Site management

A well-kept web site with up-to-date information is a winner, says Nigel Whitfield.

How often have you looked at a web site and thought, 'this seems really useful,' only to delve a little deeper and find that what appeared at first to be a great resource is rather badly marred by the fact that while there may have been lots of enthusiasm when it was first created, there's rather less now and the previous update was several weeks or months ago, leaving lots of forlorn pages offering 'updates soon' with more information.

As anyone who's ever tried to keep a site up to date will know, for all but the most basic 'picture of me and my cat' site it can be an uphill task and if your site becomes popular with other visitors, then there's even more pressure on you to make sure it stays fresh. Never underestimate the demands of people who aren't paying you a penny but want you to create something for them to look at.

So how do you keep the site up to date? The simple answer is to make sure that it's as easy as possible for you to achieve, ideally without having to fire up a web page editor and do any more work than is absolutely necessary once the basic layout of your site has been organised.

Easier said than done, of course, and it depends a lot on what type of site you have, where it's hosted and what information you want to keep up to date. If it's a personal site with news and other information, then you might find that the only way you can update it is by creating static HTML pages using a web editor and uploading them to the space that came free with your internet access.

Even there, though, there's plenty of scope for making things simpler for yourself, using templates for particular types of page and thinking about updates from the moment you first design your site.

The Save-as HTML features in modern applications will help a lot here, too, but there are other tricks you can use, especially if you're prepared to use a little ingenuity and learn the HTML tags that do what you want.

For example, if you have information in a database that you want to put on the web, you don't need to spend time writing complicated scripts. If you can save the data from the database in a set format, then a few well placed search-and-replace macros in Microsoft Word can create an instant web page for you.

If you want to go down this route, one of the best tricks is to include extra information, in a format similar to the tags used by programs such as Quark XPress and Ventura Publisher so that a line that starts with @HEADING can be

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Questions & answers

Q I have just read last October's *Internet* column and was wondering if you have a list of ISDN suppliers. I know that BT provides ISDN but there are other suppliers around. I'm a student using the internet for research, web design and everything else we use the net for, and now that I've become 'competent' on the net, a standard phone line just doesn't cut it any more.

a *Cable & Wireless also provides a national ISDN service, although in areas where it doesn't have its own cable network the company will resell the BT service to you. Some cable companies also offer ISDN but in many cases don't provide the basic rate connection (i.e. two channels), instead offering a minimum of six, which is likely to be overkill. Before spending money on ISDN, though, remember that many delays occur elsewhere on the net and you might not see the level of improvement you expect.*

Q I have just posted my personal web site on the internet and during the next few weeks I hope to add to it. My site uses a frame, and the new sections I want to add use other frames. I know how you get sites or pages to load in a new Explorer window but I am wondering whether you can load a new frame into an existing Explorer window?

a *Yes, you can load a new page into different parts of the current frameset*

by using the TARGET attribute on the link which calls them. When you define your frames, you can allocate a name to each one — for instance, 'main', 'menu' and so on. There are also special names. For example: '_top', which loads the page into the main window, and '_parent', which loads it into the parent window of the current frameset. If you want to create a new frameset, you will need to load it into the parent window so as to erradicate all those frames which are currently defined.

spotted easily, and a quick search-and-replace will put the <H2> tag at the start of the line and the </H2> at the end.

Combine this type of technique with a template and a little trial and error, and you should be able to come up with a Word macro that can turn plain text into well formatted HTML, with tables and other information, in just a few minutes.

You can of course publish directly from a database, and applications such as FileMaker Pro are designed to put your information on the web as easily as possible provided you can find someone to host the information for you, or you are lucky enough to have your own server on which you can run the program.

Another solution,
and one that works just as well whether you want to create pages in batches to upload, or run it on the server to make pages on-the-fly, is to write a program that scans a text file or image files and creates pages appropriately, adding links and other details. Yes, you can do some of this in the macros of something like Word but you'll be better off spending the time on writing a proper program, using either BASIC, C or Perl.

The last is my tool of choice for this sort of work and I'd strongly recommend that anyone who wants to cut out a lot of the work of updating a site invests in a copy of O'Reilly's *Learning Perl* and downloads the free Perl software for their system from www.perl.com. It is also worth investigating PerlBuilder from Solution Soft <www.solutionsoft.com> which will help you debug your scripts and automatically view the HTML output from them.

Much of the Perl that has appeared in this column over the years has been

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[FIG 1]

Creating HTML files

```perl
#!/usr/local/bin/perl
# lines that begin with a # are comments

open( DATAFILE, "catalogue.csv" ) ;

# read the whole file, a line at a time
while( <DATAFILE> ) {

# swap the quotes to single quotes for Perl
$_ =~ s/\'/\\\'/g ;
$_ =~ s/\"/\'/g ;

# split the line up into its component parts
    ( $code, $name, $desc, $price, $qty ) = eval( "(" . $_ . ")" ) ;

# now create a web page file
    $fname = $code . 'htm' ;
    open( OUTPUT, "> $fname" ) ;
    print OUTPUT "<HTML><HEAD><TITLE>$code - $name</TITLE></HEAD>\n" ;
    print OUTPUT "<BODY><H1>$name</H1>\n" ;
    print OUTPUT "<P>There are currently $qty of these products in ↙
 stock</P><P>The current price is &#163; $price</P>\n" ;
    print OUTPUT "<IMG SRC=\"" . $code . ".gif\">\n" ;
    print OUTPUT "</BODY></HTML>\n" ;
    close OUTPUT ;
# now do the next line from the catalogue file
}
exit ;
```
(Key: ↙ code string continues)

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fragments but to show just how easily you can create a whole set of pages, here's a script that will take the CSV (Comma Separated Value) file which can be created by a database and generate all the web pages you need.

We'll assume that the file has six fields: a product code, a name, description, price and quantity in stock; there's also a picture which has the same name as the product code, so each line in our CSV file will look something like this:

```
"K007","Super widget version
2","The latest, all singing
version of our dancing baby
model","19.99","17"
```

We want a series of HTML files, each called something like K007.HTM, according to the product code. And Fig 1 is all you need to do it.

As you can see, it is not that complicated and the actual work of creating the web page is just a few lines, although you can make it as complicated as you

like. Adapting the script, you can easily create dozens of web pages in just a few minutes, easily adding links and other features. And with Perl available for Mac, Windows and Unix systems, you can save plenty of time making your web site, regardless of what sort of server you're using. Remember that if you do not want to use Perl, you can use any language with which you're familiar, too: we've used it here because it's one of my favourites, and it's very flexible at processing things like CSV files.

Your suggestions for ways of keeping web sites up to date using a minimum of effort are welcome. Please send them in to the usual address *(shown below)* or join the discussions on the PCW-Internet email list.

PCW CONTACTS

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