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A Tangled Web

Column: The Bleeding Edge

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There's a war of sorts raging over which platform will dominate the next generation of websites.

One contender is certainly the original Hypertext Markup Language, or HTML. But there is also new competition from Ajax, an advanced version of JavaScript. There is Adobe Systems' Flash, which began as a format for multimedia and grew from there. And there is Microsoft SilverLight, a newcomer that the folks in Redmond would like to see become a major force.

Which of these platforms will dominate is a question of vital importance to web designers. But the more critical question for most accounting firms is what program will give them an easy way to create and update websites for the firm or for clients or simply to have some working knowledge of how to get documents online. A lack of knowledge in this area could brand an accountant as a 21st Century Luddite — the kind of non-technical person stuck using an AOL mailbox as that online service slowly dies.

There was a time when literally dozens of HTML editors were available for little or nothing. Simply drop in the pictures and text, upload the file to a website using an FTP (File Transfer Protocol) application, and you were done. But then the market for these programs largely died, FTP became a little-used

way of sending files, and life got complicated for small businesses. What then to do?

The answer is and should be Microsoft Expression Web. The successor to the popular FrontPage website management program, Expression Web 2.0 has improved vastly since the first, less-effective versions. It offers simplified navigation, strong tools and nearly painless website updating. But Expression Web also has a drawback in that it has been designed for use by high-end web designers. It competes well with design packages such as DreamWeaver, but the learning curve can be steep and training tools are, at least to date, not up to the task.

For firms that can't afford a full-time web manager, this is a major problem. It's a problem that will be solved eventually, when Microsoft has time to develop better training or even a "light" version of Expression Web for the novice. In the meantime, there are three work-arounds that may help bridge the gap.

Use Microsoft FrontPage 2003

Though the FrontPage line of products is retired, the last version of it is reasonably priced and very serviceable. And it's easy to learn and use, thanks to years of development work and a host of third-party tutorials if you need one. The major drawback is that in order to use the built-in website updating feature, the web hosting service must have "FrontPage extensions" installed. Fortunately, nearly every ISP has done this, and it should not be a hurdle. Eventually, these extensions will die out, but for today they are not a major obstacle.

Use Microsoft Publisher

For about the same price, Microsoft offers its desktop publishing program, which includes website design templates and automatic site updating.

The program is nothing to write home about. It's kludgy, and has limited templates with awkward use of graphic layers that make this an easy program to use but one with fewer options than I like for artistic flair and panache.

Nonetheless, for offices already using Microsoft Office or those that want to get up and running in a jiffy, this is a good place to start.

Use Microsoft Word

Sure, Word can create HTML pages ... though with tons of caveats involved. Uploading the pages will need to be done with the FTP software built into your operating system, and this can sometimes be painful and difficult. The pages themselves will be bloated with Word code. And it's not easy to string pages together in an elegant fashion, as you can with any of the more advanced programs. But it will work in a pinch.

You'll note that all of these solutions come from Microsoft. That's not because I have any inherent bias toward them. I actually really like **Adobe DreamWeaver** as a higher-end solution and have played with other HTML editing and design programs that offer features I like very much.

But for the typical small business or accounting firm, it's best to go with what is familiar. And though earlier in the year I panned Microsoft Expression Web as a reasonable solution, a long search for alternatives has not yielded much of value. So Expression Web it is.

A firm might also want to consider one of the many website builders made especially for accountants. A review of such products is available at www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/1833.

REALITY CHECK

The Garmin Zumo 550. Designed by bikers, this combination GPS/media player/hands-free cell phone device is perfect for motorcycles. But you don't have to have a bike to enjoy the wide range of features in this high-end tech toy, which includes built-in support for XM radio. Compact, portable and dropping rapidly in price, this sub-\$1,000 toy will make a nice stocking stuffer.

Cell Phone Applications. Cell phone usage in the United States could expand more rapidly, and users would be happier if the cell phone companies would loosen their strangle-holds on what apps are available and at what price. That's not my opinion, but the verdict of marketing research firms studying options for the cell phone companies. They simply charge too much for add-ins like GPS navigation, streaming radio and other features consumers want. Similar

applications for cell phones in Europe and Asia are priced as much as 70 percent lower, leading to higher usage rates.

Invisibility. Interesting tech news from the world of physics and bending light rays. Funded by the U.S. government, engineers at UC-Berkeley have announced that they are closing in on a new fabric that will actually cause light rays to bend around objects and humans, rendering them invisible to the human eye. Similar work has already been done in microwaves. What does all this mean to accountants? Hard to tell until the first blue pinstripe invisibility suit hits the stores.

State of Fear. If the computer security pundits are to be believed, any computer connected to the Internet without a firewall and anti-virus software will be immediately infected with a virus or worm and its data plundered. But is this real, or are they just drumming up business for their products by fear-mongering. I've been running an office computer with a full-time Internet connection for six months now with no protection other than common sense and have yet to see a virus. I don't recommend that to any accountant, of course. But it does make you wonder how much of the fear of hacking is real.

GPS units. Here's a solid advertisement for market dynamics: As more consumers have adapted the idea of navigating via GPS, the prices on these units have fallen dramatically. This week, the lowest price to date for a decent GPS unit came in at just under \$80. I predict a price war, with units on sale for as little as \$50 for the Christmas season. The caveat: Watch out for exorbitant fees for updating maps and software.

A compendium of ideas, products, rants and raves from the viewpoint of the author. Note that the author has no financial interests in any of the products mentioned. Feel free to disagree, or to share your ideas by sending them to davemcclure@cpata.com.

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