

Web Advice

Web Advice is a free independent service that believes in accessibility and a minimum standard for all. We aim to educate people who are less familiar with the coding and structure of the web, so that they can maximise the potential of their own sites, and allow their visitors the accessibility and standards they deserve. We try to overcome some of the uncertainty in web design that allows some agencies to under deliver and over price.

Web standards were initially created by the W3C, World Wide Web Consortium, to try and regulate the industry and maintain a minimum standard of work for all. A relatively new phenomenon, the World Wide Web was only established in 1989 by Sir Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau. Since then, Berners-Lee has played an active role in guiding the development of web standards through the W3C where he is a Director.

At Web Advice, we are happy to talk to anyone regarding websites, and more importantly, what you should expect from your own. From the importance of standards based websites, through to how much you should expect to pay for yours, we are at the end of a phone. Web Advice have Skype available, so you can contact us free of charge. Please feel free to add us as a contact, our Skype name is 'Web Advice'.

Although some web developers will argue web standards are unnecessary, in our experience, those that do not spend the additional time required to meet these often quite basic requirements have problems with natural search engine optimization, cross browser compatibility and accessibility. This means that not only are websites harder to find in search engines such as Google and Yahoo, but they also often appear different depending on the browser used to view them.

It is also apparent that many of these websites still do not appear to comply with accessibility issues stated in the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). The DDA is a UK parliamentary act, which makes it unlawful to discriminate against people in respect of their disabilities in relation to employment, the provision of goods and services, education and transport. It is a civil rights law and implies within its numerous and lengthy clauses that services and information on the web must be accessible to all. Web standards go a long way to guaranteeing programs that help those with disabilities such as the blind work effectively, and this issue is particularly focused in the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI).

Web Standards

Web Advice aims to educate web users in the benefits of standards based sites.

Below is a list of some of the key advantages of complying with web standards.

- Websites are more accessible to people with disabilities as web content can be understood better by programs such as Braille converters.
- Other devices such as PDA's and screen readers are able to understand and read the code.
- Websites can also be read by mobile phone browsers, which in a society where 76% of phones can access the web can prove very useful for customer satisfaction.
- The overall design of websites can be altered without needing to alter every page. This means that future fresh redesigns can be implemented much more cheaply, making seasonal redesigns very cost effective.
- The pages are coded in a manner that allows printers only to print the important aspects of any page without wasting unnecessary ink and paper.
- The use of tags and rigid organization of the code behind the site allows for excellent natural search engine optimisation.
- Despite developments in web technologies, older browsers are still supported by the sites.
- Standards based websites more efficiently use bandwidth so that your customers receive better download times and larger quantities of information can be handled in a more effective manner.
- They are easier to maintain by both the original developers. More importantly it will be easier for another team to maintain the website in the future.

The technical aspects of web standards

There are many technical phrases that help explain how web standards are applied. Do not worry if you cannot understand all of these, they are to help educate you, but are not really necessary in understanding the benefits, Standards based websites are configured in a more efficient manner. They allow the separation of content (HTML / XHTML), style (CSS) and behaviour (DOM Scripting).

HTML – HyperText Markup Language

HTML, short for Hypertext Markup Language, is the predominant markup language for web pages. It provides a means to describe the structure of text-based information in a document – by denoting certain text as headings, paragraphs, lists, and so on – and to supplement that text with interactive forms, embedded images, and other objects.

XHTML – Extensible HyperText Markup Language

The Extensible HyperText Markup Language, or XHTML, is a markup language that has the same depth of expression as HTML, but also conforms to XML syntax.

Whereas HTML is an application of SGML, a very flexible markup language, XHTML is an application of XML, a more restrictive subset of SGML. Because they need to be well formed, true XHTML documents allow for automated processing to be performed using standard XML tools.

XML – Extensible Markup Language

The Extensible Markup Language (XML) is a general-purpose markup language. It is classified as an extensible language because it allows its users to define their own tags. Its primary purpose is to facilitate the sharing of structured data across different information systems, particularly via the Internet.

CSS – Cascading Style Sheets

CSS is a style sheet language used to describe the presentation of a document written in a markup language. Its most common application is to style web pages written in HTML and XHTML, but the language can be applied to any kind of XML document, including SVG and XUL.

DOM – Document Object Model

DOM is an API (Application Programming Interface) platform, or an independent standard object model, for interacting with web pages. More detailed scripting becomes available such as JavaScript, that allows for a far more interactive browsing experience and for more dynamic applications.

Standards conclusion

The business benefits of using web standards are so vast that any question over the necessity of them becomes completely illegitimate. It does mean that the website has to be hand coded, rather than generated, but any professional web developer of a good standard should do this as a matter of course.

The fact is that web standards are essential for modern businesses. The advantages have already been clearly defined, and the initial added development time is well worth the benefits. It is easy to forget that, besides from people with disabilities, there are an increasing number of 'silver surfers' who also require special programs to access the web more easily, made available by web standards. Between these two groups, a gross spending of £120 billion is available for those businesses that take the appropriate paths for catering for their needs. More information on web users can be found on the National Statistics Office.

Facilities

One of the largest issues that arises from conversations we have with people, is that they are often unaware of exactly what is available to them in terms of improving their website. Many web developers will simply quote for what their clients are specifically asking for, without informing them of alternative options that might be more appropriate to them, both in terms of what will be effective for their company, and value for money. Here at Web Advice, we are more than happy to assist you in any way we can. If you have any queries regarding the various web services that should be made available to you, please do not hesitate to contact us.

CMS

A Central Management System is an administration interface that allows people to update their own websites, without needing to pay a web developer to do it. Content Management Systems are often the perfect solution for businesses that are constantly updating product lists or company information. CMS's can provide you with the means to update the website's content all from an easy to use administration interface. Using a database application such as MySQL, the CMS can also be linked into an active database for automated updates and management. The benefits of this are varied, but amongst them, the ability to keep your customers informed with the latest news and product releases allows for faster turn over and ongoing customer retention. This system also can save money in the long run, without needing to pay for updated content by a web development agency. This however does not mean the solution is right for everyone. The added initial expenses are not necessarily the right solution for your business.

As with all websites, there are various levels of technical development and implications depending on the solution that is right for you. More advanced CMS's can allow for greater in-depth changes from a complete colour change to the movement of the internal structure, adding pages, and allowing customers to change the site to suit their preferences! This kind of development is certainly not cheap, but make sure you are aware of what you are getting for your money. A website where you can update text only is considered a CMS, yet CMS can also imply much more. Make sure you get a job specification from your chosen web developer.

E-commerce

An e-commerce system is simply an online shop. It can take credit card payments and will often be tied into a database for stock management. The cheapest option for any company wishing to go online is an 'open source' system. These can be found all over the web, and your web developer should have a good idea as to which is the best. We would perhaps recommend Zen Cart as an option, but there are many within the open source community. However, it is important to remember that open source systems are generally developed on a 'one size fits all' basis and do not cater for more specific needs. Therefore, although the cheaper option, it might be worth while investing in a

bespoke system if the e-commerce is to become an integral part of your companies turnover. We have found that people we speak to are keen to make the most out of their e-commerce systems and appreciated the bespoke nature, number of fields and changeable features that are available. Any administration interface that has been developed should allow for easy updating and product management so that anyone can use the system without having to be technically minded. This is extremely important, as you do not want to have to return to your developer, and pay them more for something you should be able to achieve. These systems can be tied into a database and completely automated to allow for an integrated solution.

Flash

Flash is an interesting option for many businesses looking for a website. It can give a dynamic edge to your site, whilst not being overly pricey. Be careful of agencies that charge more than they should for flash developers. It is a valuable tool, and will often be discussed as a separate entity within the web proposal, partly because it is, and partly because many agencies out source flash work. Ideally you need to look for a design agency who not only provide flash as part of their own skill set, but that will also offer it as a sensible option for displaying galleries and pictures. The advantages of flash are that; it maximises the available space for showcasing imagery, it can display many images rather than being limited to one static image, and it can allow dynamic videos and graphics that can help with the feel of professionalism for the site. In our experience, many people are fearful of flash, partly because it is unknown to them, and partly because they have heard vague rumours of loading times and limited accessibility. These are no longer concerns, 99.3% of people have Flash Player so they can view web content, and any good web designer will only use elements of flash to take full advantage of its specialised features, but so as not to delay loading on a site. With modern connections however, this is rarely an issue anyway.

Message Board

A message board is a simple system that allows members of the public to add comments and notices to a section within your website. It is a very useful tool for a variety of sites such as DVD rental sites, book sites, music stores and other sites where customers would be interested in others opinions. Be aware that message boards are susceptible to 'spam bots' which may repeatedly write on the wall and cause havoc. Make sure your web developer is prepared to provide a suitable solution as part of the price that caters for this. It is not easy to completely eliminate the problems associated with spam bots, but simple solutions can be created in order to minimise their effects. Bare in mind your web developer will not necessarily include this protection mechanism on the initial version of the message board, but make sure they are prepared to add it later for no, or a very limited, additional cost.

Blogs

Blogs are effectively a personal web diary that others can read. It is an area in

which individuals can write thoughts and other things, Blogs can be implemented onto your site for a very reasonable price, so be aware of anyone trying to charge you through the roof for something you could get for free. Obviously bespoke blogs are expensive, and their biggest advantage is that they can be tailored to specific needs in terms of design and content. However, there are many effective free blog systems such as Blogger that can be used for a cheaper alternative. Blogger can be linked to your site and to some extent personalised so that it looks more like your own site than the Blogger site. Realistically, for a good price, a free blogging system can be completely integrated into a website, and this is perhaps the best option for most companies.

Search Facility

This is in its basic form a tool to 'search' a website for a word. This can be developed so that only key words are searchable, and that these keywords are linked to other related subjects and content within the site. A good search facility could be applied to any number of areas within a website including an online catalogue, news page or a more general search.

Contact Form

A contact form as a very useful tool which is probably best situated on the home page of a website. Most companies could massively benefit from a contact form and should perhaps seriously consider the possibility of including one within a website. A contact form works in a very similar way to a call back service, but allows a greater depth of contact information. The biggest benefit of this service is the retention of customer information. Rather than a phone call from a potential customer who may or may not give any more information than a first name, the contact form allows for a form of communication to be recorded, whether a phone number or an email address. This allows a follow up call or email, and, even if the customer does not purchase the goods or services on offer, the information is retained for future communications.

Call Back Service

A call back facility allows people to type in a name and number to request a call back from your company. This may encourage contact as it shows that your company is willing to spend the cost of a phone call in retrieving new clients. Although not as general as a contact form, the service forces a phone call rather than an email, therefore an effective sales telecom team can find more specific requirement details from the potential customer and tailor the phone call to each individual in order to win a sale.

Dynamic Map

Google Maps allow a unique option for directions to a company shop or office. Rather than a static map, the implementation of a Google map within a website can allow for a very dynamic map without the need to source it yourself. The map allows for movement and a zoom function and can be used in a manner that

makes it appear simply as if it is part of your site, not an external link.

About Us

Web Advice was started in 2006 by four individuals, one freelance web developer, one internet software developer, and two Web Technicians working for successful web agencies. Each advisor has a great deal of experience within the web industry, and share the same passion for standards and a 'Semantic Web', an evolving extension of the World Wide Web in which web content can be expressed not only in natural language, but also in a format that can be read and used by software agents, thus permitting them to find, share and integrate information more easily. I know, we are geeks! All we want to do is improve the services that you are getting from sloppy or under-skilled web developers. All our services are free, and we are able to carry on offering the advice and guidance that we do due to the ongoing support of Infozure Limited. A huge thank you to the Managing Director for his continued help. If you value our help, please visit the Infozure website.

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