

Do-it-Yourself Websites for Cheapskates and Simpletons

By Heather Reimer

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Several years ago, at the beginning of my Internet career, I asked someone if HTML was an abbreviation for Hotmail. Yes, I really was that naive. Since then, I've learned a fair bit about HTML coding. I had to.

As a writer, I needed an online presence for my web content services; and as an ornery, mule-headed, cheapskate writer, I was determined to build it myself in spite of those who said I should leave it to the experts.

This article is about how I learned HTML coding and built a functional, professional-looking site using mostly free/cheap tools and tutorials available on the web. I will not, however, tell you how fast and easy it was. In fact, it took about six months and almost drove me around the twist on several occasions. That's because I was working alone for most of the process and had to learn things the hard way... by trial and error.

I hope to make your job easier by sharing a few tricks I picked up along the way.

GET A GOOD TUTORIAL

The very first thing you need is a good, beginner's tutorial in HTML. Regardless of what sort of design software you end up using some day, it's important to understand the basics of hard coding first.

Once I got the hang of it, thanks to two excellent free tutorials, I decided to code my whole site by hand instead of trying to master an HTML editor like Microsoft Front Page, which would have meant yet another uphill learning curve. (Nothing wrong with design tools or ready-made templates... they just weren't the best solutions for me.)

I recommend either of these simpleton-friendly tutorials:

<http://www.accessv.com/~email/webpages/>

http://www.htmlgoodies.com/primers/primer_1.html

Don't just read them... open up a fresh page in your text editor and build along with the lesson. Once you've created a sort of sampler and you know how the various codes look in your browser, start working on your practice site. I wish I had found these tutorials when I first began toying with web design - they make learning a breeze.

SCAVENGER HUNT

This is where things get fun. Roam around the web looking for images and buttons and stuff to decorate your site with. Need some graphics but you aren't an artist? Do a search for "free images" or "free buttons". Forgot how to transfer them to your practice site? Go back to the tutorial and refresh your memory. Need a handy list of the most common codes? Web-Source has a comprehensive reference chart here:

http://www.web-source.net/html_codes_explorer1.htm

(And if you have a few spare shekels, you can pick up Web-Source's excellent guide, Web Design Mastery, at the same address.)

Don't be shy about checking out other webmasters' source codes. Click on View/Source and see how they've executed the design tricks you'd like for your own site. Usually the basic elements are easy to duplicate (unless the webmaster has cloaked the source code).

CALL FOR HELP

Really, the best way to master the confusing world of web design is practice, practice, practice. But if you find you've plateaued and aren't making any headway, try to connect with someone who can mentor you through your block. My site was about half done and stuck ugly when I was lucky enough to connect with business coach Michael Knowles (<http://www.mwknowles.com>).

He's the one who tipped me off to the best bargain on the net: GotLogos.com will make you a professional logo based on your

specs for \$25 and deliver it in three days. If you plan to do business online, a logo is indispensable.

Michael also opened my eyes to the vital importance of search engine optimization. Don't groan, this is a major aspect of web design and you need to know about it if you want people to actually find you on the net. Take some time to visit SEO sites - here are just two among many - and soak up some of their search engine savvy:

<http://www.spider-food.net>

<http://www.highrankings.com>

KEYWORD SEARCH

Now you've learned how important the right keywords are. But do you know WHAT the right keywords are, the ones that will attract the most visitors to your site?

<http://www.WordTracker.com> has an unlimited free trial version that will help you find the words used most often by people searching for your type of product or service. This tool was invaluable to me and determined the keywords I wrote into my content, meta tag titles and descriptions.

PAY ME, PLEASE

Last but certainly not least, to allow people to pay me for my words, I use PayPal. It doesn't cost my clients anything to send me money and the fees I pay to receive payment are minimal. As you have already guessed, I like things low-maintenance and cheap, and setting up a credit card account (even with a third-party provider) comes with fees and lots of conditions.

So those are the main resources I used to graduate to Girl Web Designer. No, my site isn't full of high-tech wizardry and complex scripts... that's next year's project... but it works, it informs, it sells and it looks pretty good. See for yourself:

<http://www.TheWriteContent.com>

Finally, don't let anyone tell you that only web designers can make websites. If you're stubborn, thrifty or you just like to do it yourself -- and if all you need is a basic, no frills site -- there's nothing stopping you. And oh-what-a-feeling! when the website you built goes online. I just wish I had known THEN what you know NOW!

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