

## How is my site coded – and why should I care?

The code that makes a site work may be invisible to the site owner and the end user, but it has a direct effect on the site's success and maintenance. The way the site is built will determine:

How fast the pages load.

Whether all users can use or even see all elements in the site.

How time-consuming/expensive it will be to make future changes to the site.

How much of the site's text will be readable by spiders, and will show up in search engine results.

How consistent the pages look on various browsers and operating systems.

Boiled down to the basics, there are a few different ways to build a site. Each has its pros and cons, which you should be aware of as you're hiring a web developer.

### Sites built with html and tables.

Pros: Easy to build; works well for sites of a few pages (five or less), or for sites that won't require frequent or substantial changes in the future. Fairly good cross-browser consistency.

Cons: Larger sites or complex page design can create code-bloated pages that are a nightmare to edit, and may load slowly. For instance, if you change your header, the same repetitive change will have to be made on every page. This costs in both dollars and potential mistakes.

### Sites built with html templates.

Pros: Easy to build multi-page sites with consistent design. An economical approach if you don't mind an off-the-shelf look.

Cons: Depending on how the templates themselves were built, templates may have the same cons as tables-based sites. (Or not.) If you want a unique look to your site or need highly customized features, templates would probably not be the way to go.

### Sites built with Flash.

Pros: Provides capability for motion, sound, multimedia. Flash used in limited areas of a site, for appropriate reasons, can enhance the user experience.

Cons: As cool as it is, Flash also presents several problems worth noting.

Users without the most current version of Flash won't be able to view what's contained in the Flash section at all.

*cont'd.*

## How is my site coded – and why should I care? *cont'd.*

Depending on the size of the Flash file, loading may take so long for users on dial-up that they give up on the page and go elsewhere.

Some Flash capabilities, such as transparency, are not supported in older versions of common browsers. This causes problems in how the Flash content works with non-Flash content.

Flash is not ADA compliant. Vision-impaired users depend on text readers. Only the most recent version of Flash (MX 2004) offers the capability of readable text, but it's not automatic. A designer needs to know what steps to take to ensure the text is accessible.

Sites built entirely in Flash (as opposed to sites that have Flash content within their pages) have only one URL. [link to glosary] This makes it impossible for anyone to link to a specific page in your site other than your homepage.

### Sites built with html and CSS (a.k.a. web standards).

Pros: In a site built this way, html handles the content and CSS handles the styling. This provides several benefits. Content is more easily edited. Site-wide design is easy to update, sometimes as simple as the change of a few lines of CSS code. (A straight-html site requires changing the code on every single page.) Also, CSS done well can create lean, quick-loading pages. CSS expert Eric Meyer says, "Experience has shown that conversion from table-based design to standards-oriented design can reduce page weight by 50% or more. In addition, this conversion improves accessibility and makes maintenance easier."

Cons: CSS takes more time to create up front, so the creation of the initial site may be more expensive. (But CSS makes up for this in cheaper maintenance, because future edits are quicker.) Also, it does have some cross-browser compatibility issues. For example, type may be positioned a little differently in one browser versus another.

### Sites built using a content management system.

A content management system—or CMS—is software that makes editing and updating a website much easier, by providing a user-friendly interface that requires little or no knowledge of html or any other code. A good CMS employs web standards to make sure sites work well in all the main browsers. Some of the more popular CMS's are WordPress, MovableType, TextPattern, and ExpressionEngine. This site was built using ExpressionEngine, and we've found it to be powerful, flexible, and easy to use.

Pros: Makes maintenance and updating quicker and easier, whether you're doing it in-house or hiring it out. Changes don't require special coding skills.

Cons: May be more a little more expensive on the front end. (But will save you money on outsourcing maintenance.)

*cont'd.*

## How is my site coded – and why should I care? *cont'd.*

So before you begin creating a web site, think through:

Who your users are and what they want out of your site. Are they 20-something gamers who expect Flash, or are they 60+ retirees who are annoyed by motion and need big type?

What their usage limitations may be. Bandwidth, browser versions, etc.

What the future needs of your site will likely be, in growth and change.

If you're hiring a web developer, be sure you discuss these issues, and ask what method or combination of methods he or she uses.

Copyright 2006-2009, Jana Snyder.

This article may be quoted in part or whole if you credit the source and include a link to [www.janasnyder.com](http://www.janasnyder.com).

