

Setting Up A Class Web Site

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This article goes into some of the basics of web building and what it can mean to you and your class.

Why Build A Class Web Site?

A web site is an excellent place to draw people together very easily and relatively inexpensively. It is especially beneficial before reunions. It helps canvas for lost classmates, informs everyone of the events, and supplies other information about classmates, history, nostalgia etc.

What It Can't Do

A web site is an address. People can't come there if they don't know where it is. You have to generate some emails to known classmates, make sure your site is registered with search engines, and have links published on known web sites, such as the West Carrollton Alumni Association site. If you have somebody that is registered with the alumni registries such as classmates.com, you can send notes to them, informing them of your web site.

What Is The Content?

A site is an individual thing. It can be customized within the limitations of the site type and resources of the class. It can be as simple as putting contact information and information on events. It can be comprehensive such as our Class of 65 site. It has email links, photos, memorial page, store for class memorabilia, useful links, classmate web page links, calendar of events, guest book, polls for functional reasons as well as non functional purposes, music links for school songs, notes from classmates, missing persons lists, and current news, deaths etc. Some sites have set up forums and email groups with great success.

How Does A Web Site Work?

A web site is a collection of various things. For the most part pages are displayed in a format called "html" (hyper text markup language). It is a universal language that is used by your browser such as Internet Explorer or Netscape to display information on your screen. It can display or present all sorts of stuff -- text, music, pictures, animations and other objects. When you go to a site -- www.something.com the web site know that you want to view the information and it starts a download of a text type html document. Your browser interprets what that text wants it to do and creates the display of information. There are additional controls done by programs such as Java, which have a more programmatic control of the display and user interface. Some people are surprised about the word "download" here; they think viewing pages doesn't involve any downloading from the Internet. Yes, web pages download information to your computer and the computer creates the page you see.

Some sites use a more static design. The pages are fixed and always look the same each time you download them. Newer capabilities include the ability to create the html at the web site on demand and then download the resulting html information. What this does is allows the web site to decide what and how to present the page. The big buzz words here are ASP or .NET. They can create web pages based on any criteria, such as the individual who is viewing it. It is used extensively where databases are used. It is more complex and perhaps not for the novice, but definitely a useful tool for a more sophisticated site. There are tools used in scripting such as Java and Visual Basic

A web site is a collection of pages that are connected with "hyperlinks". A hyperlink is just an object that when it is clicked requests another page address. That address can be somewhere at the same site or just about anywhere on the web. You navigate around the site by clicking on these "hyperlinks". Hyperlinks appear other places also. You can embed them in documents, emails etc. They can be links for web pages, files, emails or other objects.

What is A Host?

A host is simply a place where the web pages reside for retrieval. The hosts can be anything from your computer to a large dedicated computer server. The hosts have different capabilities and do not necessarily offer the same features. Another buzz word "server side" is the stuff that goes on at the host computer to communicate with the page requests and the page content. If you have a Windows computer you can use the Personal Web server and actually host web pages, but may not be the best

way to go unless you know the web server software and its ramifications. It is also slow on the "upload" So, when you type in www.something.com what happens? First, the web site is not found by name but is found by an "IP" address. I won't get into IP which is how the internet works, but suffice it to say that is a system of 4- 3 digit numbers, that give unique addresses. Another box called a DNS server takes your request by name, looks it up on a master file and converts your page request to an IP address. Then the info is sent across the giant communication system we call the Internet until it finds a computer that acknowledges the request. That computer, the host, will then decide what to do next.

Choosing A Host

Hosts come in all sizes and shapes. Some Internet service providers (ISPs) also give you some web space with your access account. Many commercial hosts provide only hosting and have no provider services. There also some free hosting services, where you are given a fixed amount of space for free. Usually with these sites, you get banner ads and/or popup ads on your site. That is how they pay the bills. As was said before, each host has different capabilities. Here are a few examples, but not necessarily all. Some servers are Windows NT based and may support all the Microsoft Front Page (an html editor) extensions. Some, such as homestead.com require a proprietary editor and publishing system that makes construction easy but limits flexibility in more complex sites. Other sites, usually freebie or "come with your service" types are template driven. You just get to fill out information and it is displayed in a predetermined manner. Most have banner ads. Examples of these are **MSN:** group.msn.com , **Yahoo:** geocities.yahoo.com (they also have pay sites) and **Google:** groups.google.com There are others. If you want ASP and database type pages you will probably be using a commercial server-usually about \$12-\$25 per month (more or less depending on amount of disk-space and how much downloading is done). I use Network Solutions for hosting many of my customers. It is \$120 per year for a rich feature set. You can use web tools or use their built in designer. If you want a one pager for your class, I will post it on our sites for you - as long as it doesn't get too complicated. Just let me know names, places, emails, phone numbers etc. You can check the class pages and you can see some of the variations. Choosing a host is just as confusing as choosing a long distance phone carrier.

How Do I Create The Pages?

As was mentioned above, there are 4 kinds of methods. One method is constrained by the host in the form of "fill in the blank" templates-highly simplistic, but very limiting. A second method is proprietary editors such as homestead.com or Network Solutions where there is a balance of simplicity and flexibility. The third method is to use commercially available editors and publishers to create the program/html. The fourth is to just type raw html language in a text editor-good luck on this one. Where an editor is used the chore of making the html or scripting code can be left to the program for the most part, unless things get real sophisticated. The homestead editor has a library of elements that you choose, paste on the page and then edit the characteristics of that element, such as color, size, method, etc. Absolutely no programming required. The editor takes this page layout, much like doing desktop publishing and creates the html automatically. Other commercial editors, and there are more than the few mentioned here, give the creator a wider range of objects and elements. In my estimation design is more difficult, but much more flexible. Some editors include, Front Page, Dreamweaver and Cold Fusion. The Front Page will work with the server-based components on a server that has the Front Page extensions installed. These programs may use java or visual basic scripting to create page programs. Other extensions such as the Dreamweaver Ultra Dev, give you the database connectivity and ASP generation tools. These aren't the only tools available, but if you know of others then reading all this has been a bore anyway. Most of the editors are integrated with the web site, so you can upload your content within the editor itself. Others methods may require creating the pages and uploading the pages with an ftp tool (a filer for looking at your web space)

Domain Names

Simply put, a domain name is a high level name for your website that is unique. It usually ends in things such as .com, .org, .net, .edu etc. So www.something.com is domain name. It for the most part is a virtual domain name, unless it is the unique name for the host server IP. Most hosts do just that, host many domain names. In this regard, 1 computer services many domains. As was said before, the DNS server has a record of your domain and is linked to a host server, which handles the domain. You can keep your domain name no matter where you are hosted, but the IP address in the master DNS has to be changed to reflect that new host. Because there are lots of DNS servers, it takes a while, before the information is synchronized on all of them. You can purchase a domain for about \$35 per year if you get one from a registrar (\$100 for 5 yrs). If the name has already been registered, you have to negotiate

with the owner. Some people buy names on speculation and sit on them. One of the registrars (they used to be the only one) is www.networksolutions.com. Their site has a lookup function to check for available sites and who owns the ones that are registered. A non-profit international consortium controls this registration process ultimately. There are other registrars and some hosts wrap the domain name into the hosting fees. Sometimes it is difficult to get them separated if you choose another host.

Of course you don't necessarily need or can use a domain name. Some hosts don't allow virtual domains. If you don't have a domain name you work off the hosts domain name. For example, a site at homestead.com, without domain name, would be look like: www.something.homestead.com. Other sites, primarily those provided by your ISP, may look like this: www.concentric.net/~something. For alumni sites, I don't believe a domain name is that necessary, unless it is a top level like the Association page. You aren't doing commerce and your audience is fixed. But, that is a personal preference. All the commercial sites and your ISP sites have fixed IP addresses. This is necessary, because when the lookup from the text address to the IP address it has to be in the same place all the time. If you are hosting a site on your own computer and you have a dynamic IP (it changes), people will have great difficulty in finding you. There are some services that create a synthetic DNS by getting you current IP address and redirecting to you from their fixed IP.

Issues

One biggie issue is privacy. Some people don't want to see their email addresses, street addresses and /or phone numbers up in lights, even though it is probably in the public domain. Get their permission to post info. If they leave an email in a guest book, I usually consider that permission, but I will add the email link, and then test it with a message telling them what I did and asking them if that is okay. If they object you can remove the link. You can create blind email links or egroups with blind emails. You can also password protect pages, so that only people with the password can get in.

If you start out to build a web site, don't plan on letting it sit. Getting content is tough after reunions, but you need to refresh a site periodically so there is a reason to come back. When you are building a site. Let everyone visit as you work on it. Many like to see the progress, like looking through those holes at construction sites. If you don't want to keep up the site between reunions, just remove the links to other pages and keep contact information on the main page, so that people can give you info changes.

Not an issue, but a philosophy. Contact with classmates doesn't have to end with a reunion. Even if you don't keep up a site, you can still create periodic newsletters and send them email. If you get a bounce from the email you can run them down quickly. This helps 5 years later when you can't find anybody again. Our class has informal get-togethers every 3 months or so. Whoever comes - comes. Also if someone is coming from out of town you can get everybody together quickly.

If you keep a site going, check your links periodically to make sure they work. Take a look at all your pages once in a while. You might find something wrong that may only need a republish.

Acknowledge people that send you notes as much as possible. They are the ones that spread the news about your site.

Your First Page

Well you are ready for your home page. The only name for the home page is index. If you name it something else other than [index.htm](#) or [index.html](#), the person requesting the page will have to add that to the URL for example: www.homestead.com/something/homepage.html Why have them type or remember that extra step. Index is the default page name for most systems. Your first page, in my estimation should not extend more than a page full. Everything should be available as text or as a hyperlink click without scrolling. I think 800X600 screen resolution is the minimum standard to build to, but 1024 X 768 is probably more in use now. Important things for the front page include contact information for you e.g. email address. Put it on a button. A guest book is also desired. Capture those people so others can see also. A page counter tells you how many hits your page is getting. The page should have a header that clearly defines what the page is for. e.g. West Carrollton High School Class of 1965 page. Don't let people try to guess what this page is all about. Keep in mind that the more stuff you put on the pages (pix, videos, etc) the longer it takes to download. Some people don't have the luxury of broadband connection. If there are to be large files to view, let your viewer choose to do that rather than force it on him. If you have multiple pages, you may want to consider having a common navigation bar on all pages. I sort of got away from that, but will return to that method when rebuilding

my sites. When setting up pages you normally can input key words. Some search engines scan these key words; others look at the page content. If you use a completely graphic page there won't be any text for the search engine to register. If you input key words, think of those that you would enter to find you site if you knew nothing about it.

Another issue is the browser level to which you build the site. I use Microsoft Internet Explorer and usually test with that. However, earlier versions of the IE, Netscape and webtv for example may have problems in the way they render your page. Netscape uses "plug ins" for various functions, which can also create problems. Style sheets, layering and other stuff may create a problem. Some systems, such as homestead, actually create different versions for different browsers, even though you don't see it. To really be sure about how your page will look, you will need to have different versions of the browsers available to check, or just not worry about it.

After this you are on your own. Create pages for specific purposes e.g. email page, album page etc. You can use form entry to have information emailed to you in a standard format. I can go on and on, but the rest is up to you. It can be a real adventure. Don't be afraid of making mistakes or trying new things. You can always create test pages that you can try out without telling anyone or linking to. Just type your URL with the page name after it (like we said not to do with the home page) and you can try it out without anyone knowing what is going on. Once you have it the way you want it, put the page on link button. If you want to see our class page www.wcclass65.homestead.com a basic yet fairly comprehensive site, built with little or no knowledge of web sites and html. The cadre of webmasters for WC classes will usually help you with things if you get into a bind. However, each Webmaster uses different tools and may or may not be able to help you with your specific problem. Also don't forget to create a link back to the Alumni Association site. Also linking to class sites that are around your year is handy too. As the ad says "Just Do It"

Good Luck and Happy Web mastering

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