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Web standards not an oxymoron

By: Alan K'necht (05 Apr 2002)

The old days of the wild west of Web development are long gone. In the early days, HTML coders quickly became webmasters because they had to master how to hack HTML to do things it was never intended to do.

Browser manufacturers further complicated matters by releasing competing proprietary features that were not World Wide Web Consortium (the W3C) approved. As developers tried to implement these features they were confronted with an array of complex hacks in order to have their work appear identical across multiple platforms and operating systems.

It's time to say goodbye to the days of the wild west of Web development and say hello to building sites based on standards and valid code.

Many of you may be saying that the term "Web development standards" is an oxymoron, but I'm here today to tell you it's not. Thanks to people such as Jeffery Zeldman (<http://zeldman.com>) who co-founded the WaSP (Web Standards Project - www.webstandards.org), who for the past several years have put pressure on the likes of Microsoft and AOL (Netscape) to make their browser standards compatible. The success of their efforts are seen in the recent release of IE 6, Netscape 6, Opera 5 and Mozilla, which all claim to properly support all valid HTML code.

So now we need to define what the HTML standards are. This is an area where the W3C needs to take some of the blame.

Since the inception of the Web by Tim Berners-Lee, the W3C has been a committee run organization whose sole responsibility was to ensure the smooth evolution of Web development. Over the past nine years or so, they've issued a series of "recommendations." What a majority of the Web development community failed to understand is that these recommendations are the W3C's way of saying this is now an approved standard. Fortunately in recent months, members of the W3C themselves have started calling their recommendations standards.

The blurring of the line between the terms standards and recommendations was self-evident during a panel discussion at Web Builder 2001. Hosted by Zeldman, the panellists (including myself) represented a cross-section of authorities on different segments of Web development. During the hour-long session, only one panellist Molly Holzschlag made a reference to W3C recommendations and that was to clarify the point that these recommendations are really standards.

What was self-evident during this session is that it's time to start cleaning up all of our HTML code by embracing the standards. The entire panel agreed that the minimum standard that Web developers should be coding for is HTML 4.01 Transitional. This should be a relatively easy task and may simply require the insertion of the document type in the HTML page header. By embracing this minimum standard, you are ensuring that your pages will display properly in all major 4+ browsers. To see if your pages are compliant, simply access the W3C's HTML validation service <http://validator.W3.org>. This free service will not only tell you if you have valid code, but in case of errors it will also identify the offending code and make recommendations on how to correct the problems.

While fixing thousands of existing pages on your Web site may not be realistic, it is important to start coding to standards. What many Web developers fail to understand is by building non-standard code Web pages, they are building for certain doom. For example, with the release of IE 6, Microsoft dropped support for some of its proprietary features (i.e. the handling of cascading style sheets) released in earlier versions of IE. In simplest terms, if you built your site taking advantage of these features, it won't work in IE 6 and you're now forced to go back and code it correctly.

So which standard should you use? Is it HTML 4.01 Transitional or HTML 4.01 Strict or is it something else? Once again the panellists were unanimous, its time to start building Web sites to XHTML 1.0 standard including the use of valid Cascading Style Sheets.

Haven't heard of XHTML? That's not surprising as the vast majority of Web developers are oblivious to the recommendations of the W3C and only find out about them when support for the new recommendations show up in their Web development tools.

Unfortunately for the Web development community, Zeldman and the WaSP are now taking a breather having accomplished their goals of the standards compliant Web browser. They are leaving it up to the community to put

pressure on the likes of Macromedia, Adobe and other software manufacturers to build into their code generation tools support for the latest standards. While I've heard from some of the manufacturers that future releases will support the current W3C standards, it is really up to the development community to demand it. By demanding this minimum feature before purchasing any upgrades or new products, a powerful message will be sent back to these companies. So for now, if you want truly compliant code, you'll need your handy text editor alongside your favourite code generator.

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