

Free Stuff: Guestbooks

By Richard Lowe

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Visitors to non-commercial websites expect to find guestbooks. In fact, they often get quite annoyed when they cannot find one, especially if they want to compliment the webmaster. Many visitors are disappointed if they cannot find one even on commercial websites.

Imagine how it feels to really want to tell a webmaster that he's done a great job, and you cannot find an easy way to do so. It's enough to make anyone annoyed ... upset enough not to come back? Perhaps not, but after working so hard to get a visitor to your site why anger someone who only wants to tell you that you've done a good job?

On our site we have gone through many different guestbooks. Like many sites, we began with the standard remotely hosted versions. In general, these did the job but as our site matured we jumped from service to service, attempting to find one that suited our needs. After much searching, we decided to maintain our guestbook by hand (what a pain that was), until stumbling on the best guestbook script we have ever seen. Once we installed vizbook we realized we were in guestbook heaven.

Anyway, virtually all of the remotely hosted guestbook services will do the job. If your site is based on a web host that allows for user installed CGI routines, then vizbook comes highly recommended.

User Installed Scripts

User installed guestbook scripts are most definitely preferable to the remotely hosted versions. If

you are allowed to install your own scripts, then by all means do so - you will get a much better guestbook.

Vizbook <http://www.dtp-aus.com/cgi-script/vizbook.shtml>

I personally tested virtually every guestbook script that was available on cgi-resources (<http://www.cgi-resources.com>). Once we stumbled upon the script called vizbook, we realized we had found the perfect guestbook. Let me emphasize that point - this guestbook is absolutely incredible. It has everything, and was even completely customizable to match our site perfectly. If you can install CGI scripts on your server, then there is no other choice as far as I am concerned.

Remotely Hosted

Many sites take advantage of the many remotely hosted guestbook services that are available. The advantages of using a remote service include:

- The maintenance required to upkeep the guestbook is minimal and generally consists of reviewing the entries.

- Your bandwidth and disk quotas are not affected by the guestbook.

The disadvantages include:

- Remotely hosted guestbooks are supported by advertising, which means banners. These cause visitors to be drawn away from your site.

- Configuration of remote guestbooks is usually very limited, so the guestbook will not match your site.

- You are stuck with the features provided by the guestbook provider.

- Most importantly, these services have proven to be highly vulnerable to the slowdown of internet advertising. As a result, quite a few have disappeared or become fee driven in recent months. This can be disastrous for a site when a guestbook with hundreds (or even thousands) of entries is lost without notice.

Here is a selection of remotely hosted guestbooks.

Bravenet Web Services <http://www.bravenet.com/>

Bravenet's guestbook service is extremely popular for good reason. It's well designed and implemented, quick and efficient. Some customization, although not as much as I would desire. Highly recommended.

Dreambook <http://www.dreambook.com/>

Unlike most guestbook servers (free and otherwise), you can completely customize Dreambook to match your site. In normal editing mode, you can pick from a variety of templates (some of which were submitted by users just like you), and if you switch into advanced mode, you can edit the html directly to make your own custom forms. You decide what fields appear in your guestbook, and how they are arranged. You can even ask your visitors questions and create complex questionnaires.

Global Guest <http://globalquest.com/>

Simple, easy guestbook service. Not as customizable as some guestbooks, but simple to set up.

HTML Gear <http://www.lpage.com/>

Extremely nice guestbook service with lots of options. This service was good in the past, so good, in fact, that it was recently purchased by Lycos. Only time will tell if Lycos improves the service or ruins it.

LemNet.Com <http://www.lemnet.com/>

Good guestbook service. Fast, reliable and very customizable. You can define up to 10 custom questions, and there is a wide range default questions, such as name, email address with link, website with link, ICQ number with status indicator and comments. These can be enabled by checking a box.

Additional Information

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Webmaster/maintguestbooks.htm>

Maintain Your Guestbook - Many webmasters include a guestbook on their site. Guestbooks are important and must be well kept to be useful.

http://www.internet-tips.net/Surfing/netiquette_guestbooks.htm

Netiquette - Guestbook Entries - Guestbooks are a great way to leave public messages to a webmaster. Just be nice, complementary and helpful.

http://www.internet-tips.net/Surfing/Guestbooks_presents.htm

Graphics in guestbooks are cool - If you want, you can leave a small graphic in a guestbook to add some class.

http://www.internet-tips.net/Surfing/Guestbooks_photoloft.htm

Using Photoloft for your images If you are leaving presents in guestbooks, it's important not to steal bandwidth. Photoloft is an inexpensive way to leave presents without being unethical.

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Legal/Bandwidth.htm>

Bandwidth stealing - Bandwidth stealing is the linking to images or scripts from another site without permission, thus using that sites bandwidth without compensation.

http://www.internet-tips.net/Legal/sins_bandwidth.htm

Sins of the internet- Bandwidth Stealing - This sin costs hosts millions of dollars a year - and often you don't even know that you did it!

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