

# Chapter 1

## Hitting the Web Running

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Comparing Contribute to Dreamweaver
  - ▶ Understanding the evolution of the Web
  - ▶ Understanding the design limits
  - ▶ Targeting your market with a good design
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**T**he Web has evolved from novelty to wild west to finally becoming a core business function that more and more people need to be able to “Contribute” to. As Web sites have become more complex, companies, universities, and nonprofit organizations have discovered that these Web sites take a lot of time and resources to maintain. Many are also realizing that the technical staff can’t handle all the minor changes, let alone the major content updates demanded by the various departments, management, and staff. But hiring outside consultants, or training everyone on staff to make changes with a program as complex as Dreamweaver, is cost-prohibitive and time-consuming.

Enter Macromedia Contribute, a program designed to meet the challenge of Web site updating and maintenance by providing an incredibly easy to use interface that is fully-integrated with Dreamweaver, yet still priced competitively enough that you can afford to let many people in the office have their own copies.

If you’re brand new to working on the Internet, take a deep breath and don’t worry. This book is designed to ease you into a program that is designed to be super simple to use. What better way to get started on the Web? And, I promise, I’ll hold your hand the entire time.

### *Comparing Dreamweaver and Contribute*

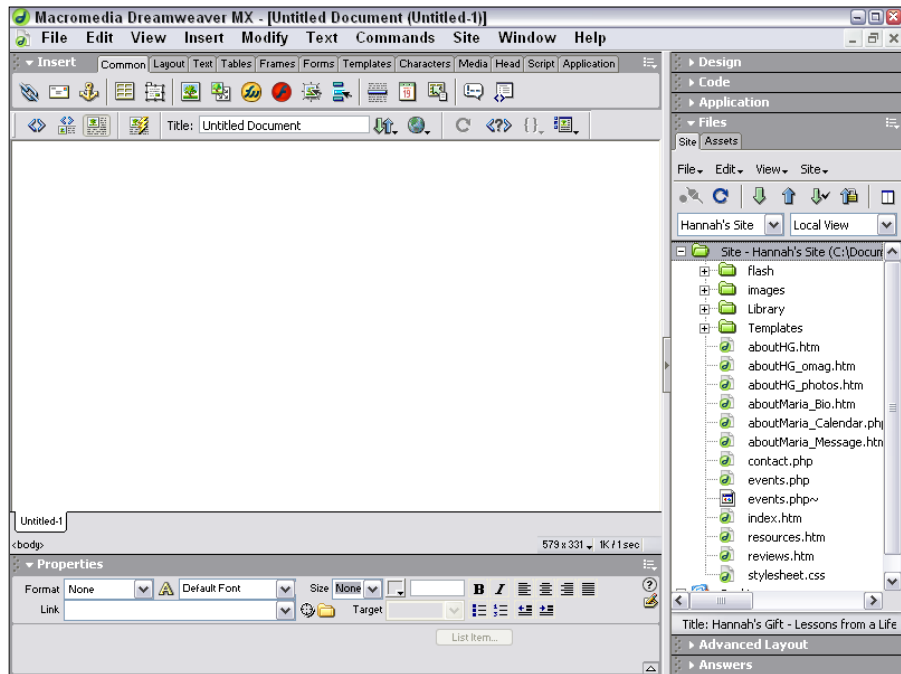
I have always loved Dreamweaver (see in Figure 1-1) because it enables me to work faster and more efficiently than any other tool I’ve worked with for creating Web sites — and I’ve tried them all. In addition to this book, I wrote *Dreamweaver MX For Dummies*, which is designed to help you get the most out of Macromedia’s comprehensive Web design program.

When I heard that Macromedia was coming out with a companion program designed to make it easy for people who've never worked on the Web before to help update Web sites, I knew it would also be a valuable tool.

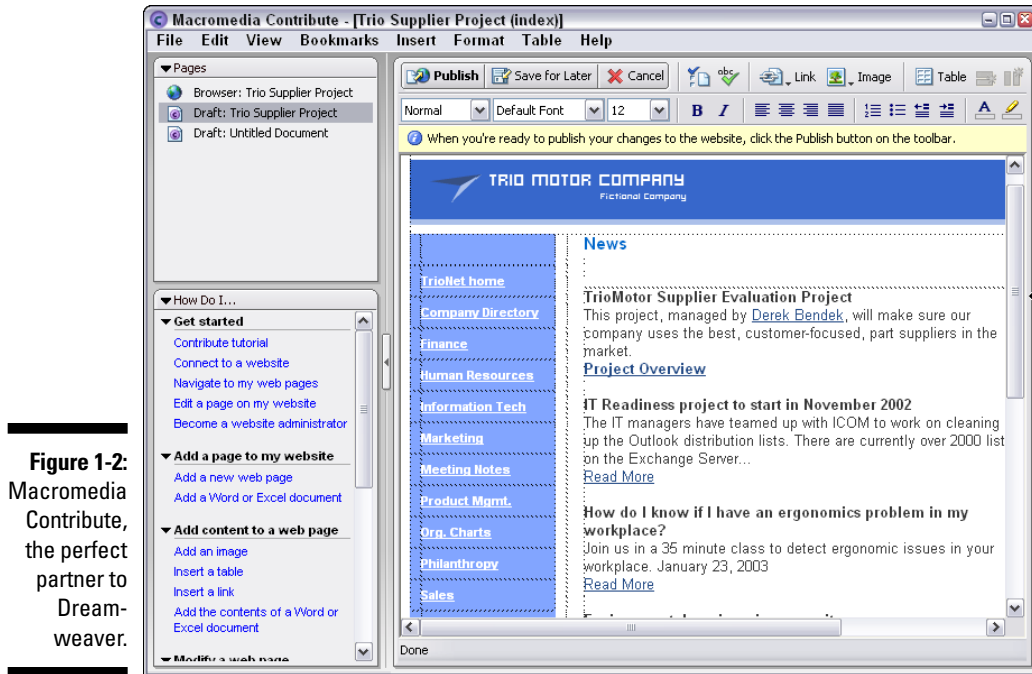
If you're reading this book, you should appreciate that more and more people are being asked to help out with the company Web site. Few small companies can afford to keep enough full-time Web developers on staff to do all the Web site development themselves and it's expensive to hire outside consultants to make simple updates.

That's where Contribute comes in (See Figure 1-2). It serves as a companion to Dreamweaver and is a tool that can be shared with almost anyone in a company, not just the "technical" staff.

Contribute has all the power you need to edit existing pages, insert images, and even add new pages. Yet Macromedia's careful integration with Dreamweaver makes it possible for a Webmaster to "lock" any part of a page, preventing "contributors" from inadvertently causing problems (which means that you can't do too much damage, even if you're not sure what you're doing). This also means that the techs can sleep better knowing no one will create more work for them when they're supposed to be saving them time.



**Figure 1-1:**  
Macromedia  
Dreamweaver MX.



**Figure 1-2:**  
Macromedia  
Contribute,  
the perfect  
partner to  
Dream-  
weaver.

Contribute can even be used to update pages on the most advanced sites where advanced interactive programming and databases are used. But again, the most delicate and complicated sections of the pages are automatically locked, so Contribute users can update content without breaking links or altering the programming code that makes a dynamic site function.

Contribute includes support for some of the most powerful and time-saving features of Dreamweaver, such as templates (which are ideally suited to sites maintained by Contribute users). You can also use advanced HTML features, such as Cascading Style Sheets, which can be set up in Dreamweaver and then applied in Contribute to ensure uniform style across a page or entire site.

In keeping with Macromedia's open program development, Contribute can be used to update any Web site, even if it was created with Microsoft FrontPage, Adobe GoLive, or by a geeky programmer who still prefers to do all of the HTML coding manually in a simple text editor. (See Chapter 6 for more on working with these kinds of sites.)



## What the heck are they talking about?

"We're gonna FTP the HTML, and they'll code in the ASP for the SQL DB. Okay?"

If you ever find yourself in a meeting, twiddling your pen and wishing you had access to subtitles while someone spouts technobabble like this, don't panic. You may be surprised to find out that even the techies don't always understand each other. And although you may have no idea what all of those acronyms mean, if you have good business sense and management experience, you're still probably better qualified than most programmers to manage your Web project.

*Techie:* This term is used loosely to refer to anyone who works with technology, including programmers, database specialists, and sometimes even designers who are technically savvy.

Reassure yourself with what you do know, and know how important you are. For starters, you probably know your alphabet, so you can at least identify the letters in all of those strange

acronyms. Whether you just know a few other acronyms yourself, you undoubtedly know a few acronyms these techies don't know (PTA, CIA, MTV — even if they're not related to the Internet, the acronyms you already know count for something). Resist showing off with your own special vocabulary — no one likes a show-off. Instead, approach the task of studying these new terms with the confidence that you've gained from all the undoubtedly more difficult lessons you've had to learn to get into this situation in the first place.

You picked up this book, and that's a good start. My guess is that you feel you have to read it — or at least skim it — before you get to work in the morning. Fear not. This book, like all *For Dummies* books, is supremely skimmable. Bone up tonight, be prepared to say a few smart things in the morning, and then get back here and read the details.

## Creating the Web

One of my favorite aspects of the World Wide Web is that it wasn't created by some marketing genius or advertising agency. No one with an MBA thought up this great business model and then set out to make millions by building a worldwide billboard. No, the Web was created by a group of geeky scientists in Switzerland who just wanted to share their technical diagrams with other geeks.

Prior to the Web, most of the information on the Internet was text, and it wasn't even formatted (no fancy fonts, colored text, or even bold and italics). But in the early 1990s, the Web changed all that, making it possible to display images and later sound, animation, and video. It was a breakthrough so radical that even its creators couldn't have predicted its impact.

## *Designing in an imperfect world*

One difficult concept for many people to grasp is that on the Web, you don't have total control over the design of your pages. People think they have control just like they do when they're working with the printed page. In print, you can choose cool fonts and set margins and leading (the space between lines) to the exact distances you want. The Web doesn't work that way. I know some graphic designers who became unhappy because they were forced to work on the Web. One told me she felt handcuffed; another said he was kicking and screaming all the way. Why do they hate it? Because they can't use all the big, fancy graphics they want because of the *bandwidth problem*. And they can't completely control the placement of every element on the page.

The Web's greatest feature is also its greatest limitation. The Web was designed to display information in a way that any computer on the planet can view. That kind of versatility is great because it reaches large and diverse audiences. But at the same time, it limits your design because it has to work on so many different kinds of computers. Some of computers have large monitors; others have small ones. Some monitors are black and white; others are color. Some computers are loaded with cool fonts; most have only the dozen or so they came with. Differences between Macintosh and Windows — and many other systems you may never even heard of, such as UNIX and Linux — also must be reckoned with. To make matters worse, browsers that are used to view Web pages are also different. They support different features, and even on the same computer, a page can look different when viewed on different (older, for example) versions of a Web browser.

What do all of those differences mean for Web design? Web pages need to be designed with versatility because they must adapt to achieve an optimum presentation on each computer. Your best hope is designing a page that looks great at the high end (a fast new computer with the latest browser) and yet still appears passable at the low end (a laptop with a black and white display and an older version of AOL software). In the following section, you discover a bit about the history of how the Web became so complicated and a few tricks to help compensate for it

## *Understanding the limits of HTML*

To fully appreciate the design limitations of the Web, you must return to its humble beginnings. Long, long ago (in the mid-1990s), the World Wide Web was created by a group of systems programmers who wanted to share their work with each other more easily. Unfortunately for the graphic designers who've jumped on this technological bandwagon, these programmers didn't

care about fancy fonts and complex page designs. They merely wanted to be able to hyperlink their information. So, the first version of HyperText Markup Language (HTML) used to create Web pages was a simple set of formatting tags designed to provide basic formatting that worked on a wide variety of systems.

This simple formatting was accomplished in a number of ways; for example, by allowing only one image format — the Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) — and by using a default font that was likely to be on everyone’s computer, typically Times font. (The JPEG image format was added later.) Then the programmers made font sizes relative rather than exact. Instead of setting text to an exact point size, they set up relative sizes. For example, the text of a Heading 1 HTML tag appears larger on-screen than the text of a Heading 2 tag, which is larger on-screen than the text of a Heading 3 tag, and so on. However, exactly how much larger depends on the browser and platform on which the headings are viewed. Designers back then couldn’t specify the size of Heading 1, but they were assured that it would be bigger than Headings 2 and 3. That worked fine when the Web still was a dirt road traveled by academics.

No one could have predicted the phenomenal growth of the Web, but any graphic designer can tell you that artists and ad agencies were never going to settle for the first version of HTML. Then came the browser wars. The first browser was called Mosaic, and your tax dollars went a long way toward making it happen. But a student who worked on that project, Mark Andreessen had the foresight to realize that when the Web reached the broader audience, Mosaic’s limited abilities to display formatted text and graphics would be a real letdown. When Mark was approached by Jim Clarke to make a commercial version of the browser, the NCSA (National Center for Supercomputing Applications) insisted that they call it something else. That something else became Netscape, and it was the most popular browser on the Web before Microsoft’s Internet Explorer came into being. Today Mark is a multimillionaire, and the Web is a much prettier place.

But not all has been cheery fonts and other fancy features, and Netscape wasn’t the only player in this process. In their effort to make the Web a more beautiful place, the creators of Navigator added their own features to HTML, but not everyone else adopted their innovations. America Online (AOL), for example, created its own browser, and AOL took a long time to catch on to Netscape Navigator’s new design capabilities, but finally gave up and made Netscape available to its members. Yet for people who still use the old browsers provided by AOL, pages on the Web can look quite different than they do for those who use the latest version of Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer.

The real competition has been between Netscape and Microsoft. Not to be outdone by anyone, Microsoft decided to create its own HTML features, even though they wouldn’t be displayed in Navigator. The two companies now race to keep up with each other, and a good designer has to work hard to

make sure Web pages look good to both audiences. If you want to reach the broadest audience, bear in mind that nearly a hundred different browsers are in use, including multilingual ones. Okay, you don't have to worry about all of them. Enough similarities exist so that you'll be safe if you design for the more common ones (Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer), but make sure you test in older versions of these browsers and not just the new one your designer is using.

Browsers are becoming more versatile by the second, and, considering that the two more popular browsers are free (or nearly free), you may nevertheless be surprised that you have to worry about people visiting your Web site with old versions of browsers. Although it may be hard to imagine, many people still are using that first version of Netscape Navigator, even though Netscape has gone through multiple upgrades since then. Why don't people upgrade? Some are reluctant to "fix what ain't broke." Then there's the fear that learning to use the new browser takes time, along with the general fear of downloading anything (or lacking the simple knowledge about how to do it). Still others fear that downloading software from the Internet causes their computers to contract viruses. And that's just among home users. Corporations tend to be slow to upgrade because they don't want to spend money retraining their employees more often than is necessary and, besides, upgrading an entire network is a big task.

What saves designers who want to use the latest features and still reach this diverse audience is that if a browser doesn't understand a new feature, it generally ignores it. That means that if you're careful about what you do, the worst thing that will happen is not all of your viewers will get to see all the coolest tricks on your site. What you must ensure is that all of your viewers can read the content and understand the meaning of the site, even if they don't hear the background sound or see the animation. The best way to ensure that your pages are okay is to test them while using a variety of browsers on a variety of platforms.

## *What's Hot and What's Not*

Whether you want to look hot or cool, retro or ultramodern, you want to achieve your style without going broke. How can you look like a million bucks on a budget?

First, you become clear about the goals that you have for your Web site and who your audience is. Looking cool doesn't mean the same thing to everyone, so you want your site to target the people you most want to attract. What keeps the interest of four-year-olds is not the same as what holds the attention of baby boomers (well, not most of them, at least).

Always keep your audience in mind as you design your site. If you're running the Disney site, you need hot graphics, video, sound, and animations. But if you run the *Microprocessor Report* and your audience is a bunch of busy engineers who just want to get some information in a hurry, you need to make sure they don't have to wait long for graphics to download.

Many people on the Web today suffer from the *more-is-always-better syndrome*. But like most syndromes, it isn't healthy. The best Web sites often are the simplest, combining a few well-designed images to achieve an overall look that fits the image the company wants to portray. Likewise, simple often means easier to navigate. If you overwhelm your viewers with too many images and animations, you're likely to lose them.

A great design can make the smallest mom-and-pop shop look like it's made it to the top of its market. Following a few rules of good design enables you to make your business look more professional and your Web site easier to navigate. So before you get too far into working on your own Web site, take some time to look at what other people have done online. Yes, that's right, I have just given you my official blessing to spend a lot of time surfing the Web, even if your boss thinks that it's a waste of time. It isn't a waste of time — it's research, and if you're the boss, taking some time to do this kind of homework is even more important.

Ideally, you should look at a variety of Web sites, not just ones that are similar to your own. If you work in a bank, don't just look at other bank sites for ideas — look at travel agents and amusement park sites, check out movie sites, and scan through your home town newspaper online. If you're a parent, consider including your children in this effort — you may get some great advice. If you're managing a business and you're under 35, consider including your parents or grandparents to get the perspective of someone who's lived a little.

You find more interface and design tips in Chapter 17.