

PUGET SOUND Business Journal

Business Leaders Get It.

November 19-25, 2004 VOL. 25, NO. 29

▼ PS TECH

Building a powerful Web site not out of reach

Web site technology and development have matured to the point that savvy business owners can conceive of Web tools that address their business needs and then create them in a cost-effective manner.

Business owners with a solid business plan and good old-fashioned drive can operate a virtual working environment that fosters organization, revenue and growth by incorporating marketing and branding, inventory management, project management, centralized business communication and publication and product sales — all on the web.

A truly powerful Web site gives control to the owner. Think of the site as a software application that is accessible from any computer connected to the Internet.

There are three technology components to a powerful Web site:

- **Web site interface.** Simply put, the interface is comprised of your Web pages. You and your customer interact with these pages by clicking links and using input controls for both logical and textual input. A good example of these controls is the text fields and buttons used with an online shopping cart.

- **Database storage.** In order to add, edit, delete and sort the information used by your Web site, a database is necessary. Databases are excellent for dealing with constantly changing information. For example, product information, pricing and SKU numbers will be stored in the database.

- **Programming.** Neither the Web site interface nor the database know how to treat the information you or your customers submit. This requires a programmed script to provide logical rules. The Web site's programming decides where and how to store information in the database and how to present that data on a Web page.

With these three technology components in place, almost any business functionality is possible. Begin by planning.

Any good Web developer will have suggestions and technical insight for you. However, you know your business best. With some critical thought, you should be able to determine the functionality that you want for yourself, your employees and your customers.

SITE PLANNING



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find contact information.

It is imperative that your visitors easily find the information they seek. Take the time to lay out your basic Web site structure on paper. This will help you organize your presentation and will ensure maximum usability.

Once you've planned basic content, determine what interactivity your site will have and where to place it. Some examples of interactivity: a search field where visitors can type in keywords and then be taken to the corresponding information; a contact form that allows visitors to enter information for submission to your business; an online shopping cart.

If you only have a handful of products, all your products can be placed on a single Web page, which, in turn, can be hooked into an online credit card processing service such as PayPal. This is a simple solution.

If you have hundreds of products, your best bet is to use a shopping cart system. Implicit in this scheme is storage of product data within your database. Having your products stored in a database will allow customers to add and remove products as they shop, and to search for products based on name, description and other factors. The ability to store billing and shipping information can be added so that the customer's shopping experience is quicker the next time around.

Most likely, in the shopping cart scenario, it will be necessary for you to have a merchant account that includes credit card processing

software. (Have your Web developer check with your bank or other financial institution to find out what card processing software they offer.) While a merchant account usually includes a monthly fee in addition to a fee for each transaction, it allows for more sophisticated purchasing transactions and features, such as online receipts, customer history and real-time inventory control based on customer transactions.

The most essential considerations for the visitor area: a clear presentation of business branding, products and services; consistent navigation; and easy-to-

find contact information.

It is helpful to divide your Web site into two main areas: the visitor area and the administrative area. The visitor area is comprised of the Web pages that your customer will use for viewing and interacting.

So far, we have discussed the visitor area. However, it is the administrative area that allows you to control your Web site, making it truly powerful. The admin area contains the Web pages that allow you to control the user experience in the visitor area and to view and interact with any sensitive data stored in your database (such as customer orders).

Because the admin area is not for public use, it requires password protection and, in some cases, encryption. It is possible for you to control access to the various areas of the admin area based on an employee's level of responsibility.

Another possible feature of an admin area is the ability to add, edit and remove pages from your visitor area. Similarly, you can add, edit and delete products from your inventory. With this ability, you can keep your Web site content up to date without waiting for a Web developer. This flexibility in administration allows cost-effective management of your business online.

With all these possibilities, here are four basic steps that start the process:

1. Create a specific wish list of Web site goals and functionality.
2. Allocate your development budget.
3. Shop for a reliable Web developer and host.
4. Plan and prioritize functionality based upon budget.

Remember, Rome was not built in a day. There is no need to develop every aspect of your Web site at once. Go in stages, if necessary. A powerful Web site constantly evolves, reflecting business changes and growth. It pays to plan well.

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