Designing with Web Standards

Throughout the semester we have been learning to design effective websites, that is websites that are accessible and usable for our specific audience. We know why it is important to design with accessibility and usability in mind, and the W3C has been instrumental in supporting web developers, by establishing the Web Standards Project. Its first objective was to persuade browser makers such as Netscape and Microsoft, to support the standards that they were developing. The next step was to educate and support designers in using these standards – believe me, a web designers life is certainly a lot easier now.

What are Web Standards? Web standards is common markup (code) that has been developed by the Web Standards Initiative that will be displayed the same in any browser. It is free from any proprietary extensions that browser manufacturers created only for their browsers.

Why is it important to design your web sites with standards?

- to increase interoperability (backward and forward compatibility)
- to enhance accessibility
- to streamline production and maintenance
- to reduce wasted bandwidth
- to lower costs

How?

By using valid XHTML for markup (XHTML 1.0 Transitional)

By setting up our pages as XHTML 1.0 Transitional, Dreamweaver automatically ensures that web standards are maintained. The documents are transitional because markup still includes some design structures like tables, but it begins paving the way for eventual transition to pure CSS layout. This means moving towards separating structure from presentation.

The structural parts of your document are the tags such as the doc type, the HTML tag, the BODY tag etc. By using CSS, designers have greater control over how pages look, and by separating the CSS from the HTML, it becomes much easier to update pages, and from a usability and accessibility perspective, coding is cleaner and pages load much quicker.

Remember in the Dreamweaver tutorial, we first created an internal style sheet, and then took the styling out of our pages and created one external style sheet, which was then linked to all of our web pages.

Standards also ensure that sites can still look reasonably good in older browsers and will continue to work in future browsers and devices.

Accessibility

We have been through some of these before, but Dreamweaver makes it very easy for us to create accessible web pages. Some simple things that you can instigate when you design your website that will help accessibility are:

Images - always provide an ALT attribute in the <img> tag. Dreamweaver will prompt you to do this every time you add an image to your page. ALT Tags provide a text label for the image that appears when images are turned off in a browser or when screen reading software is used for people with visual impairments. Make a label that best describes the image.

Think carefully about colours

When using (X)HTML and CSS follow the Web Design Standards set up by the W3 Consortium

These websites offer useful information in helping you with web standards:

Web Design Standards Web Accessibility Initiative

http://www.w3.org/WAI/quicktips

Web Standards Project

http://www.webstandards.org/

Web Standards Group (Australia)

http://webstandardsgroup.org/

Winning Web Design – Accessibility

Again, use this simple checklist to ensure you are designing your pages with accessibility in mind.

Can the majority of your web viewers access your web content easily?

Do they need special plug-ins, or other types or versions of web browsers to access your web pages?

What if a viewer's computer or web browser does not support the technology used on your web pages?

Can your viewers read the font on your web pages in contrast to the background colour?

Are the colours and themes on your web pages uniform and consistent?

Are the images necessary and do they download quickly?

Winning Web Design - Usability

Use this simple checklist to ensure you are designing your pages with accessibility in mind.

Is there a clear visual hierarchy?

Are heading levels easy to distinguish?

Does the site have easy to understand navigation?

Does the site use consistent navigation?

Are the links underlined or obvious?

Are visited links clearly defined with a unique colour?

Do you have a sitemap page and contact page? Are they easy to find?

For large sites, is there a search tool?

Is there a link to the home page on every page in the site?

Does the site use consistent and appropriate language?

If your site uses other types of media (audio, video, animation), are they necessary (or just annoying)?