



LAUGHING BEAR 126 NEWSLETTER

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The Surviving Small Press: When Your Web Site Goes Down

Once you get your web site up and visitors start coming, you'll wonder what you ever did without it. The beauty of the internet is that it's accessible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, advertising your books, providing marketing, public relations and customer service, and even taking orders for books.

There is no other medium through which you can be available to your customers (and millions more potential customers), disseminate information, and sell books at any time of day and night. Depending on how much maintenance you do on your site in-house, a web site probably costs considerably less per year than a postal meter.

So what happens when one day a customer tries to access your site and nothing's there but a message saying that the page can't be found? It happens. On top of that, if you have your e-mail tied to your domain name, as I do with editor@laughingbear.com, you may lose your ability to receive e-mail as well. As far as the customer knows, you could be out of business.

Web sites can go down for any number of reasons, and sometimes for good ones. Web servers are just big computers. They need occasional maintenance any, like any other machine, they can break down. Usually the maintenance is scheduled in the wee hours of the

night and takes just a few moments. Occasionally something unexpected comes up during the day, but can still be handled quickly. It may be that one site on the server experiences an unusually high volume of traffic, or a virus strikes, or a site owner uploads a script with bugs that temporarily overloads the system.

The trouble comes when your web site goes down for a significant amount of time during high traffic hours. Storms, power outages, earthquakes and other Acts of God can't be anticipated. Your web host undoubtedly has surge protectors, backup systems, and all kinds of protective measures in place, but nothing can protect the servers from the full force of a major natural disaster except disconnecting them.

Hackers are another danger, but probably not to your site directly. The Friday before the presidential election, Bookzone and all its hosted publishing sites went off line for the day because one site was hacked to keep it from displaying potentially damaging information about a candidate.

The third really nasty thing that can happen to your site comes from your web host itself. In the flurry of dot.com's blooming, merging, and dying, yours could just disappear without a trace. I had one do that a few years ago. They went offline for over a week, leaving hundreds of clients without web sites or delivery of e-mail.

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Be Prepared

There isn't much you can do to prevent your web site going down, but you can be prepared just in case.

1. Make sure there is a problem. If you have modified the site recently, try it out in different browsers. Also, try accessing the site from different machines or different ISP's. The problem may be with your AOL or Earthlink connection, not your site.
2. Keep the phone numbers for your web hosting service and other vendors at hand, and contact them if your site becomes inaccessible or your e-mail or online ordering capability is interrupted. They may be able to give you an estimate of the time required for repair. If it's just a matter of hours, don't worry about it. But if they say it will be a significant amount of time, or worse yet, they have no idea, you should be ready to act.
3. Keep hard copies of all the information your web hosting service gives you. If you have to contact them, you will need at the very least your account number. Try to have the name of a specific person to contact, someone familiar with your account. It would also be helpful to have technical support e-mail and web addresses, a log of technical problems you've had with the site, and your IP address. The IP is the numerical address of your site. That may help the technical support people to identify which server you are on.

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Web Site *(continued)*

An advantage of the web for small companies like us is that we can put up a web site that gives the impression that we are a much bigger and more substantial company than we really are. A lot of web hosts do that, too. In actuality some are very small, underfunded, companies, or even a kitchen table operations with a couple servers set up in a spare bedroom.

I suspect that the web host I have now is essentially a one-woman operation, and she does a wonderful job. I get personal service at a good price and she is very much on top of the technology. When there has been a break in service, which has been very seldom, it's been restored quickly and she provided good communication. A couple times, she has even moved my site to a different server to avoid downtime.

There's nothing wrong with small enterprises. In fact, more power to them. Microsoft started out in a garage. But for each of those that grows into a Yahoo or Apple, a hundred flame out suddenly and seldom have the courtesy to tell their customers they are going out of business.

On the bright side, most times your web site goes down unexpectedly it will be back up in minutes. And you'll probably only experience a real catastrophe once in a blue moon, but when it does happen you'll need to be prepared.

The first thing to do is make sure there really is a problem with the web site. Before you panic, try going to other web sites. If you can't reach any others, your internet connection is probably down, not your web server. In that case your site is probably up and running just fine – you may not be able to get to it, but your customers can.

If you have recently updated the site, try accessing it with different browsers. You may have inad-

vertently put up a page with some coding that Netscape may not be able to read, but Internet Explorer can, or vice versa.

If you determine the problem is with your web server, call your web host and report the incident. If the web server is down, they may not be able to receive e-mail. More likely than not, they are aware of the problem and working to fix it. But there is the possibility that they aren't aware of it yet.

The web host should be able to give you some estimate of the time your site will be down. If it is expected to take a couple hours to repair the server, there isn't much you can do. If, however, there is a serious situation and the site could be down for days, you need to put your contingency plan into action.

You should always have at least one "mirror" site up on some other service. There are plenty of free hosts, like Geocities (<http://www.geocities.com>) and Tripod (<http://www.tripod.com>) who will let you put up a site for free. A mirror site is usually a single page that looks just like your home page. All the links on the page send visitors back to your primary site.

In the event of a failure of your site, however, you should be prepared to change those links to connect to pages on the mirror site. Because of the limitations of free sites, you may not have all the functionality of your regular site – forms, order taking, chat rooms, message boards, etc. – but you can at least put up a catalog of your books with a printable mail order form and an alternate e-mail address.

To let your customers know about the problem you are having, and send them to your mirror site, you can use the e-mail address list you have been keeping of all your customers.

You do collect e-mail addresses don't you? Your e-mail

lists are potentially as valuable to your business as your direct mailing lists.

Put together a short message and send it to everyone on the list. Assure them your regular site will be up again soon, and invite them to visit the mirror site. Maybe even take advantage of the situation and offer books at a discount if ordered from the mail-in form.

Once your site is back up, it is a good idea to send a press release by e-mail and regular mail to your media lists letting them know you had a problem and it has been fixed. This would also be a good excuse to mention your latest book. Any mentions you receive will drive more traffic to your site and turn the potentially damaging downtime into an opportunity to get some free publicity.

If your web site is hosted by your internet service provider (ISP), you may want to have a backup ISP as well as a mirror site. If your only connection to the internet is America Online and your site is on AOL as well, then if AOL goes down you'll be out of business until repairs are made.

I have a separate, older computer set up with minimal AOL and Earthlink accounts (just \$4.95 and \$6.95 a month) so that when my cable ISP goes down I can always get online. I have both of those because odds are I'll have trouble getting onto one or the other, but I should be able to get on at least one of them whenever I need to.

You can also get free ISP's from Barnes & Noble (<http://www.bn.com>), NetZero (<http://www.netzero.com>), and numerous other sources.

The most important thing to remember if your web site goes down is that by keeping your head, having a contingency plan and using it, and keeping in touch with your web host, you can turn a potential disaster to your favor. ●

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Be Prepared *(continued)*

4. Back up your entire web site regularly. If something happens to the host's server and your files are lost or damaged, you can't assume they have an up to date backup copy of your site. Save your backup copy off your computer on floppy disks, a zip disk, or a CD.
5. Have a mirror site up and ready. If your primary site goes down, your host may be able to temporarily redirect traffic to the mirror site. If not, you can use your e-mail list to notify customers and media to use the alternate site. When your service comes back up, you can put a notice on the mirror site.
6. Collect and maintain an e-mail list. It should include everyone you regularly do business with including visitors to the site, customers, media, distributors, booksellers, publishing groups you belong to, other sites linked to yours – anyone who visits the site or steers visitors toward it.
7. Keep a media list. (You should do this whether you have a web site or not.) When your web site comes back up, send out press releases explaining what happened and assuring that the problem has been solved. This is also an opportunity to include a mention of your latest book. Publicity is the cheapest form of advertising, and any excuse to get some free attention is worth the effort.
8. Have a second ISP account so you will still have internet and e-mail capability if your primary one is not accessible. This is important especially if you are using your ISP to host your site. You can also use the second ISP to host your mirror site. I have three accounts because it seems when I need to get online most, my cable connection will go down or the phone lines will be busy. With free accounts available, there's no excuse to be cut off from the internet.

9. Check out other web hosts before you need one. If the one you are using has chronic down time, you will probably want to sign up with a new one, and it would be best to already have the research done when that need arises.
10. If you have your own server, consider having a second for backup. It should not be connected to the first server in any way, so the first can't take the second down with it. If you don't have the technical skills to handle all kinds of crashes, make sure you have someone you can call to make repairs and get you back online any time, day or night.
11. If staying online is vital to your business, you may want to sign up with a service that will monitor your site and notify you of down time. Netwhistle (<http://www.netwhistle.com>) will monitor your site, e-mail server, and other functions for free and send you an e-mail within an hour of it going down. For a fee they will notify you in as little as five minutes.
12. Be sure you have receipts for fees you pay for web hosting, e-commerce, and other services. The number one reason web sites go down is because they are behind in payments. Don't assume that just because you sent in a check, the people on the other end have credited your account. They are usually better at running computers than accounting. I've run into this problem and left one host because they could never get their books straight. So get a receipt.
13. Don't panic. If you have no control over the situation, do what you can from your end and don't pester the professional.
14. Keep perspective. Even the biggest internet sites go down from time to time. The internet is still young. It's a miracle it works as well as it does. ●

Laughing Bear's 25th Anniversary

January 1, 2001 Laughing Bear will be 25 years old. Who'd have thought? Especially after the first few years.

To commemorate the silver anniversary I am redoubling my efforts to update the web site with all the back issues and to stock the online book store with all the books I've reviewed over the years that are still available.

That's going to take some time. The old articles, prior to computerization, have to be re-typed, but there are already several new additions to the site.

I've put up the first two newsletters, from 1976 and 1977, with all the text and scans so you can see what they looked like. There isn't a lot of useful information in them, but it is sort of fun to see what the concerns were back then.

Some of the other early issues, yet to be put up on the site, have an interview with Robert Bly, a look at literary politics of the time, and other surprises.

Other articles have been included, like my 1984 piece in *Fiction Writers Market* on the nature of small press and ones I wrote for *Small Press* magazine. You'll probably be struck by how naïve some of the information seems, which just goes to show how far small press has come in the last 25 years.

When I started out, small press was still a "movement". It was made up primarily of literary publishers, many still publishing on mimeographs and other old fashioned methods. You could crank out a couple hundred copies of a poetry book and sell it at local book fairs, place them in bookstores on contingency, and sell them at poetry readings at a local bookstore or coffee shop.

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25th Anniversary (continued)

No one imagined we would be able to typeset and lay out our books on computers at home.

A few of the geekier publishers were learning phototypesetting and sneaking computer time at the local college, but for the most part it was still the age of press-on letters and manual paste-up.

And no one imagined anything like the internet, which has allowed small presses to market and sell their books directly to the whole world. No to mention eBooks, or even audio books, CD-ROM's, and electronic newsletters. Or scanners, laptop computers, cell phones and Palm Pilots, or any number of other gadgets that make life easier and more complicated at the same time.

Going through the articles, you'll also see that a lot hasn't changed. It is still a struggle to get books distributed, there are still disreputable printers and others to watch out for, and there still isn't enough time to do everything that has to get done.

As you browse the newsletters from the 1990's you'll be on more familiar ground, but the perspective is still sometimes quaint. For an article for *Small Press* in 1995, at the very beginning of the world wide web, I interviewed editors from some of the newspapers and magazines that were just building presence online. They told me they had no idea what the internet would eventually be used for, but they wanted to be part of it.

The expectation was that some of their subscribers would use the internet, but the majority would probably be computer geeks. If anything would sell online, it'd be limited to computer books and other computer-related products.

Have fun reading the old articles and newsletters as they are posted over the months. We've all come a long way. ●

Announcements

● **Upper Peninsula Publishers and Authors** (Sue Robishaw, pres.; Rt 1 Box 52, Cooks, MI 49817; <http://www.manytracks.com/uppaa>; \$20/dues) is an organization supporting and encouraging networking and idea exchange among publishers and authors in the Upper Peninsula region of Michigan, and promoting books published and authored by UPPAA members.

● **Shoreline Publishing Consultants** (Paul Obis, pres.; PO Box 5650, River Forest, IL 60305) is a new consulting firm specializing in magazine publishing.

● **Chiron Review** (Michael Hathaway, ed.; 702 N. Prairie, St. John, KS 67576-1516; <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Nook/1748>; \$4/issue) is a tabloid literary magazine that has been publishing since 1982. They also has a self-publishing program under the imprint of Kindred Spirit Press.

● **Copy Editor** (Mary Beth Protomastro, ed.; subscriptions: PO Box 500, Missouri City, TX 77459; <http://www.copyeditor.com>; \$69/6 issues) is a newsletter of "language news for the publishing profession". Useful and entertaining newsletter for anyone concerned with the latest meanings of words and using them properly.

● **Folio:Midwest** (registration: Seminar Registration, Folio:Midwest, 11 River Bend Dr. S., PO Box 4313, Stamford, CT 06907-0313; 800-927-5007 or 203-358-3751; fax 203-358-5818) is an important conference for the magazine industry in the Midwest region. There will be over 80 seminars in 14 educational tracks.

● **Alain de Gourcuff** (<http://www.alaindegourcuff.com>) is a French publisher specializing in arts, decorative arts, and picture publishing. Currently in French, an English version of the site is coming. This is an exceptionally beautiful and well-designed web site.

● **McHugh Memo on Publishing Management** (John B. McHugh, PO Box 170665, Milwaukee, WI 53217-8056; j.b.mchugh@worldnet.att.net) is a newsletter put out periodically by John McHugh. The *Memo* is a collection of McHugh's observations, opinions, and reflections gleaned from his work as a publishing consultant. The Winter 2000-01 issue has some very useful information on e-publishing, non-profit publishing, and rights management. Send an SASE for a copy. You can also request a free copy of *McHugh's on Electronic Publishing: A Checklist of 20 Questions to Ask about Electronic Publishing* (Item PD-11).

● **Publishers Association of the West** (formerly known as the Rocky Mountain Book Publishers Association; Alan Bernhard, exec. dir.; PO Box 3759, Boulder, CO 80307; PubWest1@aol.com) has acquired rights to the Huenefeld Publishing Survey. Since 1979 the Huenefeld survey, which tracks small and mid-sized publishers (annual sales below \$50 mil.), has been published by *The Huenefeld Report*. *The Huenefeld Report* will cease publication after 2001.

Advertising: Insert ads, in the form of flyers to be inserted in newsletter mailings, are welcome. Send 200 copies of the ad with \$50, and the ad will be mailed with the next issue of the newsletter. Contest and other events or promotions that solicit money in the form of reading or other entry fees will not be accepted.

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