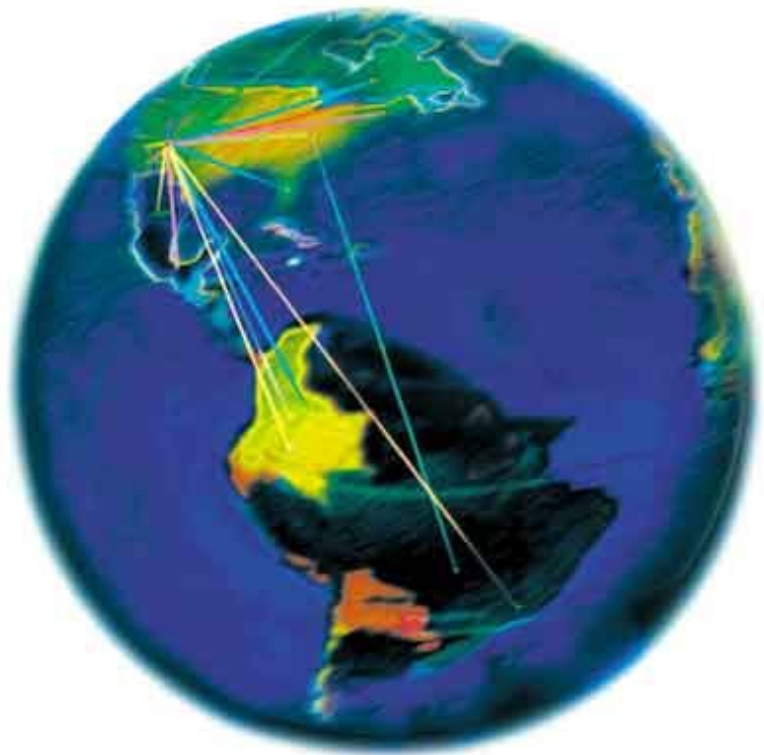# The Basics of Developing a Web Site

By Greg Smith

Greg joined BASIS this year as our Webmaster. He has five years of experience creating and designing Web-based systems.

Business relies on the Internet today as it did on the typewriter 20 years ago. Today, the central component of a business presence on the Internet has become the Web site. And a business Web site can be anything from a billboard page, which gives contact information, to a full-blown combination Internet/intranet/extranet that supports the operations of a global corporation.

Development of a Web site involves consideration of several factors before implementation. First, determine the purpose of the site. Will it be a gateway site (a site whose main purpose is to provide links to other sites), a content site, a product site, or another type? Who is the intended audience? The intended audience could range from a select few people interested in a narrowly focused theme to a general public site for selling products. This site definition process will help to determine some of the characteristics of the site such as structure and navigation scheme.

The style and appearance of the site also need careful consideration. Too many sites turn out to be either to bland to catch the user's eye or pop art ransom notes. Finding just the right mix of color, graphics and fonts is important to provide aesthetic appeal. Dynamics are an important part of Web sites as well, enabling users to involve themselves.

A Few Online Resources For Web Development

Webreview.com (http://Webreview.com)
Perlmonth (http://www.perlmonth.com)
Perl Mongers (http://www.perl.org)
Designshops.com (http://www.designshops.com/)
Netscape's JavaScript Guide
(http://developer.netscape.com/docs/manuals/communicator/jsguide4/index.htm/)

The JavaScript Source (http://javascript.internet.com/)
Web Developers Journal (http://www.Webdevelopersjournal.com/)
Web Monkey (http://www.hotwired.com/Webmonkey/)

There are different ways to approach Web site development. A Webmaster can either develop the site from the content perspective or from an appearance perspective. Many of the more popular Web sites have found a good mix between these two. But if the user does not find utility at the site, he or she won't be back.

Creating a Web site just right the first time is almost impossible. A Web site evolves over a period of time based on the development of the content, accessing the usability of the site, and the experience of the Webmaster and the development group. Unfortunately, there are few curricula dealing with the Web because of the rapid change in the technology and the way the Web is used. Any syllabus written today will be obsolete next semester. Becoming a Webmaster is a matter of on-the-job training and apprenticeship. Working with an existing Web development group to gain the experience is a great way to pick up skills. Working on a personal Web project is another way and allows you to try different things outside corporate- or project-defined limitations. Voracious reading and participation in the online information resources is not only recommended, it is required. A Webmaster belongs to a community, so move in, get settled and get to know your fellow Webmasters. They can teach you a lot.

Skills To Look For In A Webmaster

Every Web site no matter how simple or complex has one common aspect, a Webmaster. It used to be that a Webmaster was someone who knew HTML, Perl and the difference between a GIF graphic and a JPEG graphic. Now, a Webmaster has to have a much wider variety of skills to solve the complex issues in Web site development for business.

The ability to integrate a variety of technologies that are mainstream today and keep up with technologies that may become mainstream tomorrow is crucial. Today, Web sites must integrate accounting, inventory and productivity systems across a variety of networks and operating systems, using Java, Perl, C++, JavaScript and Visual Basic Script, and incorporating graphics, sound and video. For a glimpse at tomorrow's technologies, read WIRED magazine, surf www.cnet.com and ask your local teenager.

Part of being a Webmaster also entails having interpersonal skills that enable the communication and consensus building among the various business groups in an organization that have a stake in the Web. Incorporating the expertise in departments as diverse as accounting, shipping, marketing, MIS and other groups in an organization and producing a usable, coherent Web site requires the political skills of a senior diplomat.

There is a systems aspect of a Webmaster's responsibilities as well. As with any information system, there are techniques that will ensure a quality product and an easier implementation process. Doing the analysis, documenting the design requirements, flowcharting the interactive activities and prototyping the system are all part of a formal systems development approach. The biggest difference is that unlike more traditional information systems, the Web system will change and evolve at the speed of light compared to other information systems.

Design skills are yet another aspect of Webmastering. In order to be able to accommodate changes quickly, a Webmaster must have the design skills to ensure that the changes do not diminish the sites availability or usability. While the Webmaster may not create the graphics, he or she does need to be able to conceptualize graphic design and recognize what is good and what is not.

Security concerns are a major headache for Webmasters because there are hordes of people who do nothing but try and break into Web sites. Web security is an evolving technology; changes occur in the protocols, browsers and laws. Keeping on top of these changes keeps a Webmaster hopping.