

Creating Your Own Flash E-Commerce Site

**Reduce the Costs of Your Web Site
Using a Flash Technology**

By

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Introduction

As the concept of creating a dynamic web site begins to gain in popularity, there are many ways to create a content driven web site. Many technologies exist to connect a back end content source to your web site. The creation of these dynamic web sites allows the site owner to update their own web site easily and efficiently. The problem is now the owner will have to hire someone to create a web site for them, or learn several new skills to design and develop their own web site. There are now some technologies out there that will allow you to create up your own e-commerce enabled web site by using the point-and-click method.

Dynamic Web Sites

Definition

Dynamic web sites are Web sites that are based on content that is not stored on the specific HTML page, but content that is stored in another location, such as another file or database. The most popular storage place for content currently is in a database. In this case, web pages are created on the server based on the content in the database each time that page is called up by the browser on an individual's computer.

For example, if you have a new news article that you want to add to your web site, you would only need to add the article to the database. The next time the page is called, the server, using the content from the database, would automatically create a new listing for that news article when the page is being created.

Benefits

The benefits of a dynamic web site are quite numerous. The first and foremost benefit is that fewer web pages would need to be created. What would be created in its place would be more of a template that would hold specific information contained in a database. For the example mentioned above, a template would be created to hold the contents of a specific news article (such as title, date written, author, and content). The server would then call up the specific article from the database (based on previous inputs from a link or a form, etc.), and fill in the information as the Web page is being created. Instead of creating a separate web page for every article you want on your web site, you would have one template that would be used for all articles.

Another benefit is that the information on your Web site can be updated in real time. That means that as soon as you change the information in database on the server, your web site will reflect that change immediately. Properly designed Web sites will make it easy to change the information in the database without having to download and upload the Database.

In following with the last benefit, you yourself can change your web site very easily without having to hire an outside programmer to change the Web site for you, or becoming an HTML expert to update the site yourself. You can spend your valuable time on other things. If the site were designed properly, all that would be required would be to fill in a form, or modify the data through a form. Once that form is submitted, the changes are immediately reflected in the Web Site.

These immediate and easy changes save large amounts of \$\$\$ in maintaining your web site, but more importantly, it will allow you to keep your Web site up-to-date giving you a competitive advantage over your competition that uses static web sites.

E-Commerce

One big reason to use dynamic web sites is for e-commerce. Most e-commerce sites contain a shopping cart, a product catalog, a payment gateway, a site security certificate, and a merchant account. Many of these functions can be programmed from scratch, or purchased as a package and tailored to your specific needs. The benefits of programming the features yourself is that you have ultimate control over how the site gets created and can fully customize the functionality you want. The benefit of purchasing a pre-made package is that you will be up and ready to run in a much shorter time period. You are at the mercy of what features the package contains however. In most cases, many of these pre-made packages contain more than enough features than the web site owner would need.

Another consideration that should be evaluated is how you will integrate your e-commerce site with your inventory and billing system. There are some inventory/billing packages that contain interfaces to connect with

your Internet site. In almost all cases however, you would have to download the data from your web site nightly to update the records in your system. Efficiently designed web sites will allow you to do this in just a few clicks. There are some integrated billing packages that have web interfaces designed into them so all you would have to do is install the billing package, and you already have your web store front. Unfortunately these packages can cost in the tens of thousands of dollars.

Uses for Flash Dynamic Sites

Flash is a technology that is growing quite popular in the web world today. More and more sites are using at least some form of Flash technology. The interface is much more dynamic, and when you write one flash file, it is almost universally compatible among all flash enabled browsers. Try writing dynamic web site using JavaScript and DHTML, and see how far that compatibility takes you across different browsers, browser versions, and operating systems. Flash technology gives the web programmer much more flexibility in what can be done on the site. And today, many search engines are beginning to incorporate flash files in their robot searches. Flash developed sites can be more expensive to create due to the longer development time and the cost of a flash programmer tends to be a bit more expensive than the cost of an HTML programmer.

Flash Secret Sites

Flash secret is a technology that is used to allow the web site owner to build their own flash sites by a point and click/drag and drop methodology. Flash secret allows you to create dynamic web sites without the use of a Flash programmer. You can create your site in a fraction of the time it would take a well-seasoned Flash programmer to develop the same site for you. A large benefit of using the flash secret web sites is that there are unlimited product updates to the site. Your site will always have the latest Flash Secret technology running behind the scenes at no additional cost to you.

Admin functionality

Flash secret sites come with their own administration functionality. You can select your password to access the control panel. You can add/change/delete items from your catalog, select which type of informational pages you want to add to your web site. You can also manage the taxes and shipping charges on a per/item basis.

Content Management

Flash Secret sites allow you to manage your own web content. There is a news page that you can enter the latest developments with your company. You can also edit and change the jobs posting page, and many other information pages in addition. There is also an extensive inventory system where you can enter items by category and cross-link items and categories. Each Item allows you to upload a specific picture for that item, and you can attach an external link to each item in your catalogue. In addition, each item can have a subcategory such as color or size associated with it, thus allowing for a more accurate reflection of your product diversity.

Security

Each Flash Secret site contains a secure server connection to their site so that users purchasing products from your store can enter their credit card information in a secure environment. This is important to note because almost 98% of all e-commerce purchases are done with a credit card.

Database

Each Flash Secret site has a database associated with it. The database is structured based upon the type of items the site owner wants to sell. There are an unlimited number of items that can be sold from the site. The user does not have to know anything about database design. As they place items into their item .list, the database is updated to reflect the new item entered.

Shopping Cart

Each Web site comes with a shopping cart that can be connected to a payment gateway for use with a merchant account. The payments are conducted over a secure server, which will encrypt the information traveling over the net, making credit card transactions to your web site much more secure.

Search Features

A search feature is part of the web site functionality. Visitors can search through your web site for specific key words or phrases and any item that contains that phrase will be listed under the search results. This feature is very helpful if a visitor is looking for a specific item, or information page, they won't have to page through the entire site to find it. Studies show that the visitor would have left long before going through your entire site.

Customization

You can customize your own web site with your own background and graphics. The special software will automatically optimize your uploaded images, in order to minimize download time of your web site. Graphics can be a large factor in how fast your web site will download. The larger the size of the graphics, the longer it will take your site to download. Studies have shown that after about 7-10 seconds, if your site isn't on the visitor's screen, they will begin to go elsewhere.

Inventory Control

You can keep control of your inventory on-line. This is a one-stop inventory e-commerce package that is maintained all in one place. You can program your web site to notify you via email when your inventories fall below a certain level. Now you will never have to worry about running out of product due to unexpected sell-out of the product.

Shipping

Shipping costs can be entered on a per weight basis to each item on the web site. As products are placed in the shopping cart, the shipping charges will be accounted for.

Required Software/Hardware

Hardware

The required hardware to develop a site like this is a personal computer. Any platform that can access a web browser will work. Windows platforms and Macintosh platforms will work just fine.

Software

The required software is a web browser such as Netscape, or Internet explorer. If you choose to create your own background and graphics, you may want photo and image editing software also. I developed a number of backgrounds and headers using Macromedia's Fireworks application.

Costs Involved

The costs involved to develop a site like this are quite reasonable. To get a merchant account and a Flash e-commerce web site would cost about \$3000. There is also a monthly charge that can range from \$90 to \$130, which is quite reasonable for what is included, which is unlimited traffic, unlimited product listing, free software updates of the Flash Secret Software, free database support, unlimited customer support from their toll free number, free shopping cart, free secure server, and low cost integration to the merchant account.

Costs to Hire a Flash Programmer

Costs to hire a flash programmer to program a site with hundreds of products, and to create a shopping cart/inventory control system, etc would cost thousands of dollars and take many months to complete. There is also the time involved in communicating to the flash programmer how you want your site to look and what features you want on your site.

Costs for hosting e-commerce sites

The costs can vary for e commerce sites. Your monthly fees can range from \$50-\$360 per month. Beware of the lower end sites however, they have to supplement their low prices in other income generating ways such as collecting the emails of all the people who come to your site and selling them to email list collectors. Make sure you ask your potential host provider about this, as this can have some unexpected results that can detrimentally affect your business.

Who would want or need a Dynamic Flash Site?

Anyone who wants to have a dynamic presence on the Internet and perhaps would like to expand into e-commerce. People who have content that is constantly changing and want to have the latest and greatest content up on the web to enhance their business presence, and don't want the hassle of hiring someone else to do it, or at least paying an expensive programmer to update their web site, when they can pay an inexpensive non-technical person to update the content for them. This is where your cost savings will show up is in the long-term maintenance and management of your web site.

Conclusion

Dynamic Flash driven web sites may not be for everyone, but the market trend is moving in that direction. Those sites with old and out of date information will soon discover they will need to incorporate dynamic technologies in order to survive. Flash technology creates a more consistent viewing experience between the different browsers and browser versions. Using dynamic Flash technologies will offer a better customer experience, and will streamline your business processes, saving you time and money in the future.

Resources

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