Web Liaisons Group, December 2009

6 tips for keeping your Web site tidy

This presentation may seem like common sense, but in my time as Webmaster I have discovered more junk on the servers than you would be able to believe. Since we are in the middle of a transfer from one server to another, I thought this would be a good time to talk about organizing and maintaining a Web site over the long term.

It's rare that we have new Web sites to create. Most of the time we are tasked with maintaining or updating a Web site that has long since outgrown its original scope. Even when we do create a new site, it is often existing within the remnants of an umbrella site that is so disorganized that our site gets swallowed up by the mess.

Organization is essential because it

- Makes updates easier
- Keeps the server clean
- Makes it easier for other people to take over the maintenance of your site
- Can improve search engine results
- Provides a consistent, professional experience for your visitors

• Makes maintenance and updates easier
The cleaner a Web page is, the easier it is to make updates without jeopardizing the structure. Many Web editing tools will leave extra code behind, and once a page has been updated dozens of times by different people this can start to create problems with the structure. Beyond that, it's much easier to swap out a photo or document if all of the files are kept organized.

• Keeps the server clean

Our servers fill up more quickly than you'd think. The Web server is not your personal storage space, and should be kept for documents related to the Web site, not internal records. If you want to archive an old document, burn it on a CD or save it to your file server. Don't leave it on the Web server.

• Makes it easier for other people to take over the maintenance of your site

It's shortsighted to assume that you will always be the only one editing your Web site. What if you are given additional responsibilities and someone else is given the task of day-to-day updates? The files need to be clean and organized in a way that anyone can understand your logic.

• Can improve search engine results

Search engines like sites that are logical and predictable. Having your information organized and keeping your pages clean will make it easier for search engines to crawl your site which can only help your ranking. You don't want a search engine missing valuable information on your site because it was buried in a bunch of unnecessary content.

• Provides a consistent, professional experience for your visitors

If you keep a similar format on all of your pages and keep them organized in predictable ways (i.e. images are always found in the images folder) it makes your Web site appear professional and complete. Savvy users might even be able to guess where they can find information on your site without relying on a search tool.

Tip #1: Don't take shortcuts

- Don't let Web editing software think for you.

- Be in control of where your images and documents end up. Copy and paste them to the server first rather than inserting from your hard drive and clicking save.

- Avoid using text editing options.

This is a common mistake made by experienced editors as well as novices.

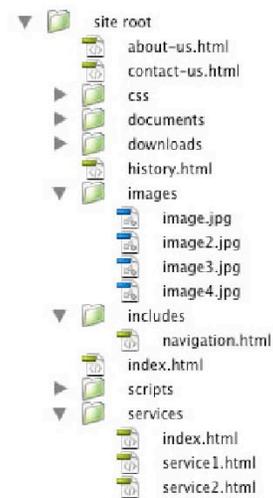• **Be in control of where your images and documents end up.**

Many Web editing programs will allow you to insert photos and create links in your documents without worrying about where the dependent files are stored. When you click save, it will upload the photo or document to the root folder where you may never find it again. You could end up with multiple versions of files or a link to something on your hard drive if you let the program do the thinking.

• **Avoid using text editing options**

Every time you change a font, text size or color, the software will create a new style that can be used in that document only and fill the document with unnecessary code.

• Group similar files together in folders.

Organizing images, CSS documents, forms and downloadable content, include/template files into labeled folders will save headaches down the road as your site continues to grow.

• Put large, self-contained sections of your site into folders to prevent confusion.

Sometimes a section of your site will become so large or complex that it needs to have its own images, CSS or documents folders. If it has become important enough to require a short, easy to remember URL, then it makes a lot of sense to move it and all of its related files to a new folder and label the entry page as index or default.

• Give your files unique, descriptive names.

Not only will this help your search engine results and make it easier for visitors to find your content, but it will also make updates easier for anyone who isn't familiar with your site.

Tip #3: Minimize repetition

- Use templates and include files wherever possible.
- Keep styles saved in an external file. If you have multiple style sheets on your site, create a single file you can import that will import the rest.
- Avoid multiple versions of images or files.

By their very nature, Web pages have a lot of repeated information. Navigation, for example, must appear on every page or a user will not be able to find their way through your site.

• **Use templates and include files wherever possible.**

Put any information that repeats on multiple pages into external files and import as part of a template or include file. This will decrease page loading times and improve user experience. This will also streamline maintenance and make updating navigation a breeze.

• **Keep styles in an external file (CSS).**

Inline styles make maintenance a nightmare. They increase file sizes and allow subtle inconsistencies to creep into your pages. Instead of creating a new style every time you want to emphasize something, create a new style in your CSS file and import it into every page. This way, if you change your mind about the color of a headline, you only have to fix it once.

• **Avoid multiple versions of images or files.**

Some images will be used on every page of your Web site. Organize any images used to create the layout of your page in a separate folder (images) in order to avoid duplicating these files.

Tip #4: Keep your code clean

- Remove unnecessary code and empty tags.
- Import only what's needed.
- Write comments throughout your code.
- Group and order items consistently across pages.

• **Remove unnecessary code and empty tags.**

If you are not a code wizard, you can use other tools to accomplish this. Most software includes some sort of validation or code clean up option. You can always use validator.w3.org as well to find mistakes in your code.

• **Import only what's needed.**

If you have a slideshow on some of your pages which requires an imported script, remove the import from pages that are not using the code. This will help to eliminate confusion and potential conflicts.

• **Write comments throughout your code.**

Comments give future editors hints about how your page is structured, where to find certain content and how to make updates to a script that requires specific variables.

• **Group and order items consistently across pages.**

Keep all CSS imports and scripts together and keep the order in which they're imported consistent. Changing the order of CSS imports can affect the way a site displays. It would also be easy to import something twice if you don't keep things in the same order.

Tip #5: Tidy up your style sheets

- Comment and organize your CSS.
- Structure CSS rules to avoid repetition.
- Use shortcuts to avoid lengthy rules.
- Label your rules by structure not appearance.

```
p { font-size: 1em; line-height: 1.4em; padding: 0 0 5px
h1 { font-size: 2em; color: #0066cc; padding: 0 0 10px 0
h2 { font-size: 1.3em; color: #5f592d; padding: 10px 0 5
h3 { font-size: 1.2em; color: #0066cc; padding: 10px 0 5
h4 { font-size: 1.1em; color: #0e3e5e; padding: 0 0 10px
h5 { font-size: 1em; color: #36424a; letter-spacing: 1px
h6 { font-size: 1em; color: #ab0823; font-weight: normal

/* -------- Titlebar -------- */

#titlebar { width: 940px; height: 70px; }

#titlebar h1 {
color: #002147;
font-weight: normal;
padding: 20px 0 0 0;
margin: 0 0 0 20px;|
}

/* -------- Sidebar -------- */
#sidebarwrap {
position: absolute;
width: 200px;  /*--This sets the WIDTH of the menu BACKGR
z-index: 11000;
}

#sidebar, #sidebar ul {
float: left;
list-style: none;
text-align: left;
padding: 10px 0 0 0;
margin: 0;
width: 200px;
}
```

External files like CSS documents and JavaScript can benefit from all the same recommendations as your Web pages. For this presentation I'm going to focus on CSS, though similar methods can be applied to other files. This might be getting a little bit technical for those of you unfamiliar with CSS.

• **Comment and organize your CSS.**

Everyone has their own preference, but I like to organize my CSS by the layout of my page. I keep global rules like headings at the top of the document and then organize the rest of the rules by section working my way down from the top left to bottom right. Some people go so far as to order the statements within their rules, i.e., alignment first, text second, padding third.

• **Structure CSS rules to avoid repetition.**

Create your rules so that you start with the least specific and move to the most specific. If the only difference between the h1 in your title bar and the h1 in your content is the color, then you can put all of the statements about alignment, size, font, spacing, etc. in the global style and create a second style that only includes the color in the content section.

• **Use shortcuts to avoid lengthy styles.**

Instead of creating a separate rule for margin-top, margin-right, margin-bottom and margin-left, create a single rule for margin and list all for in order, remembering TRBL.

• **Label your rules by structure not appearance.**

This will save time and headaches down the road. If you label the information box under your navigation as "blue box" because that's how it looks now and it is later changed to be orange, updating the pages can be confusing for someone who hasn't been there since the beginning.

Tip #6: Archive and delete

- Create a backup of your Web site at least every six months.
- After your site is archived, go through it and delete any unnecessary information.
- Schedule this cleaning in advance and ask everyone in your department responsible for content to make updates at the same time.

• Create a backup of your Web site at least every six months.

You may want to do this more often or before making a major update to your site. Save it to your file server or a CD, but **do not** leave backups on the Web server.

• After your site is archived, go through it and delete any unnecessary information.

Even if you try to keep things organized, quick updates and changes made while you were out of the office or by people unfamiliar with your site will eventually take their toll.

• Schedule this cleaning in advance and ask everyone in your department responsible for content to make updates at the same time.

Some people may not even look at their content on the Web site. This gives you a good opportunity to remind them of it and ask for updates if necessary.

Remember

**Your Web site is a public space,
not your bedroom.**

Any dirty laundry you leave laying around
will only give your visitors a poor impression
of you and trip up your coworkers when
they need to make updates.