If you decided to build a house, would you dig a hole, buy some blocks, start

laying them, and see what evolved? Unlikely, yet that is how many Web sites begin — with a few pages, no real plan, and little thought as to how the content will hang together as it increases in complexity. Just as a house will be more pleasant to live in — and less likely to fall down — if it is built according to an architect’s plans, so a Web site will be easier to use and easier to manage when a careful plan is followed during its construction.

# What is information architecture?

Information architecture is the process of creating a plan and a structure for the information that a Web site will contain. Most of the time, planning a site’s information architecture requires little more than a liberal application of common sense, although the more complex the content, the more detailed the planning must be.

# Create a blueprint

There are three important factors to take into consideration when developing a blueprint for your Web site: your audience (who is going to visit your site), your content (what is the subject matter, and how much content on that subject do you have), and the navigation structure (how will visitors discover the content once they've found your site). Carefully considering these three factors will help lay the foundation for a successful Web site.

**Determine who will use the site**

The first requirement for creating a blueprint is to know your users. Only then can you plan your content and decide how it will be presented to them.

Make a list of all those who could conceivably visit your site. For example,

suppose you are a manufacturer of products for keepers of aquarium fish. In addition to selling your products, you want your site to be a source of information about fish.

Your potential users include experienced fish keepers, inexperienced fish keepers, those considering fish as pets, pet store owners wishing to sell your products, kids doing school projects about fish, and those who wish to buy a gift for a friend who keeps fish. There are a lot of other potential groups; most sites have a list of at least 15 to 20 potential user groups.

For each potential user group, ask yourself:

* How important are these users to me, on a scale of 1 to 10?
* Do I have content relevant to these users?
* Is there content that I might plan to include at a later date?
* Do I want to cater to this particular group of users at all?

# Organize the content

Once you know who your users are likely to be, it is time to look more closely at your content and see how it can be organized. It is a good idea to have two or more people carry out this exercise separately. While your way of dividing content may seem like the only one, someone else looking at the same information may come up with a completely different method of sorting it.

Begin by creating a detailed list of exactly what you would like to include for each user group, even those groups that seem less important to you right now. Make two lists for each group: content that you have now and content that you plan to include at a later date.

If you find that content is easily divided by users, with little or no repetition of the

same content under different user headings, then yours may be one of those rare sites where using a primarily user-based organization of content makes sense.

More often than not, there will be a lot of overlap when you organize content by user group, with the same content areas appearing for several different user

groups. In this case, organizing content by subject area will result in a more

coherent and less repetitive structure.

## Organize content areas by subject

Let's look at ways in which content can be organized by subject area.

* **Standard content areas** Most sites have a number of standard sections, such as About Us and Contact Us pages, to which content is relatively easily allocated.
* **General content areas** Once the standard content list is done, look at the rest of your content and start to divide it into very general groups. In the case of our aquarium fish site, these might include product listings, fish information, company information, etc. Look at each content area and consider ways of further subdividing it.
  + **Top-level headings** Content that is of potential interest to several different user groups should appear in top-level folders.
  + **Sub-level headings** If it is of interest to only a small number of users, then it is probably more appropriate to place it in a subfolder at a lower level.

You will probably need to spend a bit of time regrouping and reorganizing content until you come up with the best method of organizing your content. Some content may be appropriate for just one type of user. For example, in our site, specific information may only be of interest to store owners. In this case, one of your top- level groups might be labeled Store Owners and include content that is of interest specifically to this group.

## Leftover content areas

It is not unusual to be left with some content groups that seems particularly difficult to place. If this content is important, consider placing it in a group of its own to which you will have prominent links at relevant points in your site.

Examples include privacy policies or information about your shipping methods. Leftover content may also be of no particular interest to anyone. Question whether it should be included at all. Content does not have to be included just because it is on your list.

Once you have your content grouped in a way that you are happy with, give each

content group a brief, descriptive label. Try to keep these labels meaningful so that they clearly describe the content within them.

# Plan the navigation structure

Because your information is already organized into subject areas, it is logical to use that structure as the basis for your navigation.

* **Main navigation** The main navigation bar should appear on all pages in the same style and in the same place. In addition to standard items like links to the home page and contact information, the main navigation bar should include links to the top-level groups of content. It is wise to limit the number of links. If the number of links goes over eight or nine, you may need to look at ways in which content could be redistributed to reduce the number of groups.
* **Subsidiary navigation** This type of navigation is specific to a section of the site and links to content within a single top-level group. In sites where the information extends to several levels of subdivision, creating coherent subsidiary navigation can be a challenge. The most important principle to bear in mind is that, as users go down to the next subdivision, content above that level should remain easily accessible to them.

You can include subsidiary navigation that links to pages such as your privacy policy, copyright information, guarantees, and other information that is less easily categorized. These links are commonly included in small navigation bars at the bottom of each page.

* **Secondary navigation** Use secondary navigation to provide users with alternative ways of navigating. For example, users who know what they want to do might appreciate a drop-down list box containing links to the main content groups in an online store. That way, they can go directly to where they want to be. Search functions and site maps, which can be added very easily with FrontPage, are important methods of helping users to quickly locate specific information.

# Page structure as navigation

Building a content structure into a page can be a very powerful way of making

information readily accessible to a range of users. Visualize a page structured so that a range of information is presented in a consistent manner. For example, our page about fish breeds might include an image, Latin name and common name, basic care information, suitable temperature ranges, preferred diet, required equipment, and suitable companion fish for each breed. Any of these items can be linked to further information. This provides an at-a-glance window to a lot of information, not all of it in the same section.

Similarly, using bookmarks (anchors) at the top of a page that link to information further down the page not only provides a quick overview of what the page contains but also helps users looking for specific of information.

# Does it work?

Remember the list of potential users? Now is the time to look at it again, taking each user in turn and imagining information in which they might be interested. How would they reach that information by navigating though your site structure?

* Would it be obvious from the main navigation bar where users should start looking?
* How many different routes could they take from the home page to their destination?

**Note** Multiple routes to content significantly increases usability. For example, users might get to a specific page by clicking links in navigation bars, using a drop-down list box or a site search, or by going to site map page. Try to have at least three obvious routes from the home page to all important content.

* If the information they want is in one section of the site but users enter through a page in another section, will it be clear how to find the information they are looking for?

At all levels, navigation needs to be obvious and intuitive. If you have to explain

your navigation or the thinking behind it, then it has already failed.

# Conclusion

All this preparation may seem very time consuming, but successful Web sites are rarely, if ever, happy accidents. By the end of this planning process, you will have laid a solid foundation for an easily-managed, flexible, and highly usable site. All that remains is to design your pages, add your content, and reap the rewards of all your hard work.