

Web Design on a Shoestring by Carrie Bickner
Reviewed by John Davey

The publication of Web Design on a Shoestring comes at an opportune time for our SIG since our group is starting a program of volunteer web design for nonprofit agencies in the Philadelphia area. Despite some unevenness, Web Design on a Shoestring is a great resource for volunteer web designers and for paid developers with low budgets. In fact, there is plenty of insight from which any web developer can profit.

Carrie Bickner's street cred for this type of book is solid. She has been in the nonprofit arena for some years, including web development for the New York Public Library. Her book is not a how-to for beginning web design. It assumes a certain level of experience in HTML. The context is at a higher level--the planning, implementation, and management of a web development project. The emphasis is on efficiency and cost control. The material is particularly directed to the developer on a small budget and to the volunteer who does not want a pro bono effort turning into a bottomless pit of time. Along the way, though, the author provides excellent perspective on creating quality web sites of any size or complexity.

Web Design on a Shoestring is divided into two parts: *Production* covers planning the site and marshaling assets; *The Tools* covers content management, standards compliance, and web hosting and domain registration.

Ms. Bickner's theme is that proper planning will keep your project in line and your clients' expectations in check. The point almost goes without saying, but the value in this book is its practical approach that is backed up with checklists and planning documents to put the advice into play. The material is useful for any developer who has figured out that if you don't plan where you are going, you will never know when you have arrived.

Plenty of real-world examples inform this book. Chapter 7, for instance, shows a step by step transformation of a web page built on tables and presentation tags into a standards-compliant page based on CSS. I have read a couple of other makeover articles, but Ms. Bickner does a superior job of showing the before and after and describing how to get there. In the process, she makes a compelling case for the value of standards compliance in terms of efficiency and results.

The section on web hosting and domain registering uses real stories as examples, including some that I have experienced myself, to illustrate the gotchas out there. The theme here is that time is money--there are low cost providers out there, but it can be worth paying a little more to avoid time wasters like sitting on hold for customer service.

The section on content management systems showed how to find alternatives to expensive CMS applications. This part is largely geared to production shops where several people would be working on a site. For the smaller developers, there was a good explanation of how Dreamweaver templates work. There were also references to

Dreamweaver's new program Contribute, but nothing in detail, perhaps because it is such a new application. I would have liked to have seen something about how Contribute actually works. The remainder of the section was probably more useful to someone with content management experience. I saw the value, but the material was not a tutorial on how to use the programs discussed. Obviously, some editorial decisions had to be made, but given how well the author shows how things work, some real world examples would have been welcome.

Other high points from my perspective were chapters on effective color and type selection, no-budget user testing, and planning and developing for accessibility. Throughout the book are references to resources for more analysis of a given topic. Many were books by the same publisher, but there was a fair distribution of works from other publishers, and free online resources as well. Included were useful sources for clip art on the cheap.

The section on tab order I frankly did not understand. From reading the pages that followed, I gathered that it was a Javascript process. It may have been my lack of experience, but something was missing in the explanation. I had the same trouble with the section about making customized 404 Error pages. There was no explanation of how to do that, but there were references to two web sites that did have explanations.

A couple of uses of "who" instead of "whom" also caught my attention.

At just about 200 pages, this book can be gone through in a weekend of serious reading, but there is plenty to go back to for continued reference. My notes have a number of sections to re-read for solutions to problems I have encountered and for things I want to do better. The sections on planning a site are required reading, and I personally found the CSS makeover to be instructive and actually inspiring. The style is informal but not overly chatty, with good charts and instructive examples, and with suggestions based on sound judgment.

This book has value for anyone making the step from tagging pages to developing full web sites. While the focus is on the small-scale or part-time designer, Web Design on a Shoestring has lessons for anyone who works with limited time or resources, which pretty much means all of us.

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