

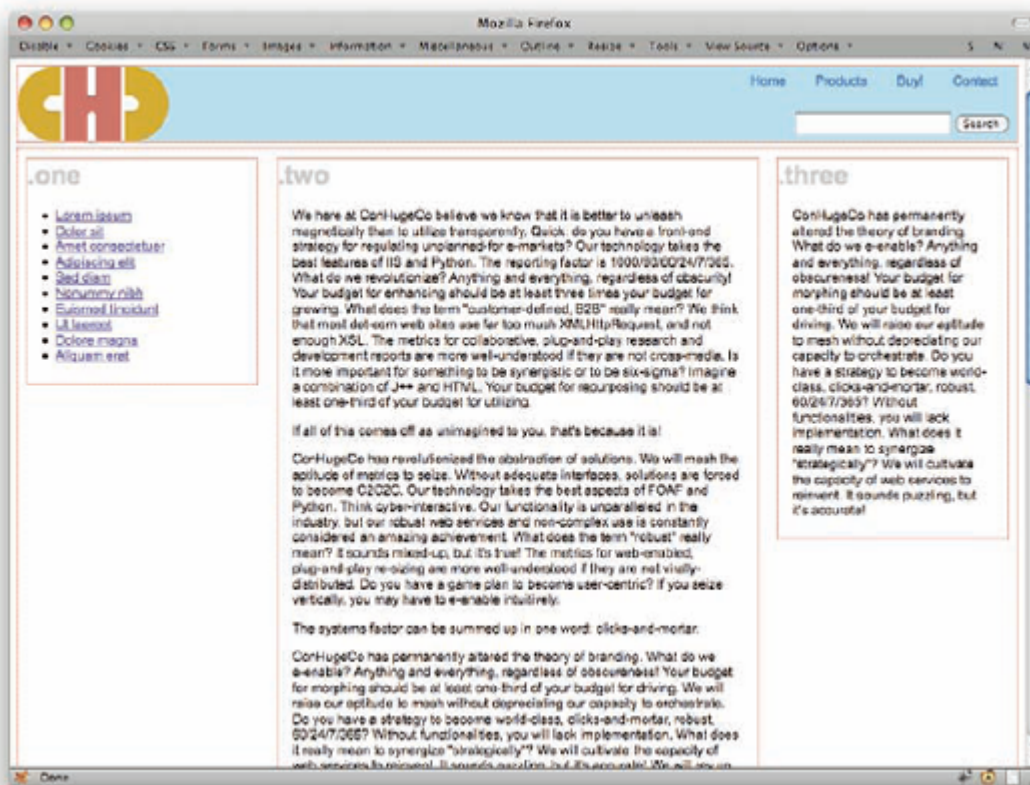
4.1. OUTLINES INSTEAD OF BORDERS

To lead off, I'd like to talk about the use of outlines, which at first glance look a lot like borders but turn out to differ in ways that are very significant to layout. Outlines can be used in published layouts, and are very handy diagnostic tools when creating and debugging layouts in progress.

During layout creation, you can visualize the placement of your layout pieces using something like this (see also [Figure 4-1](#)):

```
div {outline: 1px dashed red;}
```

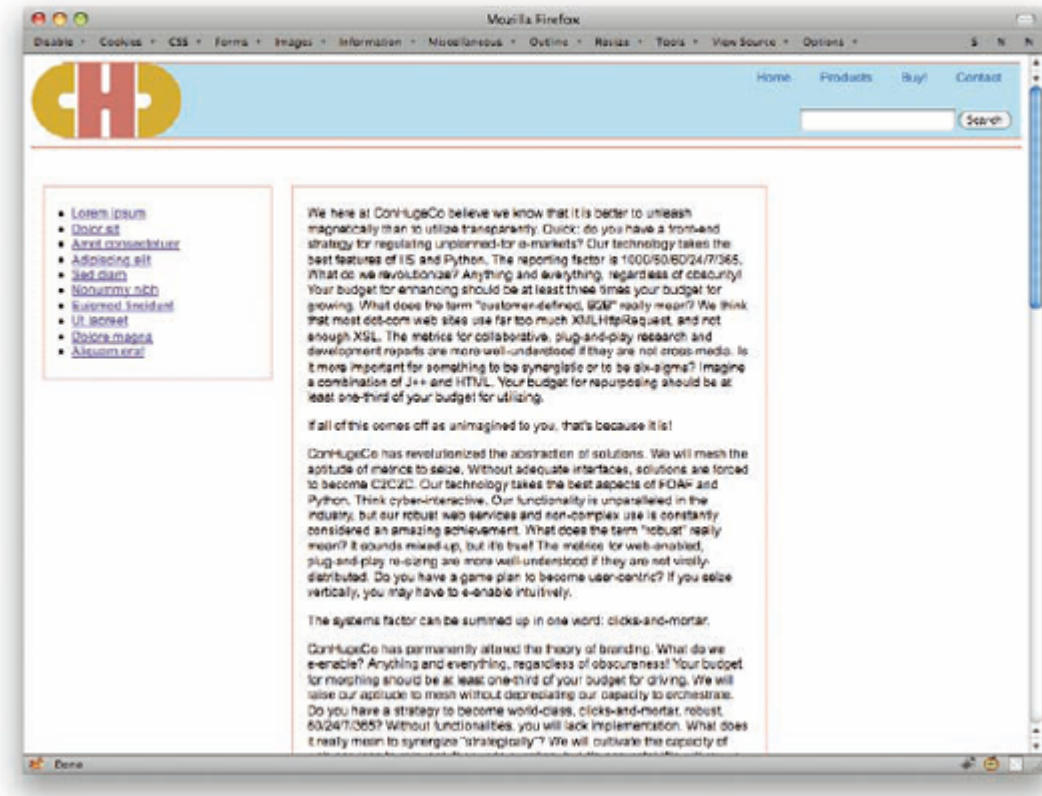
Figure 4.1. Outlining the `div` s.



You might think that the same thing can be accomplished with border, but that's actually not true. The reason is that borders participate in layout. Outlines do not.

Here's what I mean: Suppose you have three column `div`s that are meant to fit into a container `div` 960 pixels wide. (If you dislike pixels, the same thing can happen with ems, percentages, or any other width measure.) You set each one to `float: left; width: 33.33%`; and are trying to visualize exactly where the column edges sit. If you add borders, the last of the three `div`s will drop below the first two (see [Figure 4-2](#)). That's because each `div` will have a width of 320 pixels and then right and left borders added to that, which will make each `div`'s layout box a minimum of 322 pixels wide. Multiply that by three columns and you get a total of 966 pixels, which will not fit into a 960 pixel container. Float drop!

Figure 4.2. The third column drops out of sight.



That's what's meant when we say that borders participate in layout. Outlines, on the other hand, do not. They are effectively drawn around elements after they've been laid out, so in our three-div scenario, the divs will all sit next to each other with the outlines drawn around them.

It doesn't matter how thin or thick you make the outlines; they'll never shift the divs—or anything else on the page. All they can do is overlap or be overlapped, as evident in [Figure 4-3](#).

This has immediately obvious advantages when it comes to trying to map a layout. If things don't seem to be lining up quite right, you can drop in some outlines to get a sense of where the element edges sit and not worry about completely wrecking the layout in the process.

Another thing about outlines that differs from borders is that an outline must go all the way around an element, and be the same all the way around. In other words, you cannot simply set a left outline or a top outline, the way you can with a border. There is simply an outline around all four sides of the element, or else there isn't. In a like manner, you cannot vary the color, width, or style of the outline on each side. If you want a two-pixel dashed yellow border, then it will be so all the way around the element.

Note that an element can have both a border and an outline. In such a case, the outline is drawn just outside the border, so that the outline's inner edge touches the border's outer edge. If the element has margins, then the outline is drawn over that margin area, but the margins are not changed or displaced by the outline.

Figure 4.3. Great big dotted outlines.

