

## Chapter 17

# Ten Ways to Make Your Web Site Better, Even Before You Begin

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding what goes into planning a Web site
  - ▶ Gathering information and finding inspiration
  - ▶ Focusing on content
  - ▶ Creating and previewing a design mock-up
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**W**eb site building starts when you launch Expression Web and begin filling pages with content, right? Wrong. Preplanning saves you time and money and the hassle of having to do things over that could have been thought through before a single finger touches a keyboard. In this chapter, we share wisdom gleaned from real-world Web designers about how they go about planning a new Web site before they even launch their Web design software.

### *Know Thy Audience*

Regardless of whether you're designing a site for a client, your corporation, or your own purposes, understanding the site's target audience is the linchpin in the whole operation. Think about the people you want your site to attract. Ask yourself: How old are they? Are they technically savvy? Do they speak several languages? As you start answering some of these questions, your site's content and design come into focus.

If you're building a site for someone else, your key contact person is an important part of your audience (especially if that person signs your checks!). Get an idea about what they like by asking them to show you some of their favorite sites, and fish around to see what they like about each one. People respond emotionally to design, and the information you gather upfront helps you design a site they'll love.

The site's audience and its purpose are closely related. What's the site's primary function? Is it an online brochure? A place to sell stuff? An information-based site? What's the best image to accomplish this purpose — fun, quirky, professional, serious, secure?

If you're designing your own site, *you're* also the client. If you hate brown, don't use it. Pick your own brain about what you love and hate about site designs you visit. You spend a lot of time staring at your computer screen, so you need to love what you see.

## *Hunt and Gather*

Get your hands on as much information as you can — company brochures, press kits, image files of logos and other art, as well as document files. Often, the right image or photograph can act as the keystone in the design, around which the color scheme and other design elements emerge. If you're gathering images yourself, remember that people like to look at other people's faces. A stock photo with people in it is more effective than a generic landscape, but look for shots that reflect the sensibilities of your visitors. If they don't "see" themselves in the photos you choose (your audience is eccentric and the models in your photos are upright, buttoned-down corporate types, for example), the photos won't do much good.

If the client has graphics on hand, find out whether you will get them in Web-ready form or if you need to build time into the plan for sizing, cropping, and building background or button images.

If you're doing the writing, read up on the subject matter so that you can get the lingo down. If you're not, read up anyway and peruse other sites in the same field as the one you're designing.

## *Hire a Host*

When choosing a Web hosting company, build in some growing room. Does the site require a shopping cart? Does it include survey forms or user forums? Plan for those features now so that you don't have to pack up and find a new host later.

## *Circle the Wagons*

If you're working on your own, be realistic about the capabilities of your "team of one." Almost all of us tend to underestimate how long things take. Try to pad your project timelines a bit in case your dog needs to go to the vet or a windstorm knocks out the power.

If you're dividing the work among multiple team members (for example, a writer for copy and a graphics designer for photos and artwork), find out how many people you'll be working with and their time availability, as well as how much access you have to their time. Also, find out how many people must approve each stage before you can move on. Seeking approval can be a major stumbling block in moving forward on projects. Be sure to find out the expected launch date, and build a realistic timeline. All these issues should factor in to the complexity of your design.

## *Map It*

Figure out which pages the site will contain, and map out your navigation system (how users find their way around the site). Make sure that the most important elements, such as contact information, are accessible from every page. If the site requires multiple levels of menus, try to make no page more than three clicks deep. Again, think about your audience. A technology-savvy audience is more likely to have the patience to drill down into a subcategory. If in doubt, use more main menus and fewer levels of navigation. The Web is no longer a novel concept. People lose patience quickly and are more likely to leave your site if they can't find what they're looking for right away. A good way to keep the navigation system consistent and accessible throughout the site is to include it in the site's Dynamic Web Template. (We talk about Dynamic Web Templates in Chapter 11.)

### ***Sketch It***

Some people work best brandishing chunky kindergarten crayons and paper. Some feel better with a mouse in hand, a computer screen, and a good graphics program. Find your favorite medium, and knock out some rough sketches of possible design ideas. Start with the home page, and refer to your navigation structure to figure out how the other pages fit into the design scheme. Plan to have the bulk of your pages use a Dynamic Web Template to unify your design and make future updates easy. (We show you how to hook up your pages to Dynamic Web Templates in Chapter 11.) If a page has a different layout, make sure that you use some of the same design elements as other pages to give the whole site a unified look and feel. Try different color schemes and layouts, leaning toward those you can comfortably build given your skill level and time frame.

### ***Chill***

Great designs sometimes present themselves in unexpected places. Step away from the drawing board or computer and take a break. Flop on the couch and stare out the window, go for a walk, or stroll through your favorite shopping area and just look around you. An engaging color combination may pop out from the produce section of your favorite market.

### ***Boil It Down***

The best Web sites are lean and streamlined, without extraneous flash. Your combination of content and design shine more brightly if it's not competing with too much tinsel. Take another look at your design to see whether you can streamline it even further. Decide on the single feeling that you want visitors to have experienced when they leave your site. Make sure that your design inspires that feeling.

### ***Content! Content! Content!***

Spend plenty of time upfront working on the document structure for each page's text. The structure of the heading level hierarchy and content should follow good, common-sense guidelines. Each page should be easy to understand and follow without fancy design elements. A good test is to put each

page's text in a word processing program (such as Microsoft Word) and apply the default heading styles for structure: heading 1, page title; heading 2, main section title; heading 3, subsection title; and so on. If your document stands on its own in black and white — if the information flows well and makes sense — the Web page is well structured and easy to design.

## ***Begin!***

Create the Web site folder for your new site, and get to work on a design for the home page. Build a couple of variations of your design. After you have a few versions you like, preview, preview, preview. Use as many different browsers and versions of browsers as you can. Try previewing at different monitor resolutions, too. Catching early browser rendering quirks saves you time later and helps you tweak the design so that it behaves itself in multiple browsers. If you're designing the site for your own use, ask a few trusted friends to give you their feedback. If you're designing for a client, now is the time to share it with them.

After you have a design you like, create a document to store notes to yourself about the design (colors and fonts and even notes to yourself about why you made certain decisions). Include a style guide for unconventional word spellings, phrases, and capitalization, and include a to-do list so that you don't forget something important (like running the Accessibility Checker). This document can be a simple text or word processing document that you keep inside the Web site folder or a "Web page" within the Web site itself. (Make sure that you don't publish your notes page when you upload your Web site; see Chapter 12 for instructions on excluding pages from publishing.)

