

Chapter 1

The Zen of Sites

In This Chapter

- ▶ Creating unity of content
 - ▶ Building visitor loyalty
 - ▶ Unearthing your personal creativity
-

“You’re a really good Web designer,” I told a client’s Webmaster once. He shrugged it off and went on to the next topic on the meeting’s agenda. Whether he was just being modest or thought that I was playing corporate politics with cheap compliments, I don’t know. I meant what I said, however, and the reason is simple. It wasn’t that his pages were filled with nice graphics. It wasn’t that the elements were finely balanced. It wasn’t that the JavaScript pop-ups added an involving level of interactivity.

None of these things — neither individually nor in combination — can make a site fly. The reason I was impressed with the Webmaster’s work was because he clearly understood that a Web site isn’t just a bunch of pages that happen to reside on the same server. Building a quality Web site requires careful planning. This chapter introduces you to the basic elements of designing sites, achieving visitor satisfaction, and being creative.

Achieving Unity: What Makes a Site Truly a Site

No matter what technology you use to build your site, you can make it a great one — or a real loser. You can base it on HTML (HyperText Markup Language), CFML (ColdFusion Markup Language), ASP (Active Server Pages), DHTML (Dynamic HTML), AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML), or any other alphabetical wonders you care to work with. It may sound blasphemous to a world that’s used to worshipping at the altars of the latest high-tech advances, but the real secret to making a Web site work is simple human insight.

Determining the underlying theme

Long before you set out to choose background colors or font types or graphical styles, you must get a solid grasp on the theme of your site. The *theme* is the unifying idea on which everything else on your site rests. Sometimes, the theme is simple and obvious. For a corporate recruiting site, the theme is why this company is the best place to work. For a genealogical site, the theme is the history of a single family and its offshoots.

Other times, the theme is a bit more complex. For an e-commerce site, you may choose a theme of great prices and saving money. If you're aiming for a different market, however, you may charge high prices and base your theme on either higher-quality products or just plain snob appeal. The underlying mechanics of both sites may well be identical — navigational methods, order-processing systems, and so on — but the sites' editorial content and graphical look and feel would be totally different.

Your low-cost bargain site may, for example, have bright and simple graphics that show a happy-go-lucky cartoon character using scissors to whack dollars in half. The high-roller site, on the other hand, would do well with richer, deeper colors. Although both sites, as in any selling situation, need to display photographs of their products, the higher-priced site is most likely to appeal to its intended audience with photographs of well-dressed people using its products in sophisticated settings.

Setting limits on content

If you've ever participated in newsgroups or mailings lists, you know how annoying it is when someone gets way off topic. There you are on `alt.citrus.cosmetics`, trying to find out the latest tips for using orange juice as a hair conditioner, and some guy starts blathering about the high price of gasoline or which cell phone company has the best roaming plan. It's usually not very long before someone else reminds him that's not what he's there for.

When it comes to the material on your site, unless you're part of a Web development team, you alone are responsible for staying on topic. This is the flip side of determining your theme — determining where to stop and what not to cover.

Take an e-commerce site devoted to personal electronics, for example. You'd need to decide whether to sell the entire spectrum of available devices or to target a specific niche, such as MP3 players or digital cameras. For a religious site, you may need to choose among covering the activities of your local church, the wider issue of the tenets of the sect to which it belongs, or the broadest range of world religious beliefs. If you don't know in advance what

you're going to do — and not do — you're really hampering yourself. Designing a Web site is much easier if you know what specific parameters your efforts must meet.

Keeping Them Coming Back

Practically every human endeavor depends on repeat customers. Even if you're not selling anything, the number and frequency of return visits are generally good indicators of success or failure.

If you're going to make your site into a place that people want to visit again and again, you need to think from two perspectives. You have to wear your developer's hat, of course, but you also need to look at your site from a visitor's perspective. Put aside your awareness of the site's structure and mechanics; approach the site as though you just stumbled across it and have never seen it before.



Ask others whose judgment you trust to visit and critique your site. You don't have to change things to suit them, but getting outside perspectives on your work never hurts.

Creating a comfortable site

Keeping visitors around for even a little while, let alone making them want to return, depends on the level of comfort that you provide. If visitors aren't comfortable moving around your site to begin with, what makes you think that they'll add it to their favorites list and come back for a return engagement? In creating comfort in your Web site, you need to consider the following questions:

- ✓ **Does the site maintain a consistent layout from page to page?** If not, you'll create stress and annoyance for your visitors.
- ✓ **Is the type and style of content consistent over time?** This point is a critical one. A large part of visitor comfort comes from always finding what they expect when they visit your site.
- ✓ **Is it easy to navigate from one page or section to another?** Visitors usually don't appreciate being forced to jump through hoops or follow a preset path. See Chapter 6 for site navigation tips.
- ✓ **If the site is larger than a few pages, does it include a search feature?** Most people are either legitimately busy or just plain impatient. Unless your site enables visitors to run a search so that they can quickly and easily find the material they're looking for, you run the risk that they simply won't bother to use your site. (See Chapter 6 for how to add a search feature.)

Keeping your site fresh

If your material never changes, the odds are pretty good that most people won't come back to it very often, if ever. Unless your sole topic is a rock-solid reference subject, you can't get away with anything less than constant updating. Sure, the *Oxford English Dictionary* can come out with a new edition only every few generations. (The first edition came out in 1928 and the second one in 1989, with only two supplements in between.) But such cases are very rare. Even if you deal with a modern high-tech equivalent, such as a site on the Java programming language or the current HTML standard, you need to stay on your toes.



If your core material is something that doesn't change often, you need to add some peripheral material that you can replace more frequently. Consider adding a Tip of the Day, fresh links, a Did You Know? column, or something along those lines so that you can avoid offering only stale content to your return visitors.

How often you need to update your site depends partially on your topic and partially on your site policy. With sites that deal with volatile topics such as breaking international news, you need to update on an hourly basis at a minimum. On the other hand, sites that analyze the news can stand a more leisurely pace — daily, weekly, or even monthly — because their scope is considerably wider.

Even if your topic doesn't absolutely demand a certain update schedule, you should still establish a regular policy for how often you add fresh material to your site. Whatever schedule you establish, make sure you stick with it. Remember the comfort factor and bear in mind that your site's visitors will be less comfortable if they don't know what to expect from you. Consistency on your side helps build trust on theirs.



A Web site must change at least once a month to keep visitors interested in coming back to it.

Tapping Creativity

Although much of what goes into making a Web site function is pretty much simple, mechanical, left-brain stuff, there's another level — creativity. You need to reach that level to stretch beyond the basics and create a site that really shines. Fortunately, you can use a lot of simple techniques to get from here (the basics) to there (an extraordinary site).

The Web 2.0

When the World Wide Web first got started, it was pretty much a one-way street — Webmasters like you always made the decisions about what would appear and how it could be used. As the Web has evolved, however, it has taken on some important new characteristics.

Today, some of the Web's most popular sites aren't so much controlled by their Webmasters as they are by their users. Places like YouTube and MySpace are hotbeds for the users' self-expression and, indeed, that is their reason for existence. The new trend that has led to the

phrase "Web 2.0" is user-generated content, supplemented by social networking.

Of course, the majority of Web sites are still generated almost totally by either individuals or small teams working together, but the public's hunger for its own chance to shine is seemingly insatiable — and it's something you might want to keep in mind as you design your own Web site. Wikipedia and the other wikis are collaborative efforts, and the old personal home page has largely given way to *blogs* — Web logs, or personalized diaries that can be syndicated and sent to others automatically. (See Chapter 11 for more information on blogs.)

You don't need to sit around in a lotus position, chanting mantras in order to tap into your hidden creative resources. If that's your particular cup of tea, by all means do it, but whatever means you employ, the goal's the same — to stop doing just plain thinking and reach a different level of understanding.

Now, I've got nothing against day-to-day thinking. I do a fair amount of it myself. But *standard* thinking means that you're using only half of your brain-power. People's brains have two halves. The left brain is the one that people "live in" most of the time — the one that handles numbers and words and sees everything as sequential. The right brain, on the other hand, sees everything as symbols and images that are free-floating and nonsequential.

People actually have five brains, not just two, but I promised my editor that I wouldn't use the word *paleomammalian* in this book.

The basic upshot of all this right-brain/left-brain stuff is that the left brain is such a loudmouth that you don't often hear what your right brain says. And it's got so much to tell you. Because the right side of the brain isn't stuck in the same patterns as the left brain, it gives you an entirely different perspective on the world — and on your work — that can often provide valuable insights and show you patterns that you didn't even realize existed. Perhaps your right brain can identify the perfect background color to go with a particular topic or the kind of navigation buttons that would appeal most to your audience — things that would be very difficult to achieve by linear thinking alone.



At any rate, your right brain is there for you to use, free of charge, and you ignore it at your peril. So how do you muzzle the left brain long enough to hear what the right brain has to say? Here's a handful of tips:

- ✔ **Meditate:** You can use an official, ritualistic method of meditation, if you want, where you study for years under a guru. Or, you can just sit in a comfortable chair and let your mind drift. If your left brain just refuses to stop chattering, try subvocalizing or humming nonsense syllables such as “dum-de-dum” to override it, or listen to music to occupy its attention.
- ✔ **Brainstorm:** If you're fortunate enough to be a member of a loose, relaxed team, sit around with other team members and shoot the breeze about the problem. Feel free to get off topic. Let the humor roll — nonsense often leads to sensible results.
- ✔ **Doodle:** If you're on your own, take your mind off the straight-and-narrow path by drawing whatever pattern comes to mind. Try doodling with your left hand (if you're right-handed) to jog your right brain into action. It's an odd fact that your left brain controls the right side of your body, and the right brain controls the left side.
- ✔ **Do other things:** Engage in an activity that has nothing — nothing at all — to do with your work. Play solitaire. Read a novel. Play a video game. After you take a break from your nonwork activity, the answer to your problem often comes to your mind.
- ✔ **Take a nap:** Your right brain often speaks to you when you're in an unconscious or semiconscious state. You may well wake up with all the inspiration that you need.

Online Sources for Creative Thinking

Table 1-1 lists some places on the World Wide Web where you can find more information on the topics that are covered in this chapter.

Table 1-1		Online Resources on Creativity	
Web Site Name		Web Address	
BrainWaves Center		www.brainwaves.com	
WebsiteTips: Creativity and Inspiration		www.websitetips.com/design/creativity.shtml	
Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain		www.drawright.com	
Funderstanding: Right Brain vs. Left Brain		www.funderstanding.com/right_left_brain.cfm	