

Web Site Management: Guestbooks

By Richard Lowe

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Have you ever visited a web site, liked what you saw and wanted to leave a quick note to the webmaster to let him know your feelings? Did you find a great website which entertained you for hours, and you felt like you had to let the person who created it know? Or did you spend the entire afternoon reading someone's wonderful content, which was so great that you just had to tell him what you thought?

If so, I'll bet you've looked for the guestbook, which is the traditional place to communicate those thoughts. I don't know who started the concept of the guestbook on web sites, but it's a great idea. It is a quick and easy way for your visitors to leave a little comment (and sometimes a not-so-little comment) about your site.

Have you ever been to a site which elicited these feelings only to find there was no guestbook? If you are anything like me, you felt a little disoriented, perhaps even a bit angry. You just wanted to let someone know they did something good, and they have not given you a way to do so.

Some webmasters will tell you that guestbooks are not important. Others will claim they are a waste of time and effort. I've even heard some say the "real estate (space)" on the page would be better put to use promoting a product or something. These comments make me feel a little sad, as these webmasters prove by their comments that they don't really understand the internet or the web.

You see, the internet is not about making tons of money (although making tons of money would be great). It's not about awesome storefronts, pay-to-surf programs or even the newest technology. The internet is not about these things.

What the internet is about is communication. Purely and simply, the purpose of the internet is to communicate. This morning, when I had to refill a prescription I jumped onto my favorite prescription web site and punched in my renewal instructions ... that's communication. Later in the day, I researched some products ... that's communication. Tonight, I may even make a purchase from my favorite shopping site ... and that's also communication.

Those webmasters who make it easy for their visitors to communicate will find their sites prosper by whatever measure they deem important. Conversely, webmasters who impede communications will find their sites are not nearly as successful as they could be.

How does a guestbook fit into this? It gives your visitors not only a standard, globally understood way to communicate with the webmaster, but it also gives them a way to communicate with all of the visitors to the web site. Your visitors can stop for a minute to congratulate you on your good works ... in public for all to see. This is communication at it's best.

A good guestbook script has the following features:

- It must be very configurable, so that the webmaster can leave plenty of things for his visitors to communicate.
- A good guestbook always sends an acknowledgement back to the person who signed (assuming he left his email address).
- The best scripts also send an email to the webmaster so he knows someone signed.
- A guestbook absolutely must be moderated. Any guestbook which does not allow for moderation must be discarded.
- The better scripts will filter out curse words.

When you design your site, you should include an easily found link to the guestbook on every single page. Believe me, if your visitors want to say something good about your site you should make it easy for them to do so. The link can be anywhere ... just be sure to place it in the same location on every page.

Once a guestbook has been selected and installed, it must be maintained. This is where the game gets a little interesting. Here's what happens.

- 1) Someone visits your site, likes what he sees and navigates to your guestbook. He writes a comment and submits his entry.
- 2) Your guestbook script should send him an acknowledgement (assuming he included his email address). The acknowledgement must not be a blatant advertisement for your affiliate programs or products. It's purpose is to thank your visitors for their comments and to remind them to return to your site. You can also let them know of other features of your site that they may find of interest.
- 3) NEVER send more than one email to your visitor from a guestbook signing. One email is polite. More than one email is spam. The only exception to this is when the visitor specifically asks you a question or asks for your response.
- 4) NEVER add your visitor's email to your mailing list because he signed your guestbook. This is spam.

5) Your script should also send you an email so that you know someone has signed. Read the message and determine if it is appropriate for your site. If so, add the message. If not, delete it.

You should moderate your guestbook, as you want to be sure that only comments that are appropriate end up being made public. This is a very critical part of guestbook maintenance. Guestbooks are intended to positively reinforce your work - not tear it down. You can feel free to delete any and all negative messages.

Another type of message that I usually delete immediately is the pure advertisement. Guestbooks can provide links back to sites, but that is not their primary purpose. Leave advertisements to classified and free-for-all link pages.

I would be very cautious about making any changes to anything in a guestbook. This is a place for visitors to post comments (generally positive ones) about your site and it's contents ... it is not your editorial page.

Properly used, a guestbook is a useful and easy way to enhance your site and make it more friendly to your visitors. These scripts give your visitors a way to publicly post positive comments about your works for the world to see. That in itself can be very useful and helpful.

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