Mark Bell

Build a Website for Free

Second Edition

Personal Site • Blogs • Wiki
Small Business Site
Multimedia Based Site

que

Build a Website for Free

Second Edition

Mark Bell

que®

800 East 96th Street,
Indianapolis, Indiana 46240

Build a Website for Free

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7897-4718-1
ISBN-10: 0-7897-4718-9

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file.

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Introduction

So you want to build a website for free?

If you are reading this book, you probably want to build a website (even though you might not know exactly what that is), and you want to do it for free. If you have no idea what a website really is and need some basic information, you'll learn this later in the Introduction. If you know what a website is, you probably are more interested in the "free" part. All the software and tools I discuss in this book are free of charge. If at all possible, I choose the best free alternative to commercial software.

In the past decade, the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web, has grown considerably. There are now millions of websites on the Internet covering all sorts of subjects, from family and business to education and entertainment. Some websites have been long-lasting and useful (Yahoo.com and Google.com), and others disappear as quickly as they come. You might have plans to create a website that you hope millions of people will go to, or your site's purpose might be just to stay connected to your family members.

IN THIS INTRODUCTION

- Why This Book?
- For Free, Really?
- I Can't Really Do This. . . Can I?
- Note on Edition 2
- How to Use This Book
- Web 101
- What Is a Website?
- What Is a Web Browser?

Why This Book?

You probably picked up this book because you have an idea in your head—an idea you want to share on the World Wide Web in the form of a website. You might have a fully formed idea or just a kernel of that idea, but you have a starting point. Maybe you have been given the job of creating a website and have no idea where to start, or maybe you have a burning desire to connect with other people.

Regardless of your reason for creating a site, this book will help you understand the process of how those ideas become a website and then walk you through creating five different sites for specific purposes. These sites include a basic website, a blog, a content management system, a wiki, and a multimedia website. You might not know or care about all these, but this book will show you how to build them for free. This book covers how to plan, design, build, and maintain a website, and it does it using free tools. With simple step-by-step instructions, you will be up and running on the World Wide Web before you know it.

For Free, Really?

You're probably wondering how much this is going to cost. The book title says "free," but you have never believed anything was really free. This book is unique.

Different people and websites will promise you the lowest prices possible on website tools, hosting, and creation. Conventional wisdom says nothing is free. Generally, the more you invest in a project, the more options you have.

In the past five years, though, open-source and free software have been flooding the World Wide Web and allowing people to create fun, interesting, dynamic web pages for very little money. This book tries to use free software as much as possible. If people are giving away quality software, you should use it.

Open-Source Software

In the previous section, I threw out the term "open-source software," and you're probably wondering what the heck that is.

Most software, including your operating system, word processor, and web browser, is more than likely developed according to a traditional software model. Software is traditionally created by a bunch of guys who run a

software company, which runs on money. The people who run the company pay programmers to write and test software, and they employ marketing and salespeople to sell their products to you, the consumer. Most software has been developed this way since the mid-1980s.

The Internet is in a constant state of flux. Some people call this a revolution and others just a fad, but in reality, open source is here to stay. Open-source software is created by teams of people working for free, and it is given away to anyone for free. More than that, open-source projects also give away the parts that make up software, or "source code," which a traditional company keeps secret. The theory behind all this is that the more people programming, editing, and using the open-source software, the better it becomes. Also, when the work is distributed among thousands of people, most of whom will never meet, the workload per person is drastically reduced. Don't tell the traditional software industry, but their programmers are working for them and then going home at night and doing the same thing for free!

In this book, as much as possible, we will be using open-source software because it is usually free and, surprisingly, is some of the highest-quality stuff available. There are open-source operating systems, web browsers, graphics applications, and even website management tools. All these are covered in this book.

With each piece of software I recommend, I list where to find the latest version and what the major features are.

Is This Legal?

Your next question might be, "If I am getting this stuff for free, isn't that stealing?" I am not advocating or recommending that anyone steal or pirate software. All the software I recommend is given away for free. The software industry is full of hard-working people who deserve to be paid for their work. If there is a price for software, I tell you about it. Where there is a cost, I provide a free alternative and let you know the differences.

I Can't Really Do This…Can I?

In my years of teaching software in the corporate and academic world, I have heard people say they can't do some computer task that they need or want to do because of this or that reason. Some people say they are afraid of computers or "just don't get them," some blame the hardware, and some just say they can't understand these crazy things. This book is designed to get even the

most apprehensive would-be website developer, who has no special qualifications or knowledge, up and running in no time. I explain each task to you in easy-to-understand instructions.

Note on Edition 2

Any book about the web or the Internet in general is out of date as soon as it is finished. The World Wide Web continues to change at an accelerated rate. This book is no exception. For this reason, a new edition has been created to update the text. As part of my revisions, all the links have been checked and new ones added. Also, the mobile web has exploded in use and market share. The tablet market looks like a possible contender for the next big thing, so I have added sections on the iPad also.

How to Use This Book

Throughout this book, you will find special little notes to help you along the way.

Tips and Cautions

tip **Tips** contain little bits of information that will give you extra knowledge or save you time or money. They don't present mandatory information, but you should pay attention to them.

caution **Cautions**, on the other hand, are important to pay attention to. A Caution is must-read information that you need to know before proceeding with the task at hand. Please pay close attention to them.

Geek Speak

The world of computers and the culture that surrounds them are full of jargon. It is almost as though acronyms and arcane terms are the fuel that the software industry uses. When the terminology gets techy in the book, the Geek Speak sections decipher the lingo for you and use common, simple words to explain what is going on.

Geek Speak

These notes act as a mini-translator into the world of computer geeks.

Whenever a line of code is too long to fit on one printed line, we've broken it and used a code-continuation arrow to indicate the continuation:

```
    <param name="movie" value="http://www.youtube.com/v/
➥-xL7YSsEyOs?fs=1&amp;hl=en_US"></param>
```

Web 101

This book is trying to make it as simple and cheap as possible for you to create a website. To make sure this can happen, it's important to cover some basics, including how the Internet and web work. You may use the Internet every day but not know what it really is. For me, a basic understanding of the building blocks of the web helps me build better websites.

If you already know how the Internet works and what a web page and website are, skip ahead to Chapter 1, "The Order of Things." But if you want a quick refresher on some basic Internet facts, read over this section before moving on to the rest of the book.

What Is the Internet?

Can you even remember a time before the Internet existed? Depending on your age, the answer may vary, but how did we ever get along without it? Think about trying to find a new restaurant to go to before the Internet was around. You would have to look in the Restaurant section of the Yellow Pages, use a map to find the street where the restaurant was, and then devise your own directions to get there. With the Internet, you can not only do most of that with the click of a button, but you can read the menu, see pictures of the interior, and maybe even make reservations—all without leaving the house or picking up the phone. But what *is* this incredibly useful thing we call the Internet?

The Internet is simply the largest network of computers in existence. All these computers speak a similar language and share information easily. That's it. You don't need to know the history or the technology beyond that. When your modem connects you to the Internet, your computer becomes part of the computer network known as the Internet. You might have a local network at work or home, but that local network is connected to the Internet.

What Is the World Wide Web?

People talk about the web and the Internet as if they were the same thing. They aren't. As mentioned previously, the Internet is a network of computers. The World Wide Web is a method of viewing the information on those networked computers. The World Wide Web is a collection of certain files on certain computers in the network of computers. These files contain information that, when referred to collectively, is called the *World Wide Web* (see Figure I.1).

Geek Speak

www

Ever wonder why so many pages start with "www"? Those letters are just technical shorthand to tell your web browser you are looking for something on the World Wide Web. The www isn't even needed, though. Most web browsers will find the site whether you type www or not.

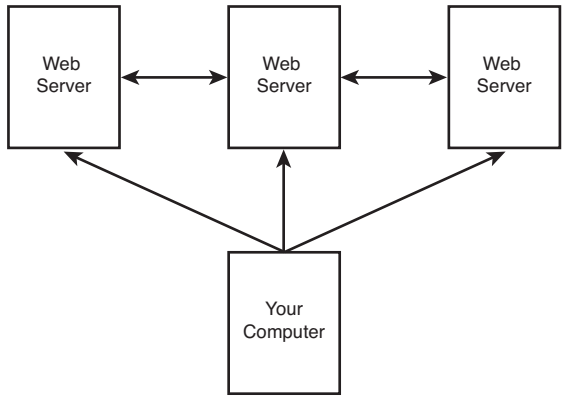

FIGURE I.1

The Internet is made of web servers to which you connect with your computer.

What Is a Web Page?

The World Wide Web is then made up of web pages. A web page is a file of information that can be accessed and displayed on your computer. When you access the file, it is downloaded to your computer. When you go to Amazon.com, you are accessing a file on an Amazon computer, it is downloaded, and the information in that file is displayed on your computer. When you go surfing on the web, you are connecting to a bunch of different computers, all transferring files to your computer.

What Is a Website?

Basically, a website is a collection of web pages (see Figure I.2) stored on a particular computer (called a web server) and accessed by outside computers. The site creator puts the files on the web server. A web server is just a computer with special software that allows others to view your web page when they go to the address of the web server. When you go to cnn.com, there is a collection of pages that make up the website for the CNN television network.

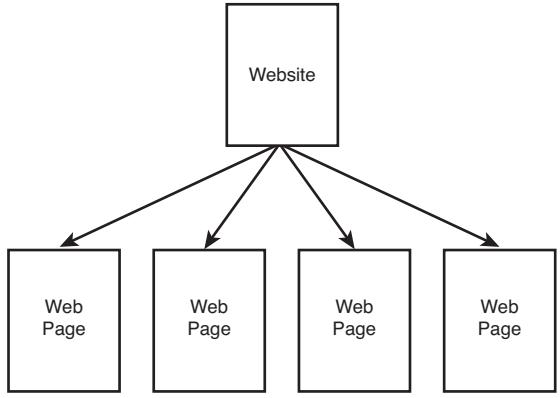

FIGURE I.2

A website is made of web pages.

What Is a Web Browser?

A web browser is a piece of software on your computer or mobile device that you use to access web pages on websites. All desktop computers include at least one web browser as part of the preinstalled software. A web browser is

the tool you use to view websites, and more and more often it is also a tool to help you create websites.

All browsers work essentially the same way. You enter a website address into the browser or click on a link. This tells the browser to go to that Internet address and download the files (images, text, videos) to your computer or mobile device. Then these files are displayed in a way that looks good (hopefully) and allows you to interact with them.

Several browsers are available to you. A good website developer (that's you) will be familiar with all the major types, and more than likely will have them installed on a computer used for testing. More than ever, people are using mobile browser to view the web. Your phone probably has a web browser in it. Keep in mind, Safari on a Mac is not the same as Safari on the iPhone. If you are serious about web development, you need to get and keep the latest versions of browser software on your computer. You also need to be aware of each browser's unique features and limitations. The most common browsers are as follows:

- **Internet Explorer (Microsoft)**—http://www.microsoft.com/ie/
- **Chrome (Google)**—http://chrome.google.com
- **Firefox (Mozilla)**—http://www.firefox.com
- **Safari (Apple)**—http://www.apple.com/safari/
- **Opera (Opera)**—http://www.opera.com/
- **Flock (Flock)**—http://flock.com/

CHAPTER

3

Planning Your Site

IN THIS CHAPTER

- What Type of Site Do You Want to Build?
- Learning from Sites You Go To
- Website Goals
- Organizing Websites
- Best Practices of Website Organization

The central question you need to answer before beginning any website project is "Why do you want to build a website?" Sometimes the answer can be simple—the boss wants you to create a site, you want to connect to old school friends, or you want to promote your home-based business. By asking the question, you can begin to figure out the best structure for the site you are building. For example, if you are making a website for your home based-business, you want your products and services on pages by themselves. You should also make sure the business contact information is on every page.

What follows in this section are some questions you should ask when planning your website's structure. You should try to answer as many of them as you can because they will help you make important decisions about your site. Don't just read the questions and think about the answers; make notes and develop a formal plan. If you are building this site for someone else, that person probably wants to see your plan of action. This plan of action would include listing the website's goals, the rough plans for the site and the pages, and a timeline of when you plan to complete the work.

What Type of Site Do You Want to Build?

As we all know, there are so many websites on the Internet that it is impossible to keep track of all of them. We use websites to book plane reservations, talk to friends, and catch up on the scores of last night's games. When you're thinking about why you are creating a website, you also need to figure out what kind of site it will be. The best way to familiarize yourself with types of websites is to look around on the web. Typically you go to the web with a particular objective in mind, such as renting a car or sending an email. This purpose sometimes causes you to overlook the structure and purpose of the sites you are viewing. Take another look at some of your favorite websites, and pay close attention to the structure and purpose of these sites. You'll be surprised by what you learn.

Types of Sites

New types of websites show up every day and are limited only by the imagination of the people creating them. Listed here are a few high-level types. If your website fits into one of these categories, read the listing and go to the example sites, paying close attention to the structure and design of each website.

- **Business**—In the early days of the web, there was a virtual gold rush of companies and corporations to the web thinking they could make a fortune overnight. This, of course, happened to only a few, but slowly over the past decade, businesses have begun to figure out how to make money, attract new customers, and find working business models. In fact, these days it is almost impossible to think of a business that doesn't have a website, from huge corporations to the mom-and-pop web shop down the street.

  Examples:

  - Amazon.com
  - Kodak.com (see Figure 3.1)
  - Bloomingfoods: www.bloomingfoods.coop/

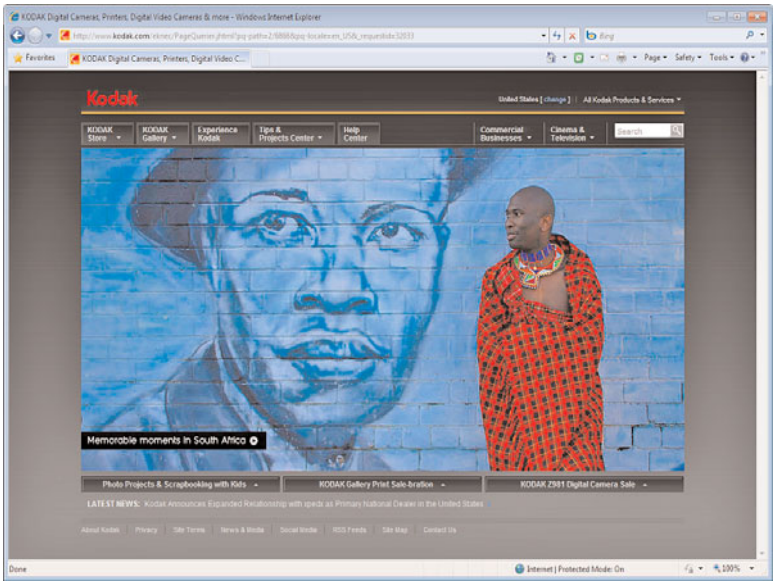

FIGURE 3.1
Kodak.com is an excellent business site.

- **Personal**—Before business invaded the World Wide Web, people were creating personal websites. These included family websites, fan sites, and journal sites such as blogs. This is really part of the World Wide Web's greatest cultural effects. Everyone can now have a voice on the web. You don't have to have a million dollars to have a great website that attracts lots of attention. From the rich and famous to the mom down the street, folks are making personal websites.

  Examples:

  - www.stephenfry.com
  - blog.markwbell.com
  - wonkette.com

- **Social**—Ever since computers have become connected to one another, they have become tools for social interactions. They make it simple for people to talk to each other online through social networking sites and email sites. The web is becoming more social every day. No longer is

the Internet solely the refuge of geeks, but now just about everyone is making social connections one of the most dominant forces on the web.

Examples:

- Facebook.com (see Figure 3.2)
- Gmail.com
- Blogger.com

FIGURE 3.2
Have you been to Facebook today?

- **Informational**—The Internet is a storehouse of information. Some sites exist purely to give you free information. This information is so incredibly helpful that it is changing knowledge and education on a daily basis. The web has terabytes of information added it to every day—so much that you can never keep up on it all.

  Examples:

  - www.wikipedia.org (see Figure 3.3)
  - www.imdb.com

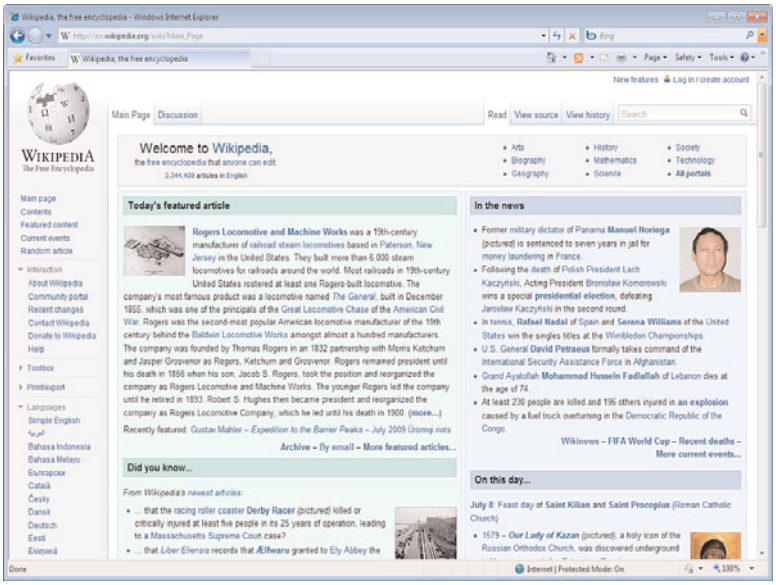

FIGURE 3.3
Wikipedia is the largest open-sourced reference work ever created.

Learning from Sites You Go To

As I mentioned earlier, you might need to try a new perspective to see the web for its structure rather than just its content. The following exercise forces you into that perspective and lets you see websites you visit in new ways:

1. Open your browser and look in your web history, which is a list of websites you have been to recently. It is usually found in a menu item. In Internet Explorer or Firefox, use Ctrl+Shift+H (see Figure 3.4).
2. Open the past few sites you have visited.
3. As you go through each site, ask yourself
   - What type of website is this?
   - What makes up the parts of the website?
   - How do you move between pages?
   - What gives you a sense that this website is one complete site and distinct from other sites on the Internet?

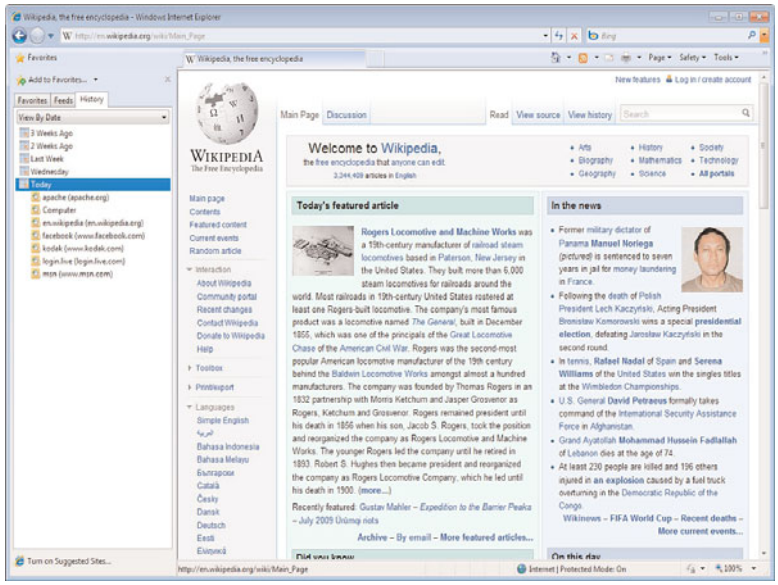

FIGURE 3.4
Explorer with History open.

You might even take notes on these websites. What makes these sites work? Or better yet, if you find a bad website, figure out what makes it bad, and don't make the same mistakes. Can you map out the structure of the website on a piece of paper?

Website Goals

Before you begin designing or building your website, you need an idea of what you want to achieve with it. The goals you are hoping to achieve will help you make decisions down the road.

Your goals are simply the things you want to accomplish with your website. These could be things such as making money, attracting attention, or making a statement. You should have goals for your site itself and for its content (see Figure 3.5). You also should think of short- and long-term goals for your site. Start by examining some of your favorite sites and determining the goals of those websites.

Ask yourself

- What is the overall goal of this website?
- What parts of the website show me this goal?
- Will my website be similar to or different from this site?

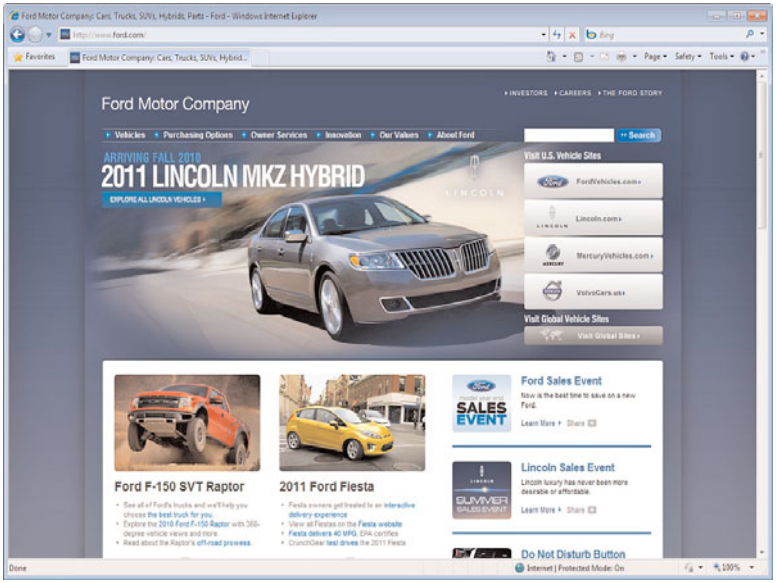

FIGURE 3.5

The goals of the Ford Motor Company website are to provide information about its products and to sell vehicles.

Organizing Websites

When you are figuring out the structure of your site, you need to think about both the site as a whole and each page. Remember that a website is just a collection of web pages. There should be a unity to what you create. This unity should be apparent on the site itself and on each page. For example, if you create a family website with pages for each member of the family (mom, dad, son, and daughter), each of those pages should look similar to the others. They should look like a united whole. If every page is different, the site visitor might get lost. You might start by looking at your entire site, or you could look at just one page.

Organizing the Site

When I begin to plan out a new website, I start with a blank piece of paper on which I draw out the website in this manner:

1. On a blank piece of paper, draw a central box and put Home Page in it.
2. Draw separate boxes around the Home Page box for subtopics you want to cover on the website.
3. If these subtopics divide further, add those topics to the page using additional boxes.
4. Determine what warrants a separate page. A web page should have its own unique content that is equal in amount to that of other pages.
5. Draw lines connecting these pages to the Home Page box.
6. Draw lines from the subtopics of each page to the page itself.

Now you have a rough map of what you want to do on your website. See Figure 3.6 for an example.

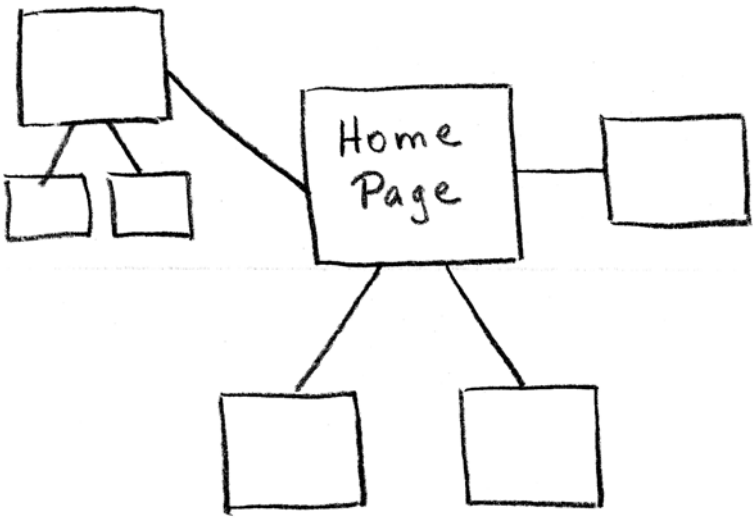

FIGURE 3.6
A rough map of a website.

Geek Speak

home page

A *home page* is the first page people see when they come to your website. This page is the one loaded when people type in your domain address. Keep in mind that people do not stay long at any website—usually just seconds—so this is where they get their first impression.

Organizing the Page

In the same way as the site, I begin organizing each web page with a hand-drawn template. I keep it as simple and generic as possible so I can then make each page look like a unified page in a website. This is the method I use:

1. On another blank piece of paper, draw a rectangle that is longer than wide and fills most of the page. This rectangle represents a web page that is viewed with a typical browser on a typical screen.
2. At the top of this page, draw a horizontal line across the page, about 15% of the way down. This is your *header*.
3. At the bottom of this page, draw another horizontal line across the page, about 15% of the way up. This is your *footer*.
4. Add a rough outline of how you want your content to look on your site. You might want to have columns or tables. Take some time to express your creativity. Figure 3.7 gives you a general idea of how your site should look.

Geek Speak

header and footer

The header and footer sections of the page are the same for every page. Typically you'll find links to other pages and contact information in the header and footer. Look at other web pages, and you will see many have headers and footers.

You may have the same organizational structure for your whole website, or you might have a couple of different ones for different parts. This is essentially a paper template. A template allows you to keep consistency across multiple pages. Let your content define the structure.

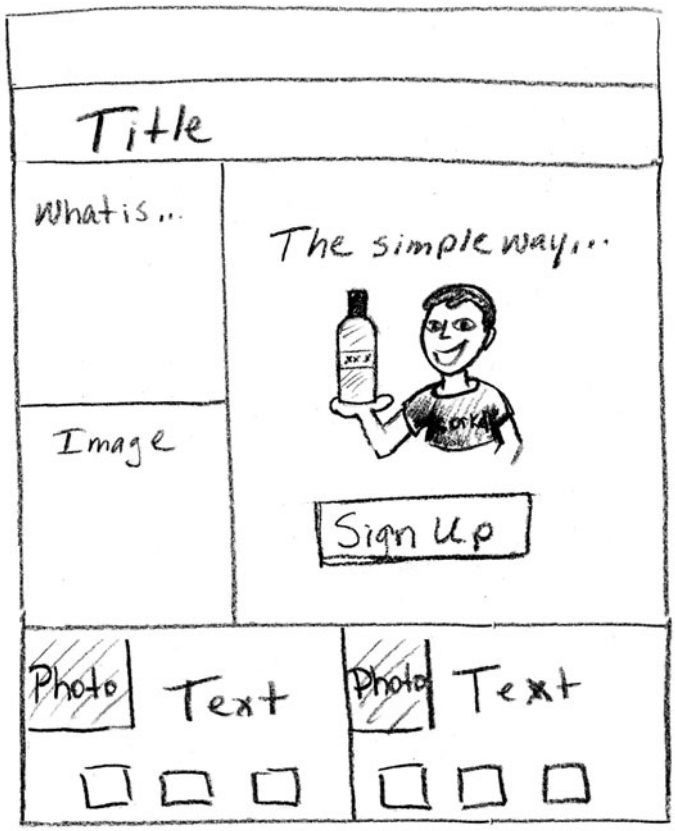

FIGURE 3.7
Web page diagram.

Best Practices of Website Organization

There are some general rules, or best practices, for organizing a website that you should keep in mind as you organize your site. These rules are not the law but will help you avoid common mistakes.

Keep Your Website Simple

Above all, especially when beginning the planning for your website, keep things as simple as possible. Try not to make your website too complicated right away. You can always add things later. A simple website allows your message to be clearly understood and your goals easily attained (see Figure 3.8). If you get too complex too quickly, your visitors will get lost.

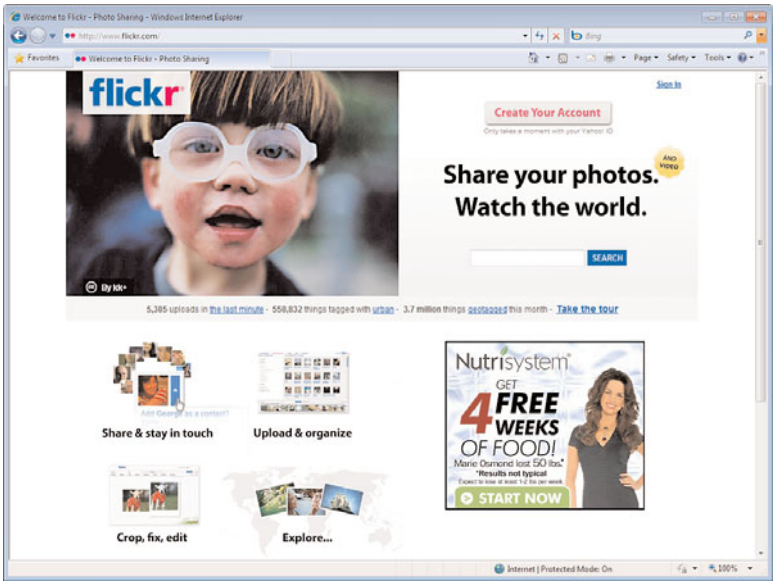

FIGURE 3.8
flickr is a clean and well-organized website.

Keep Your Website Consistent

Try to keep your website a unified whole. This makes it look more professional and helps the transmission of your message. A website filled with inconsistent pages makes for a mess that drives visitors away. A site that is unified and consistent from page to page conveys the fact that the creator of the website has invested a great deal of time to present a well-crafted and well-conceived site whose purpose is for your enjoyment. Keep your pages uncluttered and organized. Use consistent structures on pages (such as headers and footers) so your visitors can easily tell what your website is about and not get lost in a bunch of unorganized text and links.

Keep Your Website Easy to Maintain

Well-organized, well-designed websites are easy to maintain and improve. If your site is a disorganized haphazard mess, it causes you more work in the long run. And if you have a complex site, you need a lot of time to make sure all the parts work together. Starting simple and trying to maintain that simplicity can be helpful in the long run.

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