



LAUGHING BEAR 112

NEWSLETTER

April/May 1999; edited by Tom Person; Copyright © 1999 by Laughing Bear Press; Estab. 1976; ISSN 1056-0327
P.O. Box 613322, Dallas, TX 75261-3322; 817-858-9515; e-mail: editor@laughingbear.com
<http://www.laughingbear.com>; REALNAME: Laughing Bear; \$15/12 issues, \$17.50/Canada, £15/UK & Eire

The Surviving Small Press: Website Tips and Tricks

Over the past few years, I've learned a lot about building websites by making mistakes and from advice I've gotten. I've tried to put down some of the more useful bits of information I've learned here.

Just as in book publishing, anyone can put up a website, but there's a lot you learn along the way that makes it easier, more cost efficient, and more enjoyable.

My best advice to you is to approach this the way you did publishing. Do it yourself.

The idea of putting up a website can be intimidating, but so is the idea of publishing your own books. This is just another form of publishing.

Also, keep up with the technology. It is especially important to test each new addition to your site in different browsers. At the least you should have Netscape and Internet Explorer, but the more browsers you can test your site with, the more likely everyone will be able to see it.

The reason is different browsers see things differently. A page that shows up fine in IE, may be blank in Netscape. That's because Internet Explorer may forgive a missing tag at the end of your code, but if Netscape doesn't see the tag it will refuse to read the page at all.

You may have the best page on the web, but it'll only do you half good if half the people who visit it can't see it.

Web 101

The internet and world wide web can seem mysterious and scary to some people. Really it's not that much different than a simple office network.

In a network, there is a large computer (a server) with a bunch of smaller computers (workstations) linked to it.

A person at a workstation can get data from the server, store information on the server's hard drive, and use it to connect to another workstation.

The internet is just a very large network with thousands of servers that have agreed to work together. They comply to certain protocols (rules; such as http and ftp) so the data they send out is compatible.

When you connect your computer to the internet through an internet service provider (ISP), like AOL, you become a workstation on the network, and you can get information, store data (like your web page), and contact other workstations through the servers.

The world wide web is part of the internet, but with another set of protocols applied so you can not only receive and send text, but images and sounds as well.

Browsers like Internet Explorer and Netscape take digital information that complies with web protocol and turn it into pictures and sound.

Another way to look at it is the internet is like a telephone system, and the web is like television. Combined you have TV you can talk back to.

Free Stuff

You can get everything you need to get online and set up a website, even set up your own server, except a computer and phone line.

Of course, the first thing you need is an ISP so you can connect to the internet. NetZero, Inc. offers an absolutely free internet connection, if you don't mind putting up with a little advertising as you surf. It includes e-mail. You can download the software at <http://www.netzero.com> if you have some way to get there, or order the software on CD-ROM (NetZero, Inc., Attn: CD Orders, PO Box 3009, Thousand Oaks, CA 91359; 877-638-3117), but it isn't available for Macintosh yet.

Once you're online, you need web space. This is easy, virtually every ISP and search engine is giving it away. For generic space, go to <http://www.geocities.com> or <http://www.tripod.com>. There are also sites for special interests, like <http://www.ivillage.com> for women.

Once you've got space, you'll probably need software to transfer your website files to your space (though some of the free sites let you do it through your browser). The most popular ftp program is available in a free version. WS_FTP LE is a very powerful and easy program to use. You can get it free from <http://www.ipswitch.com>. They don't advertise the free version like they used to, but you can still click on "Download

(Continued on page 4.)

LAUGHING BEAR NEWSLETTER 112

Don't Lose Your Visitors

You've gone to a lot of trouble to make your site attractive to the people who visit it. Don't lose them just because they go to someone else's page you are linked to. They may not find their way back if they explore further links there.

To avoid this problem, when you link to another site, open it up in another browser window so your site will still be available in the background. When the visitor closes the browser of the linked site, they'll be back at your site.

A normal HTML link to my page is written like this: `Laughing Bear Newsletter`. On the page the link looks like this: [Laughing Bear Newsletter](#).

To do the same link, but have it open the new page in another browser window, we add a little JavaScript so the code looks like this: `Laughing Bear Newsletter`.

The link still shows Laughing Bear Newsletter underlined like a regular link, but when it is clicked another window of Internet Explorer or Netscape, or whatever browser the visitor is using, opens with the new page.

In the code, the "window.open" command is what opens the new window, but don't leave out the "javascript:void". The first book I found this trick didn't have the "void" added on. The second window opened, but my original page was sometimes lost when I closed the newly opened window (depending on the browser used). The "void" anchors the original page in place.

This trick will only work for browsers compatible with Java, but virtually all browsers in use are compatible.

Simplify Your Home Page

The home page of a web site is like the combined front cover and table of contents of a book. The home page, like a cover, is supposed to catch the visitor's eye and give them an idea what they can find inside your site. Then your table of contents is the menu of links to the various pages within your site.

A common mistake of people new to designing web pages, and I did this too, is to put too much information on the home page. They give their life story, the history of their business, why they wrote their book, and on and on.

The thinking is that the visitor may not go beyond the home page and so they try to put everything they've got into one massive, overwhelming essay.

For the visitor, however, going to a web site is like picking up a book in a bookstore. They choose a book for its cover, browse the table of contents, and then flip through the parts that interest them.

If you picked up a book that had an 2,000 word essay on the cover about how the publisher got into business, everyone who inspired the book, and their plans for summer vacation, would you read the cover or go to the next book?

A home page should say who you are and what you do in the simplest and most direct way possible. Most web surfers don't spend more than a few seconds deciding whether they want to explore a site or not.

Include a menu (links or buttons) that is easy to understand and that will take visitors quickly to the information they are looking for so they don't get frustrated and go somewhere else.

You can put anything you want on your web site, but keep the home page clean. People do judge a book by its cover.

Sell Books Online Without Credit Cards

One of the great advantages of the web is people can order your books electronically. It's easy for them, and it means more impulse sales for you. The problem is, you need to be able to accept credit cards, and that can be more trouble than it's worth if you are selling small quantities.

Here is a way to sell your books online without credit cards. Become a Barnes & Noble affiliate. (Other online booksellers may do this as well, but B&N makes it very easy.)

You sign up to be an affiliate at <http://www.affiliate.net>. It is quick and painless. Then you put a special link on your page so when a visitor clicks on a phrase or your book cover, they go to B&N where your book pops up and they can buy it using their credit card.

But what if Barnes & Nobel doesn't carry your book? At the [affiliate.net](http://www.affiliate.net) site, you can enter your book in their database. All you need is an ISBN. When someone orders the book, B&N orders the book from you and pays you like they would any publisher whose book is in their store. If they already stock your book, it will be sent to the customer in 1-2 days.

You sell your book to B&N at a discount, probably 40%, but because the customer orders the book through the link on your site, you get back 5% of the retail price as commission.

This isn't an ideal solution to the credit card problem, you don't get full price, but you'll probably come out ahead of the expense setting up a merchant account, if you are even eligible for one.

If you still want to sell books from your site by having the customer send in a check, you can give them a little price break off the B&N price, but still give them the option of paying with a card.

LAUGHING BEAR NEWSLETTER 112

Hiring a Web Designer

It may be that you don't want or don't have the time to set up your own web site. If that's the case, there are plenty of people willing to do it for you. They can call themselves webmasters, content developers, or designers, but to keep it simple here lets lump them under the term web designer.

Web site design is an area people are getting into for the promises of a lucrative, work-at-home profession, but that doesn't make them qualified to do it. It is easy to put up a web page, but it is difficult to match design and function with a company's real needs.

If you are going to hire someone, you need to see sites they've done for other customers, call their references, and be sure you know what you want your site to do for you. Then you need to sit down with the designer and discuss your plans for the site and for its maintenance and evolution.

Maintenance of a web site can include adding books and reviews, and making text changes and other adjustments to keep the site up to date. Ask the designer to walk you through these simple changes so you can do them yourself. If you have to bring someone in every time you want to make a minor change, maintenance is going to be very expensive.

Take the time to learn how your site works and how to repair or add on to it.

Evolution of a web site takes place as your goals change and you want to add features to the site. You may want to bring the designer back in to implement changes that require complex coding, like adding a shopping cart or database.

Explain your business to the designer – who your customers are and how you reach them now. Go into how you do business and the impression you want the site to project. Don't make them guess.

Mirror Sites

Under "Free Stuff", I already mentioned that there is a lot of free web space available from ISP's and search engines (now known as portals) like Lycos, who owns Tripod (<http://www.tripod.com>).

The disadvantage of these sites is each of your pages will have a pop-up ad when it is opened, or the ad will be built into the page.

But there is a powerful advantage if you have a your own domain site and just put a copy of your home page on as many free sites as possible. Then you'll just need to set the links on the duplicate home pages so they send the visitor to a page on your domain site when clicked.

The hosts of these free community sites have, in effect, created their own little webs. Geocities claims to have over 30 million pages of content, 8% of the entire world wide web.

They have their own search engines, categories to navigate by, and a lot of their members stay inside their webs for most of their online time, hence the name "community sites".

The web page you place on a free sites acts as a mirror site for your real site. It lets people in, but you don't actually copy the whole site to the free space, even though there would probably be room.

For one thing, you'd have ads popping up everywhere. And for another, any little change to your domain site would have to be duplicated in all the mirror ones.

With just a home page, you only have one page to update, and if you follow the advice in "Simplify Your Home Page" on page 2, that won't happen often.

Another advantage of free web space is you can use it for storing and posting personal stuff like family photos, then linking them to your domain site, leaving expensive domain space for business.

Choosing a Web Host

I just changed web hosting services. My old one would break down, loose e-mail, and the technical support went from great two years ago to nonexistent. The last straw came when they tried to charge me twice for the last six months of service.

I also wanted a change. I've been on a Unix server for two and a half years, and I wanted to move to Windows NT because it has features, like the ability to link to a database with relative ease, that I wanted to try out.

But with so many web hosting companies out there, how do you find one in your price range, with the features you want, without spending a week on search engines hunting them all down?

There is a service online called HostFind (<http://www.hostfind.com>). At this site you can select a price range, all the features you are looking for, how long the company has been in business, and the kind of support they offer (are they geared to beginning website owners, for instance). Then click a button, and you get a list of qualified candidates.

I found Arriba Computer solutions (<http://www.arriba.net>), a woman owned company in New Mexico with everything I wanted for \$24.95 a month – \$5 a month less than I was paying the old host.

Here's a special tip if you are going to transfer your domain name to a new host, always keep your InterNIC (the company that registers domain names) account up to date with changes of address.

The way they ask your approval to transfer a domain name is by e-mailing you at the address they have listed. You also have to replay from that address. If you don't have it anymore you can be in for weeks of waiting to have it changed. Fortunately AOL still had my old screen name available.

LAUGHING BEAR NEWSLETTER 112

Free Stuff (continued)

Evaluations” at the site and select WS_FTP LE. The Pro version offers a few more features, but LE does all most people need.

You’ll need an html editor to write the code for your site, and an adequate one is already built into Windows – Notepad, the text editor, is all you really need. If you want to simplify life though, there are many editors available, along with lots of other free software, at <http://www.tucows.com>, <http://www.nonags.com>, and <http://www.freewarehome.com>.

You’ll probably need help learning the basics of HTML code, and there are links to several sites I’ve learned a lot from on Laughing Bear’s Links page. “A Beginner’s Guide to HTML” at <http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/General/Internet/WWW/HTMLPrimer.html> is a good place to start.

In you want to add interactive stuff like guestbooks and forms to your site, you can find free CGI scripts at Matt’s Script Archive (<http://www.worldwidemart.com/scripts>). And if you want a counter on your site, <http://www.fastcounter.com>, lets you do it with no programming at all. Just copy the code and paste it on your page.

The coolest freebie of all comes from Microsoft with their Personal Web Server (PWS). This works only on Windows 95 or NT and requires 100mb of disk space and at least 32mb of RAM (64mb is recommended). What it does is let you set up your own internet or intranet (in-company) web server.

Web developers use it to create and artificial web inside their computer where they can test a website before publishing it on the real internet. I have it installed at work for just that purpose, and it is incredible.

But if you do have an itch to do *everything* yourself, PWS will hook you up to the web.

Announcements

- **Writer’s Guidelines & News** (E.P. Burke, ed.; Independent Publishing Company, P.O. Box 18566, Sarasota, FL 34276; \$19.95/year) is a quarterly magazine for writers and small publishers. It began as *Writer’s Guidelines* in 1988 and was bought and renamed by Independent Publishing Co. in 1997. IPC has another magazine called *Yesterday’s Magazine*, and they’d like to find a partner to co-publish and run it. It is a nostalgia magazine with 25 years in business.

- **New Poets Press** (Diane L. Hallstrom, ed.; P.O. Box 2134, Eugene, OR 97402-0041; <http://www.newpoetspress.com>) is a new publishing company created to promote new and established forms of poetry.

- **Poetry Tonight** (<http://www.poetrytonight.com>) is a new website featuring new and established poets. The site will soon feature readings using RealAudio. Very sophisticated and fun site.

- **Chicken Soup Press** (P.O. Box 164, Circleville, NY 10919; <http://www.chickensouppress.com>) publishes quality children’s books and is branching with an adult novel, a continuation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*.

- **Inkspot** (<http://www.inkspot.com>) is a very useful resource site for writers. Lots of articles and other good stuff on writing and selling what you write.

- **Wise Owl Books** (<http://www.wiseowlbooks.com>) is a self-publishing site from the publisher of *A Simple guide to Self-Publishing* and *A Simple Guide to Marketing Your Book*.

- **PUB123** (Adams-Blake Publishing, Inc.; 8041 Sierra St, Fair Oaks, CA 95628; <http://www.adams-blake.com>) is a new back-office accounting system specifically designed for small to medium sized publishers. Download an evaluation copy at their site.

- **RealNames** (<http://www.realnames.com>) is a new way of naming websites. My RealName is “Laughing Bear”. If your browser is RealName enabled, all you need to do is type in Laughing Bear (no “http://”, no “www”, no “.com”), and you go straight to my site.

Until RealName versions of browsers come out (Internet Explorer 5.0 will be enabled), you need to download an “enabler” program from <http://www.centraal.com> to use RealNames.

The RealName can be any word or phrase, including spaces and symbols (ampersands, etc.), that describes your company, what you do, or your book title. If your domain name is the title of your book, the RealName could be your company name, so people who know the name of your company, but not necessarily your book title, can find you.

Centraal, Inc., is running a “My RealName” promotion that lets you get a FREE RealName for any sites you have on Geocities, Tripod, and any of a dozen other free website communities. To get your free RealName, go to <http://www.centraal.com> and click on the My RealNames icon.

Advertising: *Laughing Bear Newsletter* does not accept classified advertising. However, press releases, review copies, and samples of products can be sent to the editor at the address below. If deemed useful to *LBN* subscribers, they will be mentioned in the newsletter.

Insert ads, in the form of flyers inserted in newsletter mailings are welcome. Send 150 copies of the ad with \$50, and the ad will be mailed with the next issue of the newsletter. There are no deadlines. Contests or any other events or promotions that solicit money in the form of reading or entry fees will not be accepted.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use, or for the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by Laughing Bear Press, provided that US\$.25 per copy (\$1.00 for an entire issue) is paid directly to Laughing Bear Press, P.O. Box 613322, Dallas, TX 75261-3322.