



Roadmap Series

Issue 5

Planning Your Site

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Planning Your Site

Produced by Joseph Lowery

Planning in Web design, just as in any other design process, is essential. Not only does careful planning cut your development time considerably, but it makes it far easier to achieve a uniform look and feel for your Web site-making it friendlier and easier to use. This section briefly covers some of the basics of Web site design: what to focus on, what options to consider, and what pitfalls to avoid. If you are an established Web site developer who has covered this ground before, feel free to skip this section.

Primary Considerations

Even before you choose the overarching structure for your site (as discussed in the following sections), you need to address the all-important issues of message, audience, and budget.

Deciding What You Want to Say

If I had to pick one overriding concern for Web site design, it would be to answer the following question: What are you trying to say? The clearer you are about your message, the more focused your Web site will be. To this end, I find it useful to try to state the purpose of the Web site in one sentence. "Creating the coolest Web site on the planet" doesn't count. Although it could be regarded as a goal, it's too open-ended to be useful. Here are some examples of clearly stated Web site concepts:

1. To provide the best small-business resource center focused on Adobe software
2. To chronicle the world's first voyage around the world by hot air balloon
3. To advertise music lessons offered by a collective of keyboard teachers in New York City

Targeting Your Audience

Right behind a site's concept-some would say neck-and-neck with it-is the site's audience. Who are you trying to reach? Quite often, a site's style is heavily influenced by a clear vision of the site's intended audience. Take, for example, Adobe's monthly Edge newsletter (<http://www.adobe.com/newsletters/edge/>). The Edge is an excellent example of a site that is perfectly pitched toward its target; in this case, the intended audience is composed of professional developers and designers. Hence, the site is snazzy but informative, and it is filled with exciting examples of cutting-edge programming techniques.

In contrast, a site that is devoted to mass-market e-commerce must work with a very different group in mind: shoppers. Everyone at one time or another falls into this category, so I am really talking about a state of mind, rather than a profession. Many shopping sites use a very straightforward page design that is easily maneuverable, comforting in its repetition-where visitors can quickly find what they are looking for and, with as few impediments as possible, buy it.

Determining Your Resources

Unfortunately, Web sites aren't created in a vacuum. Virtually all development work happens under real-world constraints of some kind. A professional Web designer is accustomed to working within a budget. In fact, the term budget can apply to several concepts.

First, you have a monetary budget-how much is the client willing to spend? This translates into a combination of development time (for designers and programmers), materials (custom graphics, stock photos, and the like), and ongoing maintenance. You can build a large site with many pages that pulls dynamically from an internal database and requires very little hands-on upkeep. Alternatively, you can

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construct a small, graphics-intensive site that must be updated by hand weekly. It's entirely possible that both sites end up costing the same.

Second, budget also applies to the amount of time you can afford to spend on any given project. The professional Web designer is quick to realize that time is an essential commodity. The resources needed when undertaking a showcase for yourself when you have no deadline are very different from those needed when you sign a contract on June 30 for a job that must be ready to launch on July 4.

The third real-world budgetary item to consider is bandwidth. The Web, with faster Internet connections and an improved infrastructure, is slowly shedding its image as the World Wide Wait. However, many users are still stuck with slow modems, which means that Webmasters must keep a steady eye on a page's weight-how long it takes to download under the most typical modem rates. Of course, you can always decide to include that animated video masterpiece that takes 8 minutes to download on a cable modem - you just can't expect everyone to wait to see it.

In conclusion, when you are trying to define your Web page, filter it through these three ideas: message, audience, and the various faces of the budget. The time spent visualizing your Web pages in these terms is time decidedly well spent.

Design Options

Many Web professionals borrow a technique used extensively in developing other mass-marketing forms: storyboarding. Storyboarding for the Web entails first diagramming the various pages in your site - much like the more traditional storyboarding in videos or filmmaking - and then detailing connections for the separate pages to form the overall site. How you connect the disparate pages determines how your visitors navigate the completed Web site.

The following sections describe the basic navigational models. The Web designer should be familiar with them all because each one serves a different purpose, and they can be mixed and matched as needed.

The Linear Approach

Prior to the World Wide Web, most media formats were linear - that is, one image or page followed another in an unalterable sequence. In contrast, the Web and its interactive personality enable the user to jump from topic to topic. Nevertheless, you can still use a linear approach to a Web site and have one page appear after another, like a multimedia book.

The linear navigational model, shown in Figure 1, works well for computer-based training applications and other expository scenarios in which you want to tightly control the viewer's experience. Some Web designers use a linear-style entrance or exit from their main site, connected to a multilevel navigational model. With Dynamic HTML, you can achieve the effects of moving through several pages in a single page through layering.



Figure 1: The linear navigational model takes the visitor through a series of Web pages.

Caution Keep in mind that Web search engines can index the content of every page of your site separately. Each page of your site - not just your home page - becomes a potential independent entrance point. Therefore, make sure every page includes navigation buttons back to your home page, especially if you use a linear navigational model.

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The Hierarchical Model

Hierarchical navigational models emerge from top-down designs. These start with one key concept that becomes your home page. From the home page, users branch off to several main pages; if needed, these main pages can, in turn, branch off into many separate pages. Everything flows from the home page; it's very much like a company's organizational chart, with the CEO on top followed by the various company divisions.

The hierarchical Web site, shown in Figure 2, is best known for maintaining a visitor's sense of place in the site. Some Web designers even depict the treelike structure as a navigation device and include each branch traveled as a link. This enables visitors to quickly retrace their steps, branch by branch, to investigate different routes.

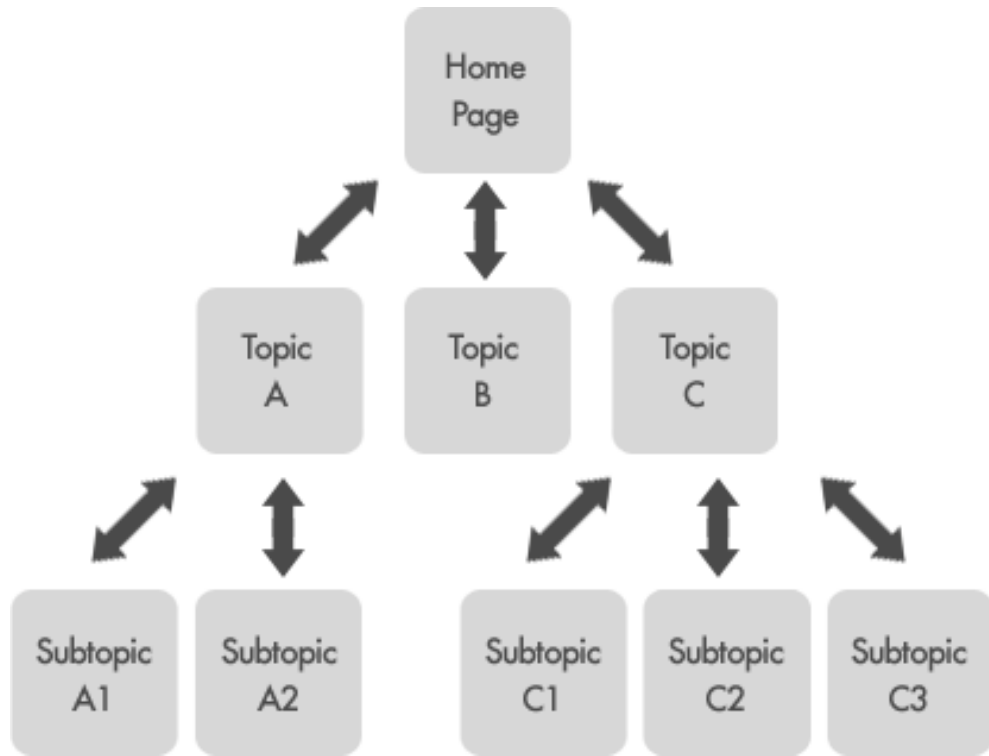


Figure 2: A hierarchical Web layout enables the main topics to branch into their own subtopics.

The Spoke-and-Hub Model

Given the Web's flexible hyperlink structure, the spoke-and-hub navigational model works extremely well. The hub is, naturally, the site's home page. The spokes projecting from the center connect to all the major pages in the site. This layout permits quick access to any key page in just two jumps - one jump always leading back to the hub/home page and one jump leading in a new direction. Figure 3 shows a typical spoke-and-hub structure for a Web site.

The main drawback to the spoke-and-hub structure is the required return to the home page. Many Web designers get around this limitation by using frames to make the first jump off the hub into a Web page; this way, the navigation bars are always available. This design also enables visitors using nonframes-capable browsers to take a different path.

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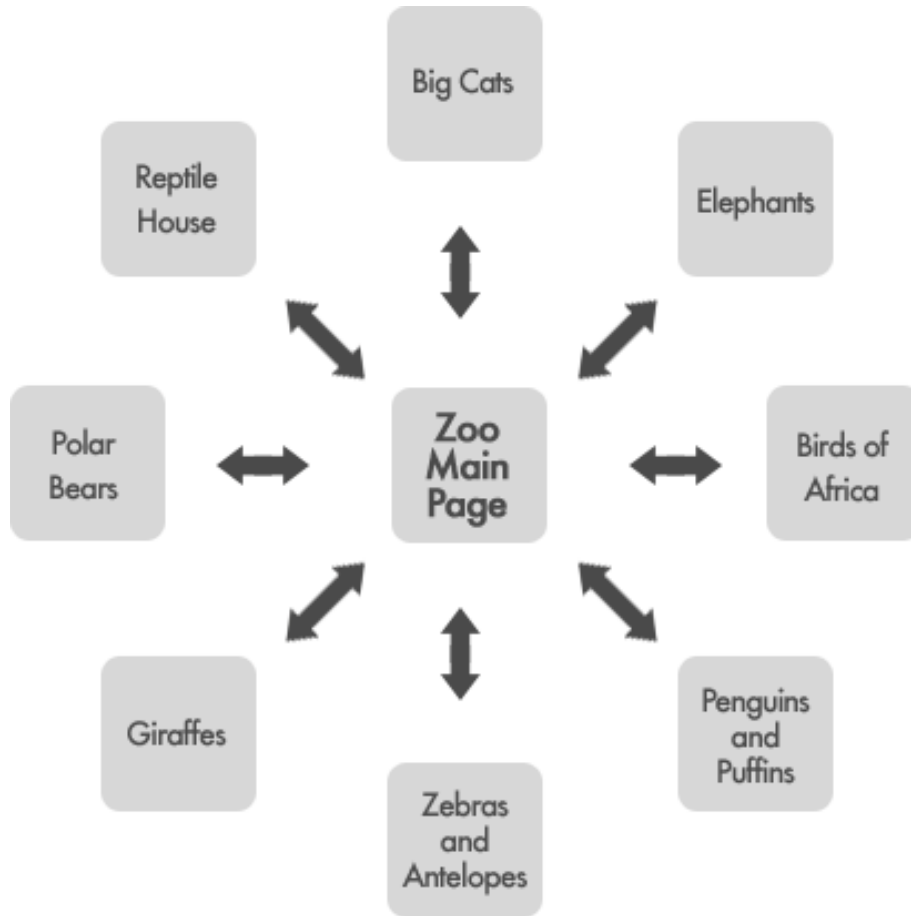


Figure 3: This storyboard diagram for a zoo's Web site shows how a spoke-and-hub navigational model might work.





The Full Web Design

The seemingly least structured approach for a Web site - full Web - takes the most advantage of the Web's hyperlink capabilities. This design enables virtually every page to connect to every other page. The full Web design, shown in Figure 4, works well for sites that are explorations of a particular topic because the approach encourages visitors to experience the site according to their own needs, not based on the notions of any one designer. The danger in using full Web for your site design is that a visitor can literally get lost. As an escape hatch, many Web designers include a link to a clickable site map, especially for large-scale sites using this design.

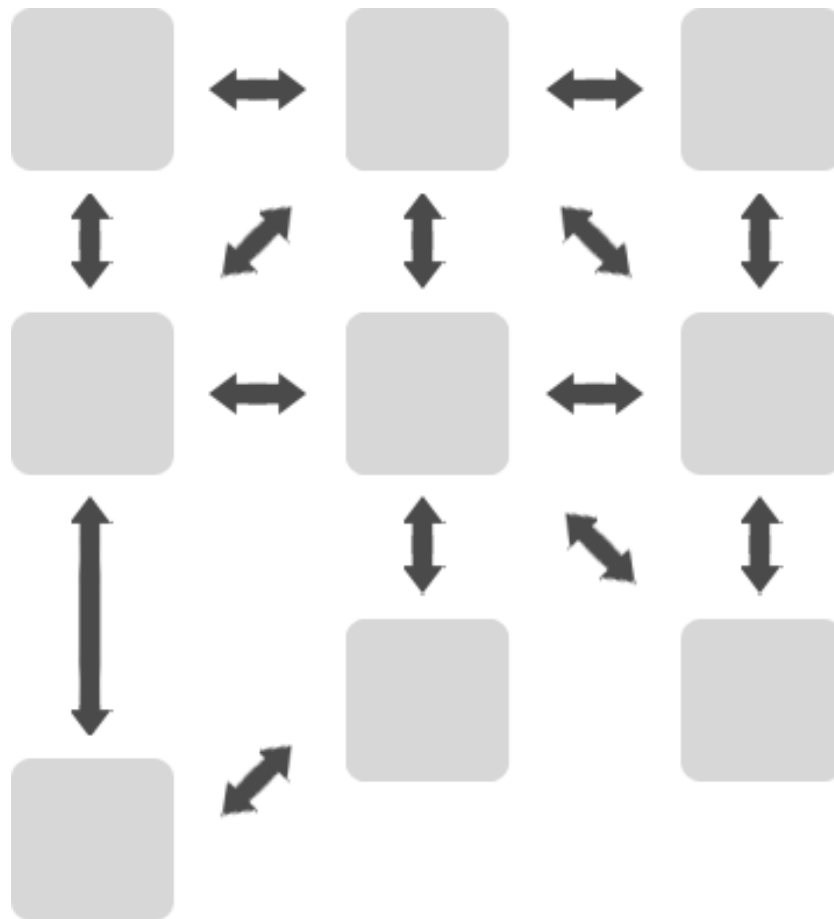


Figure 4: In a full Web design, each page can have multiple links to other pages.

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