



# LAUGHING BEAR NEWSLETTER 102

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## The Surviving Small Press: Don't be Afraid of the Web

According to a survey by Brenner Information Group and Publishers Marketing Association, 66% of small press publishers asked have an e-mail address and 42% have their own web site. (Of PMA's 2,960 members overall, 45% have e-mail and 16% have a web site. The higher percentage in the survey group reflects a concentration of more active and progressive publishers.)

Those statistics show a couple things. E-mail is becoming very common in small press, as it is in businesses overall, and a lot of small publishers are not taking advantage of the web space that comes as a part of most internet service provider (ISP) accounts.

I think that a lot of the disparity between the number of people with access to the internet and those using it to it's full potential has to do with three big misconceptions about the world wide web: It's expensive, difficult, and not secure.

Misconception #1, a web site is expensive. If you believe the consultants advertising their web design services, yes, it can be very expensive. But if you are willing to design your own web site, and you have an ISP account

(like America Online or any provider that allows you to put up a web site), that's the only expense.

HTML editors, the software used to build web pages, are available free online, either from your ISP or from several sites on the internet. A more sophisticated program, like Hot Dog, will usually cost under \$100. And both Microsoft Word and Word Perfect are capable of creating professional-looking web pages.

There are links from my web site to sources for free software and all the instructions you need to design and publish web pages yourself.

If you don't have the time or inclination to do the work yourself, consider hiring a high school or college student before turning to a consultant. This is remarkably simple technology to use, and the consultants are charging an arm and a leg for their "expertise".

The world wide web is only a few years old, and constantly changing. There are no experts. There are people who may do nothing but design web sites, but they are only half a step ahead of everyone else. And I have yet to see a site worth what they charge to design one, which can easily get into the thousands of dollars.

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## Marketing on the World Wide Web

Here is a checklist of items to keep in mind to make your web site useful for your press and your visitors.

1. Put your URL (web address) on all printed stationery, ads, and promotional materials. And don't leave off the `http://` in your URL. While, experienced surfers know that prefix is always needed to call up a web site, but I've had numerous people say they couldn't find my site, and it's always because they left out the `http://`.
2. Be prepared for response. Have any promotional packets offered on your site ready to send out as soon as you receive a request. People requesting information online expect a quick response.
3. Put your mailing address, phone, and fax on your home page. Visitors access your site from coffeehouses, libraries, work, and friends' computers. They may not always be able to place orders or download information online.
4. Include your URL in your e-mail "signature". Use the signature as your business card online.
5. A domain name (like *www.LaughingBear.com*) will make your web site easier to find and remember.

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## Don't Be Afraid

(continued)

Misconception #2, designing and publishing a web site is difficult. Yes, it can be. But it doesn't have to, I have a friend who had a \$99 per year ISP account. For over a year he used it just for e-mail and surfing the web. It came with a megabyte of web space, not much, but enough for a simple page with a few graphics, and one day he decided to publish a web page just for his internet friends. In one morning he designed the page using MS Word and published it.

Then he began to see all the possible uses he could have for the site. He ordered another 10 megabytes of space to add of photos and clips of songs from a band he had been in and a special page devoted to the submarine he served on.

It's intimidating to see the rows of books on web sites in a bookstore. It's even worse when you see the prices. Web publishing must be impossibly difficult for there to be dozens of 600 page books on how to do it.

And then try reading the books. I was laid up recovering from an emergency hemorrhoid operation (OUCH!) from mid-October to early November. Perfect time to hit the pile of internet books I'd accumulated, intending to get to them "sometime".

Every time I'd get to the point in a book where I thought I understood what was happening, the author would come up with something they assumed I knew, like "To make your program work, you need to set permissions at the command line." What #@!% command line?

One book put the whole commercial computer how-to genre in perspective. In the preface the authors thanked their publisher for giving them nine months to write the book since the industry standard is two months.

I did find a couple good books. *CGI/Perl Cookbook* by Craig Patchett and Matthew Wright (John Wiley & Sons, \$44.99) includes ready-to-use programs on CD-ROM to add interactive forms, e-mail broadcasting, shopping carts, counters, and other programs. It is not a book for beginners (though it says it is), but prerequisites are kept to a minimum.

The other book is a real gem. At just \$17.95, *HTML for the World Wide Web* by Elizabeth Castro (2nd ed., Peachpit Press) is the least expensive and most useful book I've found, and really may be the only book you need to create professional looking web pages. It does an excellent job showing how to use tables, frames, and other design elements, and it teaches by example. Rather than explaining how HTML code works, she shows you.

Technical Note: HTML is the computer language used to create and format web pages. They always have the file extension \*.htm or \*.html. An HTML page by itself can display text and graphics. To make the web page interactive (i.e. to let visitors fill out forms and buy stuff) takes CGI scripts. The HTML page calls up the CGI script when the page is opened by a visitor.

Misconception #3, the internet is insecure. This is probably the toughest misconception to dispel. While files can be locked and

assigned "permissions" so they can't be tampered with, there is always the possibility a hacker can get in. But you have to ask a humbling question: Out of all the millions of sites on the web, why would a hacker be interested in mine?

I've gotten paranoid reactions even from people in our wedding pictures at the Laughing Bear site. One couple demanded I not use their last name. Others joked (I hope) about suing me for using their likenesses. They think millions of people around the world are going to be looking at them, when in fact only 100 or so a month drop in.

Questions of copyrighting web sites and the material on them often comes up on the PMA e-mail list. A web site is a published work, and should be protected, however the whole thing is so new the laws haven't been put to the test. People do copy things without giving credit, but the same can happen with books. You've got to balance the risk against the rewards.

I can see a major change coming in the world wide web. People I work with and my relatives are beginning to use the internet to hunt down long lost family members, share photos, and keep in touch with their families. One absolute computer-hater I work with went spent \$4000 for a state of the art computer set up to teleconference with his baby granddaughter.

When the majority of people using the internet were teenage computer nerds, the internet was a fad. When grandmothers started setting up web sites for the family album, that was the beginning of an institution.

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## Marketing on the Web (continued)

6. If you are set up to take credit cards, use the site to sell books. Web hosts offering this capability charge more, but they are secure, and people are getting used to shopping online. For small press books especially, I'd rather take the chance and order one online than wait a month for a bookstore to special order the title.
7. Have alternate ways for visitors to order books from you. Some people don't have credit cards. Include a form they can print out for mail orders. Link your site to sites of bookstores that carry your books.
8. Use your site as an extension of your books. For books on timely or changing subjects, you can publish updates online to keep the information fresh between editions. Or for children's books, let kids download pictures of the characters. The possibilities are limitless.
9. Reinvent your site periodically. Change the design. Add pages. Drop pages. Keep it fresh. If nothing else, it'll keep you from getting bored with it.
10. Always ask for visitor feedback. This makes your site interactive. It also builds goodwill and helps you build a more useful site.
11. Keep the graphics on your home page to a minimum. If the first page takes a long time to load, surfers will cut off before it's finished and go elsewhere.
12. Remember, the internet is interactive. Answer your e-mail and respond to requests. When you publish a web site, you're extending a hand. Don't pull back when someone takes it.

## Announcements

- **On Q** (toll free 888-972-1907; <http://www.wsites.com/OnQ>) is a new company for promotion of self-published books and their authors. They have a bookstore in Lakeside, AZ, and will be opening stores in Tucson, Phoenix, and Denver in 1998. Ten more stores are expected to open by the year 2000. They also publish a free magazine, *The Writer's Showcase*. In a really unusual move, On Q is incorporating and will be issuing stock at \$1.00 per share in the near future.
- **Poets and Writers Magazine** has put their catalog of books and gifts for writers online at <http://catalog.pw.org>. At their regular web site (<http://www.pw.org>), they've added over 40 articles from their original magazine, *Coda*, dating back to 1981. In the near future they will be posting current articles from *Poets & Writers* as well.
- **Rodeo Town** by John Bennett (Rodeo Town, PO Box 1634, Ellensburg, WA 98926), a collection of interview-based stories about a wide spectrum Ellensburg residents is available at 25% off for Christmas. John was editor of *Vagabond*, one of the pioneer literary magazines of small press in the 1960's.
- **Poets on the line** (Linda Lerner, ed.; PO Box 020292, Brooklyn, NY 11202-0007; <http://www.echonyc.com/~poets>) has published an online double issue of work by Vietnam veterans/poets. The electronic literary magazine has recently received two grants: the 1997 Puffin Foundation Grant and the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation Grant.

- **SPAWN** (Mary Embree, exec. dir.; Small Publishers, Artists & Writers Network, PO Box 2653, Ventura, CA 93002-2653), which promotes exchange of ideas and information between authors, self-publishers, and artists, has a web site at <http://www.spawn.org>.
- **The Children's Book Council** has a web site at <http://www.cbcbooks.org>.
- **You're On The Air** (Marketing Directions, Inc., PO Box 715, Avon CT 06001-0715; 800-562-4357; <http://www.marketingdirections.com>), is a 90 minute videotape featuring interviews with producers of top talk and news shows to help you get on shows and to use the opportunity to effectively publicize your books. The tape and it's companion 100 page guide are available for \$89.95. Also includes the book, *Perpetual Promotion*, which has a list of shows, how to prepare a press kit, and other resources.
- **2nd Mile Productions** (Darla Sims; PO Box 12280, Mill Creek, WA 98082-0280; [DarlaS@msn.com](mailto:DarlaS@msn.com)) offers affordable publicity services for small publishers.

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