

The Simple Way to Web Site Design

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Colin-Baxter.com

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Most small businesses and many individuals want a web site to sell merchandise, services or ideas — or just to sell themselves in order to get a better job. Here are a few tips I have found useful in setting up my own web sites, and although they are aimed at UK readers, the tips should also of more general interest.

Keep it Simple

Of course, you're not what used to be called a *dot-com entrepreneur*. You are not misguidedly thinking that your fantastic money-making idea must have the latest and coolest web applications. I'm assuming you simply want a web site that's easy to use, easy to maintain — and downloads quickly. The most important thing to remember is to keep it simple and consistent.

Keep it Consistent

Each page should follow a similar layout. For example, if you spell your name using only upper-case letters then keep it that way if it re-appears on other pages. Capitalizations, spelling, the use of hyphens, *etc.*, *etc.* should be consistent.

Keep it Secure

If you are selling from your web site then use a well-known and trusted merchant service, such as for example [Paypal](#). The advantage of using something like Paypal is that you do not have to be concerned about setting up your own secure server and getting the appropriate certification. Do not forget to include a Privacy Policy and a set of Terms and Conditions, with links to these documents on every page.

Things not to do

Do not use British hosting companies

They will charge you VAT, and their prices in general are usually stupidly high compared to hosting companies based in North America.

You might not be able to use domain names like *co.uk* — but so what.

I use [Netfirms](#) and have found them to be excellent. They are a Canadian company but bill in US dollars. And providing you are careful, you have the opportunity of using currency exchange rates to your advantage.

Certainly, there is free web-site hosting available on the Internet, but you cannot usually choose your own domain name and you have to display advertising banners for which you do not get paid. An exception may be [Google Sites](#). I have not yet examined what is on offer from Google so I cannot comment further at this stage.

Do not even think about using Flash

It's a waste of bandwidth and often takes forever to load. Remember, not everyone has a fast Internet connection. Also, many users regard Flash as annoying and have switched the application off at the browser. Users of Firefox (and some other browsers) can do this easily with [Flashblock](#).



Do not provide only MS-Office Documents

It may be hard to believe, but not everyone uses Word, Excel, etc. At the very least, offer your users the choice of downloading pdf documents. More importantly, pdf documents, unlike MS-Office, always format correctly. For this reason, pdf is the internationally recommended format.

Strictly there should be no MS-Office documents whatsoever posted on a web site, and although this may not be immediately possible for a small business owner it is the best-practice objective. [Click here](#) for more information on using pdf.

Do not post documents larger than 1 Mb

It goes without saying that the size of your documents should be small — up to a couple of 100 Kb. So if you provide a downloadable brochure, for example, then please do not put a glossy graphic on the front cover. It may look wonderful, but it can easily increase the size of the document to 1 Mb or more, particularly if the document comes out of Adobe distiller. And you are forcing the reader to expend much toner or printer-ink in order to obtain a hard copy.

An example of bad practice is given by the Confederation of British Industry in their [CBI education and skills survey 2008](#). Considering this document is only 54 pages in length, it is over 1.8 Mb in size.

Do not provide only uncompressed photographs

It's amazing the number of web sites that will think nothing of putting up pictures of more than 1 Mb in size. Photographs should always be compressed to below 100 Kb at the very least — and preferably to below 50 Kb. That way, they load quickly and easily.

You don't have to go out and buy something like Adobe Photoshop to compress pictures. There are plenty of free applications that do an excellent job. For example, both [Irfanview](#) for MS Windows and [Gimp](#) for Unix-based computers work well.

If you must have a high-definition picture on your web site then make a link to it from the compressed picture. Give your users a choice! Here is an [example](#) of what I mean — click through the small Meeting's photograph that you will see on the right hand-side of the page.

Things to be wary about

What about php or java?

Personal Home Page (php) is very popular these days. It is a great application that builds web pages dynamically, using information stored on an SQL database. Java, like php, builds dynamic web pages. It often uses a SQL database and a server such as Tomcat5.

But both these applications are complicated to set up — and use heavy amounts of server resources. Java and php are more suitable for large companies with special requirements and who have their own powerful dedicated servers.

I do not recommend them at all for most users, but if you really must have php or java then make sure you know how to use them and that your hosting company has sufficient server-power to run your site, as well as all the others it looks after.

What about adverts

If you put adverts on your sites, such as Google AdSense, the chances are that you will not make money. Unless, that is, your site receives thousands of hits a day. A major disadvantage of many adverts, including those sent by Google AdSense, is that Firefox can block them. All the user need do is to install [AdBlock](#).

You must also be careful that advertising is suitable for your site, not only in the product that is advertised but also in how the advert is displayed. Do not forget that your web site is advertising **you** and **your product**. You must ask yourself the question, do I wish to be associated with this advert? I have put adverts on some of my pages, but I monitor them and do not hesitate to delete those I regard as unsuitable or inappropriate.

What about search engines?

Submit your site to [Google](#) and [Yahoo](#) — that should be enough. There's a large amount of material on the internet about how search engines rank your site — most of it you can safely ignore. The exceptions are what Google and Yahoo say themselves.



It is also a good idea to produce an xml sitemap for your website, especially for Google searches. A sitemap is very easy to make - click on the [XML-Sitemap Generator](#). There are also other generators available on the internet, but I have used XML-Sitemap myself and I can recommend them.

Building your web site

Get someone to do it for you

Many hosting companies provide complete web sites for the business or personal user. They can come with full merchant checkout facilities — but they can also be expensive. Be careful, however, about employing a friend to build a web site for you, unless you both have a good working relationship with each other.

Build it yourself from scratch

This is perfectly possible, even for the beginner. It may be the cheapest way. It certainly ensures that you know everything about your web site and how it fits in with your corporate identity. This is important even for a small-business owner. You need to be able to use a very small amount simple html code. It's not difficult to learn and there are plenty of free guides available on line. A good one is available here.

Look out for one or two simple web sites that load quickly and whose layout appeals to you. Then modify the source code for your own web site. Providing the layout is pretty standard, no one can claim ownership to source code that is generic. Of course, you will want to use your own words and graphics.

You might find a problem using html commands (tags) that have become deprecated, *i.e.* are deemed (by The World Wide Web Consortium) to be outdated. I have never worried about using deprecated tags. If the pages look ok in Internet Explorer, Firefox and Lynx then that's fine by me. Of course, I run the risk that browsers will not continue to support deprecated tags, but I'll worry about that when and if it happens.

Build it yourself from templates

There are some simple but effective templates available for free on the internet — there is a very good site at andreasviklund.com.

You are very welcome to use my site as a template. Modify my css script, available at www.colin-baxter.com/code/base_css.html, for your own use. It would be nice if you put a link to me somewhere on your web page; go to www.colin-baxter.com/talk/link2us.html to see how.

Build it yourself from generating programmes

You can also build simple (or not so simple) web pages using things like [LaTeX2html](#) or [txt2html](#). These applications are not designed for the novice, but I include them here for completeness.

