marketing, and hiring employees. However regardless of its level of detail, each goal of a business website must always address the needs of its target audience.

Many online business mistakenly address the needs of their operations instead of the needs of their visitors, and this is but one contributor of the complexity we all have come to experience on the Internet—and of course, one contributor to failure.

### **Audience-Oriented Design Goals**

The key needs of a website's audience will set the course for further development because they address things like Internet experience, browser type, connection speeds, and screen resolution.

For example, a website that caters to visitors with little Internet experience should provide a very simple interface with small blurbs of explanatory text next to each button or link. One of the goals in this case would be to offer extensive help.

A website that serves mostly Internet Explorer users can take advantage of advanced Java or VB scripting, whereas a website that attracts mostly low-end browser users should avoid scripting altogether and concentrate on providing text-based content instead.

Another goal of a website that caters to visitors with slow Internet connections would be to display small, fast loading graphics rather than video-laden web pages that are riddled with 400K+ images.

These examples illustrate how a website's audience literally dictates what should and shouldn't be part of its design if it's going to meet its audience-oriented *business* goals.

At times, audience-oriented design goals may conflict with each other -- especially when they encounter visitors who have fast Internet connections but low screen resolutions. To accomplish design goals for such a widely varied audience, it's best to design a website that satisfies the most common needs.



**TIP:** To determine what your visitors needs are, check your server's visitor logs to find the most commonly used browser, connection speed, screen resolution and more. Without these logs, your guess will be as good as any stranger's.

**TIP:** Check out the Web Site Garage @ <http://www.websitegarage.com>. This service will analyze a website's load time at various connection speeds with various browsers.

Use it to see if your website accommodates the needs of your visitor's Internet equipment.

## Part 2: Key Factors In Site Development

### The Work Factor

#### Doing It Yourself

We couldn't lie about it even if we wanted to, because building a website from scratch is hard work! And it's even harder if you have no experience doing it. But if you're willing to take the time to learn the required skills, be prepared to learn *a lot*. As the sole person responsible for every aspect of website design and maintenance, you're going to need all the right tools and every bit of knowledge to use them. Here's a brief introduction to three essential tools you'll need and want to use as a web designer:

#### HTML Editor Tools

You'll first need a good web page editor and we highly recommend that you find and stick with the WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) kind. These software programs will display web pages as they're being built -- much like the way that word processors display documents as they're edited.

- NVU – Best editor there is and it's free.  
(<http://www.nvu.com>)
- Microsoft Front Page is a popular, easy-to-learn HTML editor but there are others, some quite expensive and some that are entirely free.  
(<http://www.microsoft.com>)
- Microsoft Word - Although not quite a HTML editor, Microsoft Word can save word processing documents as HTML webpages.  
(<http://www.microsoft.com>)
- ColdFusion offers a lot more features than both of the Microsoft packages above, but it's also a lot more difficult to learn and a lot more costly too.  
(<http://www.adobe.com/products/coldfusion>)

## Graphics Editors

A website that doesn't use images to enhance its image or communicate a message is rare website indeed. Almost all websites display icons, artwork, or photographs of some sort. You don't need to be a professional artist or photographer to display graphics—you just need to know where to find high-quality imagery to use and edit as your own. Here are a couple of good leads:

- [Clipart.com](http://Clipart.com)
- [Free-StockPhotos.com](http://Free-StockPhotos.com)
- PaintShop Pro  
([http://www.paintshoppro.com/pspx\\_offer/index.html](http://www.paintshoppro.com/pspx_offer/index.html))
- NeoPaint  
(<http://www.neosoftware.com/npw.html>)

## Multimedia Editors

In addition to imagery, a growing number of websites incorporate animation, sound and/or video into their presentations. It's easy to get carried away with adding these elements to a website because they make the final production sophisticated and exciting to use. When used excessively however, they can slow down data transfer and make an unfavorable impression on visitors who don't have the proper equipment to handle such a rich form of media.

Use multimedia sparingly only to support a website's purpose.

**TIP:** Remember that there are still a large number of Internet users who use a dial-up connection. Animation, sound and/or video files are more appropriate for visitors with a cable or DSL type connection.

**TIP:** While learning how to acquire, code, or manage a website on your own could save anywhere from a hundred to thousands of dollars, they do require an extensive amount of learning. If you need to get your website up and running rather quickly, your best bet would be to outsource as many of these tasks as you can afford!

## Working From A Template

Short of handing the responsibility of designing a website to someone else, website templates make the whole process ridiculously easy. In a nutshell, website templates are complete website designs minus custom content. Depending on the type of template, website owners can either (1) download, modify, and then re-upload edited templates to a server, or (2) edit a template online and save changes on a remote server.

The first approach uses templates called turnkey packages while the second approach uses templates called prepackaged software solutions. Both approaches are low-cost methods of producing a website, yet they don't allow for unlimited customization.

## Outsourcing the Job

Web design couldn't get any easier when it's outsourced to someone else. As a significant time and money saver, outsourced web design grants access to experienced web programmers who can quickly facilitate the entire process, usually within a month's time.

The key difference between this approach and the other two described above is that hired programmers have a lot of control over how things work. In fact, programmers are usually the folks who update and maintain the site because they're the ones who are most familiar with it.

***TIP:** Outsourcing could leave you out of the loop unless you've taken the time to familiarize yourself with some of the ways that websites operate. Learn some basic HTML so that you make harmless changes to your website without being completely dependent on your programmers.*

Another difference with outsourcing web design is ownership. In the above approaches, the website's owner retains ownership (copyrights) to the final design, however, depending on the contract between you and your programmer, you may not own copyrights to your site at all.

Before agreeing to any type of outsourcing arrangement, read the contract and get specific answers to what you'll get for payment, what will or could be subcontracted to another party, who handles updates, and who keeps copyrights. If necessary, have a lawyer review the terms of any contract before signing it. Here are a few online outsourcing resources to start:

Rentacoder      <http://www.rentacoder.com>  
Elance      <http://www.elance.com>  
Get a Freelancer      <http://www.getafreelancer.com>

## The Cost Factor

Budgeting the costs for designing a website is a different beast altogether but it basically follows a simple formula: "More Stuff = More Expense." The more that you can do yourself, the less expensive your costs will be. The expenses involved in designing a website may range from a simple \$50 investment to a whopping \$10,000 expense. The following describes what could increase or decrease development costs:

- Supplying office space and furniture
- Purchasing sufficient networking hardware

- Buying appropriate website software
- Purchasing additional computer peripherals (digital cameras, scanners, video cams, etc.)
- Buying artwork or hiring a freelance artist to supply it
- Hiring a computer programmer to provide Java or VB script code
- Paying for web hosting
- Utility bills
- Legal fees for copyrights, trademarks, patents, etc.

Things that could affect the rate of these costs could be the decision to:

- Rent equipment and space or re-use existing equipment and space
- Register low-cost HTML editing shareware (or use free software)
- Use multimedia material in the public domain or purchase low-cost stock images, sounds, and video
- Completely outsource the entire design of a website or only outsource specific tasks
- Learn how to code HTML, JavaScript, VB Script, and any number of other web languages
- Host a website on a privately owned network

## Part 3: Web Design Guidelines

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### Planning Guidelines

As soon as a website is loaded, it should show what's available and how to get it without having to jump through unusual hoops. Planning can help with that. In fact, designing a website is much easier with a plan in mind, and a good plan will turn the entire process into a series of simple 1-2-3 steps.

#### The Flat Plan

The simplest plan for a website entails a series of webpages linked together from a single webpage. This basic "flat plan" is sufficient for websites with no more than a couple of pages, but it's not an appropriate plan for websites with hundreds or thousands of webpages.

#### The Multi-Level Plan

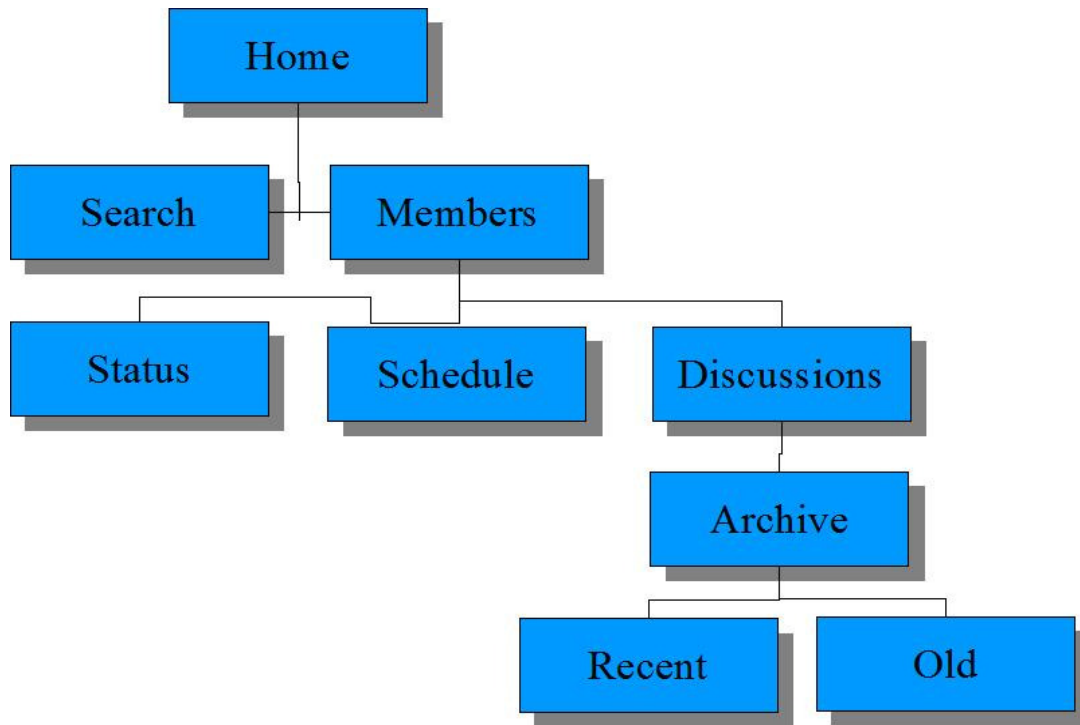
A different kind of "multi-leveled" plan links to webpages stored in multiple folders or directories within directories. But when these hierarchies are built too deep, finding information is more difficult than it has to be. No one wants to click through more than three to five links just to access a webpage, and that's exactly what happens on websites that bury content.

#### The Perfect Plan

The best structure is a combination of the simple plan and the multi-leveled plan in which information can be accessed within three clicks or less. A search tool can help visitors find information that must be organized in deeper levels.

In the illustration below, you can see how this combination looks on a flowchart. Each row of webpages represents a level, and this website's older archives are located on the 5<sup>th</sup> level. Instead of having to click through four pages or levels (home page => members page => discussions page => archives page) to access this website's older archives, visitors could search for it through a form we provide on the website's home page.

### *Combination Of The Simple Plan And The Multi-Leveled Plan*



*Sample combination of the simple structure and the multi-leveled plan*

## **Web Design Tips**

### **Consistency**

To maintain a consistent look and convey a serious business attitude, every page in a website should always display the following elements:

- Business Name, Contact Information, and URL. When visitors print a page, they can readily recall where the page came from if this data is displayed on each and every page.
- Logo. Repetitive display of a company's logo helps with the branding process.
- Font (Typeface). A consistent font also helps maintain a consistent look. Websites or pages that display several different fonts give the impression of being haphazard and unstable rather than focused and serious.
- Update Date. The date (and time) that reflects when the content on a page changed can help visitors determine how fresh the content is. Fresh content is particularly important for businesses who need to convey time-sensitive materials (product availability, pricing, etc.)

- Copyright Information. This should deter a few visitors who might want to steal exclusive material.

## Navigation

Like the elements described above, navigation elements should also appear on every page -- especially since visitors can enter any part of a website, including its home page. Through a search engine query or through a link on another website, a visitor could land on a product page or mission page for example. With a navigation system on each page, visitors can easily access the home page regardless of where they entered the site.

### *Common Navigational Systems*

There are two common ways to display a navigational system on each page. One way uses graphics and the other way uses plain text. Known as "navigation bars," these systems are simple links to the main areas of a website.

Typically, graphical navigation bars are displayed on the top of each page and textual navigation bars are displayed either on the left side or bottom of each page.



*Sample Graphical Navigation Bar*

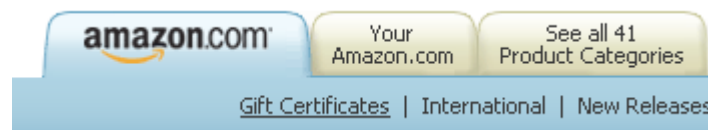
[How to Suggest a Site](#) - [Company Info](#) - [Copyright Policy](#) - [Terms of Service](#) - [Contributors](#) - [Jobs](#) - [Advertising](#)

*Sample Textual Navigation Bar*

*(The picture above was taken from Yahoo.com)*

### ***The Multilevel Navigation Bar***

For massive websites that have multiple levels of major sections, a hierarchical navigation bar is best. This kind of navigation provides access to important sections beneath each hierarchy and shows visitors how the website is organized.



*Sample Multilevel Navigation Bar*

***TIP:*** Use "top-of-page" links at the bottom of long webpages. These links eliminate the need to reverse-scroll back to the top of lengthy content because when clicked,



*they automatically take the visitor to the beginning of a webpage.*

## ***The Sitemap***

Sitemaps are webpages that resemble book indexes. They link to all the pages of a website in an organized way and they're really helpful for visitors who want to interact with something that resembles an index rather than with something that resembles a table of contents.

### **Links**

#### ***Text Links***

In the past, it was rather easy to recognize hyperlinks on a webpage because they were traditionally blue and underlined. Today, hyperlinks can be any color, and they may not be underlined at all. With a little advanced scripting, today's hyperlinks can move, jump, swirl around, and do a little bit of everything short of inserting a coin into a jukebox and selecting a song to dance to. While that's pretty fancy, they can be hard to locate on a content-dense page.

We recommend that you stick to the traditional format so that visitors can readily distinguish a link from other text, and so that navigation doesn't require them chase anything around the screen.

#### ***Image Links***

At times, images make better links than text links -- especially when they help visitors who speak a different language navigate around a website. As an example, consider a small image of the envelope. Anyone from any country can easily identify the envelope as a representation of email. A small image of a shopping cart indicates a check-out center, and a small image of a telephone indicates contact information in any part of the world.

Use image links with discretion and make sure that they indicate the kind of content it presents.

### **Color**

#### ***Color Schemes***

The color scheme of a website sets its tone even before visitors begin to read what the website is about. In general, light, muted colors are appropriate for business or conservative websites, and pastels accented with earth tones are just fine. The further that a color scheme deviates from this combination, the more risky it is in terms of making conservative, professional impression.

#### ***Color Meaning***

It isn't practical to apply the meaning of every color to a website because color meanings change from culture to culture and country to country. In the U.S., blue is often interpreted as "trusting," while in Korea, "trust" is pink. But a pink website that appeals to an American military audience is entirely

inappropriate! So, to make color meaning work, you'll need to determine where the bulk of your visitors come from, and then use a color theme that reflects the taste and preferences of that audience.

### *Web Safe Colors*

Even still, some web browsers can only display a small number of the 16 million color combinations that we've been blessed with thus far. Problems occur when a webpage is designed with a specific color, but a web browser can't reproduce that color on a visitor's computer. To avoid this common problem, design a website with web safe colors. Web safe colors are hues that will display in any web browser on any computer.

***TIP:*** *Most color palettes in WYSIWYG HTML editors offer web safe colors!*

## **Text**

At first thought, one would think that applying text to a website would be a pretty straightforward task. But experience has shown that visitors prefer text that follows specific formats.

### *Preferred Format*

Visitors tend to scan online text rather than actually sit and read it verbatim. Blame it on the fleeting and swift nature of the Internet if you will. The fact is that most online users will run away from a website that resembles the content of college-grade philosophy text.

Online readers want to view text in a column that's broken up into easy to read chunks and separated by plenty of white space (wide margins), bullets, and big, summarizing headlines. They also want text that gets straight to the point. Long essay-like prose just doesn't jive with the high-speed pace of the Internet, nor does it work well for today's demanding and speed-conscious consumer.

### *Common Fonts*

Be aware that not everyone has the same fonts installed on their computer. A web browser can only display the fonts that are installed in a visitor's font folder, so when it encounters a request for a missing font, it will make a substitution. The most common fonts are Arial, Verdana, Comic Sans MS, and Times New Roman.

Varying the appearance of these fonts with different sizes, colors, and bold or italic attributes should be enough to offer sufficient visual variety.

***TIP:*** *Try not to underline text since visitors will interpret it as a hyperlink and will try to click it. Reserve this formatting for actual links.*

## Images and Multimedia

### *Images*

We talked about images and multimedia earlier; however, here we want to introduce the two most common types and how to properly use them.

To improve the time it takes to load a webpage, you should design a site with small, compressed image files. Both the GIF image and JPEG image formats are compressed, and although they both display imagery just fine, each has their own purpose.

GIF images are unique in that they can be animated and they can have transparent backgrounds. JPEG images are unique in that they compress photographs better than GIF files and they retain a photograph's original qualities better than GIF files.

Still, no matter what you do sometimes, a large image just doesn't seem to compress as small as you'd like it to. Optimizing images is one way to reduce large images even more and there are numerous software programs that can help.

***TIP:*** *This link points to a large number of GIF optimizers via our favorite search engine: [Yahoo](#).*

Another way to reduce the time it takes to load a webpage is to display thumbnail images the way that catalogs display small products pictures. Thumbnail images are smaller versions of larger images which are linked to their bigger forms. To see the full form of an image, visitors can click on its small and quick-loading thumbnail version.

### *Multimedia*

Like images, sounds can increase the time that it takes to load a webpage and playing them in the background should generally be avoided. Visitors should always have the choice to listen to audio recordings, midi music files, and streaming audio through a link that plays them, rather than being forced to download and then hear these files in the background.

Video files can present the same loading problems as large image files and sound files so again, visitors should always have the choice to view them rather than being forced to download and then watch them. Even though the technology behind video is improving in both speed and compression, they're still a burden on those with slow Internet connections.

### Frames

Frames divide the visible area of a web browser into sections and then load different pages into each area. They're an extremely useful way to organize and present multiple sections of a website, however overkill tends to overwhelm visitors (and their browsers) by presenting too much information at once.

They also don't index well in search engines or easily archive into a visitor's bookmark or favorites folder. As a result, they're pretty much avoided by all.

We don't particularly have anything against frames other than the few minor problems that they cause because when used correctly, they really can make interacting with a website easy. If you find frames an irresistible lure, seek the help of a website frame professional so that they avoid the problems described above.

## Forms

Form elements are what make websites come alive with interactivity in its truest sense. Without them, visitors can do little more than read text, click on a few links or watch a video or two. When a website employs form technology, it can ask visitors for information and then react to that information.

Visitors supply information through text-input boxes, drop-down lists, option buttons, and more. Form-enabled websites in turn take that information and send it to their databases for storing, or they send it to the websites' headquarters for processing.

There are many reasons to use forms on a website, but some of the most common reasons are to obtain feedback, register new users, or process orders.

All WYSIWYG HTML editors should provide the tools needed to build an interactive web form.

## Accessibility

One part of web design that's largely ignored is its accessibility -- that is, it's ignored until it becomes a big legal issue exploited in the media. Essentially, accessibility makes the same content available to non-handicapped persons equally available to those with a disability of some sort. Equal access is just as important online as it is offline, and disability watchdogs are adamant about enforcing their rights to appreciate the Internet just as much as anyone else.

From any webpage that's coded properly, a disabled person can use special software to translate what's on each page into speech, hard-printed Braille, or some other usable form of content. Although the intricacies of designing an accessible website are beyond the scope of this book, you are well advised to learn how to make your site an equal access site, because certain legalities may require it. At best, an accessible website should accommodate visitors who may be:

- blind
- partially blind
- color blind
- unable to use the hands
- deaf
- partially deaf
- prone to flash-induced seizures
- learning disabled

***TIP:*** Visit *The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0* to learn "...how to make Web content accessible to people with disabilities. The guidelines are intended for all Web content developers (page authors and site designers) and for developers of authoring tools." <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT>

## **Part 4: Website Maintenance**

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### **Testing For Functionality**

To ensure that a website functions the way that it was intended, every website should be tested for functionality at regular intervals -- especially when it's first built. During testing, you'll want to ensure that:

- Links load up the pages or files that they point to.
- Forms send data to the correct person or database fields.
- The website itself can accommodate a large number of network requests.

### **Maintenance**

After it's determined that a website functions according to plan, it can be uploaded to a server so that the public can begin using it. But that doesn't mean it can be left to its own devices. Websites must be monitored so that unexpected errors can be fixed. They also need regular updating to oblige the needs of its audience.

New technology and advancements in the way that the Internet evolves will require you to make many adjustments - some major, some minor. The Internet was never designed to be a static phenomenon, and neither were websites. To keep up with the directions that the Internet continues to grow in (and equally match the directions of your audience), you'll want to make sure that your website sustains the same momentum of the medium that hosts it.

Time will continuously change and create new opportunities in Internet marketing -- prompting you to change the goals of your website in an effort to meet new customer demands. So be prepared. You're in for an exciting and dynamic experience full of huge potential for growth and adventure.

Remember that creating your own websites may have a learning curve, but knowing how to control and edit your website will have huge advantages to your business in the long run.

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