It's a wide, wide World Wide Web

Whether it's creating a site to share your company with clients or figuring out the best browser to surf through cyberspace, the Internet is ripe with opportunity. BY TYLER WHITAKER

WEB BROWSERS are an integral part of online life. And for most of us, judging from Web statistics, our online adventures usually start by opening Internet Explorer. "Are there other Web browsers?" you may ask. The answer is yes — and your choice of browser may be more important than you expect.

Which browser you use not only affects your Web surfing experience, but plays a small part in the ongoing browser war. In the early days of the Internet, you had the choice between Internet Explorer and Netscape. But now the number of available Web browsers is growing — as are the reasons to get beyond your default browser and explore what the rest of the Web has to offer.

HTML Web standards

When it comes to the Web site programming languages, standards matter. It might surprise you to know that there is an official standards committee that oversees Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and the functionality every browser should support. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) decides the future of HTML and what new features will be added.

As the number of Web browsers has grown, some proprietary Web browsers have implemented non-standard dialects of HTML, leading to problems with Web sites looking and acting differently on various browsers.

TAKE AWAY

A professional-looking Web site is a must-have for marketing these days.

Your site should be easy to edit and update at a moment's notice.

WordPress offers a user-friendly way to design and update your site to your specifications.

These differences cost us, as business owners, every time we make changes to our Web sites. The extra testing and bug fixing by our Web developers for each non-standard browser takes money out of our pockets.

Memory and speed

Performance is another key item to consider when choosing a Web browser. Time adds up fast when you are waiting for Web pages to render on your screen. Recently, Google's Chrome browser and Mozilla's Firefox 3.5 have made huge improvements in both faster speed and lower memory consumption. These enhancements translate into much higher performance — the ability to open more active browser windows, with fewer crashes than most other browsers. These performance gains allow your existing desktop computer hardware to last longer without upgrading.

Automatic upgrades

Time seems to pass quickly on the Internet. Gone are the days when we expected new versions of our favorite software packages on an annual basis. Software updates are now available multiple times a month. This is good news from a security and reliability perspective, but unfortunately, too many businesses get caught in the "Don't Change Anything" trap. It's too easy to think that if it works, we shouldn't fix it.

If you are not staying current on the latest version of your browser, you truly are missing out on the best productivity improvements, security updates and newest features. Consider upgrading to the most recent version of your favorite browser and leaving the automatic upgrades option on so you will continuously be up-to-date.

Your choice of browser can encourage innovation and forward momentum with Web standards. Ensure your continued productivity and security by staying current on the latest browser versions. Every little bit helps.

From surfer to surfed

While you can't control which browsers clients use to access your Web site, you do need to engage them once they get there.

Let's be honest. Building a good-looking and functional Web site can be challenge. Once it's built, keeping it updated can feel like an ongoing and losing battle. But I have a few suggestions to ease your Web site pain and turn that chore into a pleasure.

Most small-business sites are built one of two ways: You know a family member or teenage neighbor who can put a basic Web site together, or your Internet-hosting provider has a template-based system that can help you build a site by uploading your logo and text. Neither is a bad solution if you just need something to start with, but the result often lacks quality.

Larger companies have the marketing funds and access to talent to build top-notch Web sites with all the bells and whistles. If they're smart, they add administrative capabilities for their staff to add new content easily without the need to understand HTML, JavaScript and other Web technologies. They understand good Web sites are changing and improving constantly.
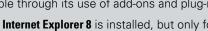
However, anyone who has hired an external Web design firm understands this route can become costly and limiting quickly. What you want is a solution with the following capabilities:

1 **The ability to edit your site in a simple and efficient manner** that doesn't require tracking down the nearest IT guy. This includes uploading pictures and video.

2 **The ability to update the style, colors and layout whenever you like.** Calling your local graphic artist and asking for a Web-site makeover — and then rebuilding the entire site

"DO YOURSELF A FAVOR AND UPGRADE YOUR WEB SITE USING WORDPRESS. YOUR SITE WILL LOOK BETTER, BE MORE UP-TO-DATE AND COST YOU LESS IN THE LONG RUN."

— can be a nightmare. A content management system (CMS) is much better. Traditionally, though, they've existed only within large companies because of their cost and complexity. What's the alternative that doesn't require spending the entire marketing budget? Read on.

An accessible solution
Recently, several open-source systems have been built with the small business in mind. My favorite is WordPress from Automatic. At first glance, WordPress looks like a Web-blogging application — and it is. But if you look closer, you'll see a system with all the power and flexibility of a large CMS without the associated complexity and cost.

As an open-source program, the software, along with a large collection of site themes, is free. The themes allow you to customize the look of your site in an easy-to-manage way. No more waiting for the designer to get back to you. Don't like the current theme? Change it. Need to add new pages, images or video? No problem. You can even add additional functionality through the use of plug-ins, which extend the site's features without involving special programming. It's that easy.

Most Web-hosting providers offer WordPress as optional software to install on your site. It requires the PHP programming language and a MySQL database to run, but those are standard defaults at almost all Web-hosting providers.

So do yourself a favor and upgrade your Web site using WordPress. Your site will look better, be more up-to-date and cost you less in the long run — and that's something to blog about. LM

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