

# Good web Design: Site Maps

By Richard Lowe

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When a new visitor reaches your site (by whatever means), you must remember he has never seen it before. Yes, I know that you are intimately familiar with every single page throughout your site, but your new visitors most definitely are not.

In fact, a site with poor navigation is a site which will not see a large number of repeat visitors. Today the internet and web are just too massive for anyone to spend any significant amount of time trying to figure out how to find out something from your site. Most people (myself included) will simply surf elsewhere very quickly rather than hunt around for what we need.

One feature common to any well designed web site (at least any web site of any size) is a site map. This document is similar in concept to a table of contents in a book. Its purpose is to give your visitors an overview of the contents and organization of your site.

All right, so you've got a search engine on your site, you've got a navigation system which is good and you've cross linked everything so your visitors can get around as needed. So why do you need a site map in addition to all of this? The answer is simple:

- Sometimes your visitors want to get a view of your whole site's organization and design in order to efficiently explore what you've got.
- It is a way to show off all of the information that you have made available to them.
- Site maps are good pages to submit to search engines, as they include links to every page on

your web site.

Some critical things to keep in mind about site maps:

- Keep your site maps up-to-date and accurate. If your site map is not useful, then you may actually wind up chasing away people instead of attracting them.
- Remember you want to include as much of your site as possible on one page, but you do not want to increase the load time to the point where no one will want to wait for it.
- Make sure your site map links to all of the pages within your site.
- Link to your site map from every single page on your web site.

There are several different types of site maps, each with it's own advantages, uses and disadvantages.

**Outline Format** - Perhaps the most common format for a site map is a simple outline. This is most similar to the table of contents of a book, with everything listed from top to bottom in a specific order.

This format is most useful for smaller, less complicated sites (under a hundred pages) with a straightforward design. The main disadvantage is that as your site grows, the site map grows and takes longer to load into your visitors browsers. It is, however, by far the easiest of all for your visitors to grasp and understand, as your entire site is presented on a single page in a logical manner.

**Multi-column outline** - Many web sites use this format. It is similar to the Outline format, but with several columns. It has the same advantages and disadvantages as the outline format, although it can be slightly more confusing to your visitors.

**Portal Format** - This format consists of a main page which indexes additional pages, which may in turn index additional pages. Thus your main page may consist of the overall general contents, with links to more specific contents. This format is most useful for very large sites or sites with complicated organizations. It is a little more difficult for your visitors as it requires more clicks to move around, but it is better than Outline format for large sites.

**JavaScript and other formats** - Some webmasters like to use JavaScript or Java applets to make their site maps very fancy. I would recommend against this, as they are far less intuitive than a simple outline or portal format. In addition, you can be reasonably sure that a straight HTML outline will display on anyone's browser - JavaScript or Java may be restricted by many users.

No matter what you decide, the important thing to remember is to make it easy on your visitors. They are the reason why you created your web site, after all, and the easier you make it for them to get around, the more they will explore and the more you will meet the goals you made when you created your site.

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