

Getting ready to get a website for your artwork can be a bit of a daunting experience: there seem to be endless choices of designers, templates and words that quite frankly sound familiar, but do not quite make sense. I have gathered basic information in this article to help you make an informed decision about what is right for you.

How websites are made

A basic website is written in a language called HTML.

HTML stands for hyper Text Mark-up Language and was first developed by Tim Berners-Lee. The first version was published in 1993. Since then, attempts have been made to have a set of standard rules on how HTML works. These standards are maintained by a group called the World Wide Web Consortium. Unfortunately, these standards are not official!

HTML is a simple way to format a document for use on the World Wide Web, and uses a series of tags that look like this: ` `

Tags will surround text and force it to display in a specific way on your browser. For example, any text that a user wants to appear in bold will be written in HTML like this:

`text` in HTML looks like **text** in your browser

To reiterate, there are no standards in HTML. Most browsers will use the WWW Consortium standards, but there will be inconsistencies between browsers and a web designer will spend quite a bit of time making sure that a site looks similar across most commonly used browsers (Explorer, Netscape, etc.).

DHTML or Dynamic HTML is a recent version of website creation, and lets the designer make more interactive and interesting website presentations. DHTML uses a combination of Javascript, Cascading Style Sheets and static HTML. What it comes down to, is that DHTML makes websites which are much more attractive, with capabilities such as animated buttons, or slide shows with fade-ins and fade-outs for example.

Understand that HTML was first intended as a way to format text. Since the popularity of the web has soared, the big challenge has been how to make web pages more attractive to users.

Flash

This is where Flash comes in.

Flash, formally a Macromedia program now owned by Adobe, has two basic components that concern an artist:

- one side of Flash is an actual program used to create content
- the other side is a browser plug-in that lets the viewer see the content as a website.

A Flash site is created using a software application, which is decoded in your browser through a Flash Player. What gets created by a designer is essentially a

Flash movie, that will play on a browser, but which is also capable of letting the viewer interact with it, as in a navigation bar or buttons.

Flash is a multimedia application, and as such, a designer can create any type of very attractive content for a website, adding sound and animation for example. The biggest challenge for an artist is then which one to choose? HTML or Flash?

Flash vs. HTML

The choices, unfortunately, are not very simple. There are pros and cons to both types of websites, and fortunately, you are not limited to one or the other but can use a combination of both to get the best site for your portfolio.

Let's run first through the advantages of Flash:

- Consistency: remember how I said there are basically no standards in HTML? Flash takes care of that. Provided the user has a Flash Player, a website will look the same no matter what computer or browser it is being viewed on.
- Attractive: Flash can make presentations that are far more attractive than HTML

And of course there are disadvantages:

- Difficult to learn and create: there is a huge learning curve to flash so if you ever want to take control of your site and do simple changes, you will spend quite a bit of time figuring out how to make those simple changes.
- Size: if done incorrectly, a flash site can become quite bloated and your viewer might get bored and move on before the site has finished loading. Know who your audience is, and if they are likely to have a fast internet connection. Mostly make sure you tell your designer to keep the file sizes down.
- Plug-in: your viewer will absolutely need a plug-in on their browser to see your site: ask yourself if your audience is at the cutting edge of technology and is likely to have the required plug-in installed on their machine. Some people (I am one of them) will get irked if they have to download yet another plug-in just to see your site.
- Search engines have difficulties indexing flash-only sites. Most designers will recommend that your site has a point of entry in HTML, and a flash component within.

As you may have guessed, I am a big proponent of HTML, for the following reasons:

- HTML is easy to use and maintain: if you ever have the time to do your own update, you do not need to hire an expensive designer to make simple changes to your site.
- HTML is fast to load so most of your users will not have any problems seeing your site.

- HTML is search-engine friendly (to most extent... there are designer abuses there too!).

To be fair, there are disadvantages to HTML, some of which I have stated earlier:

- There are no official standards to HTML, and users will notice minor differences between browsers
- HTML has fewer design capabilities, though most of them can be worked around with Javascripts and CSS
- Your web designer also has to be aware of how a search engine works to optimize your chances of being indexed no matter what is being used Flash or HTML

Putting it together

At this point, you have several choices to get a website:

- Hire a designer
- Purchase a template
- Do it yourself in HTML and/or Flash

I hopefully have clarified some of the issues, although of course more information means more headaches when it comes to deciding which way to go. Currently, your choices are to have a site completely custom made, buying a template from the myriads of suppliers out there or doing it yourself.

A custom site can be exciting, but be aware that you will need a much bigger budget. Typically designers charge anywhere from \$50 to \$100 an hour. Take into consideration the design aspect as well as the coding aspect of getting your site done. The more prepared you are, the less time the designer will spend in coming up with ideas. Get as many samples of sites that you like and be very clear in how you want the site to be laid out: think about how the user will navigate your site, how they will find information. Give your designer a flow chart, even if it's a pen and paper presentation.

Ask your designer how they code the pages to make sure that your site will be more friendly to search engine and easy to view/download. If you are going with a Flash site, make sure you understand about file size and download concerns. Again, make sure your designer knows if you are concerned about being search engine friendly and consider having an entry page that is text only.

Templates can be a great money saver. There are many sites selling very good templates. Be sure you understand what you are getting: a friend of mine bought a template and basically got all the code for the site, which was incomprehensible to her. She spent many months deciphering the instructions, and she still doesn't have a website. Be aware of what type of site you are getting: many do-it-yourself templates are flash-based, which can be very easy for you to do but tend to become giant files that don't download very fast, or tend to be impossible to change or simply inflexible.

Finally, you can choose to do it yourself. If money is a concern, and you have time to learn HTML, you can make a good website within one to two weeks. Check your local library for any books on HTML explaining how tags work and see if it's a project that you can tackle yourself.