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It's time to take advantage of XHTML

By: Alan K'necht

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About a year ago, I redesigned most of my Web site (<http://www.knechtology.com>) to use valid transitional XHTML (validated at <http://validator.w3.org>). At the time, I still used tables to control the layout and only put a minimal reliance on Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to control the overall look of the site. But that has all changed.

In May, after spending considerable time reviewing design options with my graphic designer, the majority of my site was switched to pure XHTML. There's not a table to be found in the primary site. All content is controlled by using a div and a class defined in the CSS. Virtually every element's position on the page is controlled by the CSS. The use of spacer images has virtually vanished and, within a few months, I'm hoping that all spacer images will be gone as well.

So what's the benefit? And should you care? First, no, you shouldn't care about how I designed my site — it's my site after all. But you should care about the benefits this type of design has to offer and the big deal it could mean to your organization.

The benefits are clear:

- I can change the entire look of my site within minutes instead of days. Don't like the font size of the copy? No problem, just change one reference from 10 px to 11 px, save and upload and bang, it's done for the entire site.
- Content is organized in a priority manner (important stuff at the top of the page), but it can be displayed anywhere on the page (position is defined by the CSS).
- Because of that, search engines have increased my site's ranking without rewriting any copy or getting more people to link to my site.
- I can create a variety of CSSs, each targeted to specific devices (a future effort) or even for different browsers to customize the look for each user.
- My site degrades easily to older browsers and is accessibility friendly.

I now have a site that is easy to manage, passes all accessibility requirements, works across all browsers and gets ranked better by search engines and has a separate presentation layer than the content layer. Is it possible?

Yes it is possible, and my site isn't the only one out there built using XHTML and CSS. Are there pitfalls to constructing a Web site this way? The answer is yes, but only to a limited degree. The site won't look exactly the same across all browsers. This isn't a big deal in my opinion because rarely does a user look at your site at the same time using different browsers. Of course, you might run into some complaints from people in your organization who have older computers at home (perhaps still using IE 5 or Netscape 4.7) and have memorized what the site looks like at work. Just ask them to look at the site via their cellphone or wireless PDA — it's not supposed to look the same.

A huge benefit is that older browsers simply ignore the CSS features they don't support. This way, if a visitor comes to my site using Netscape 4.7 — I get less than two a month — they may see a really boring page, but they can still read all the information and can easily navigate through it. The same can't be said if I had designed my site using Flash and the visitor didn't have the current or no Flash plug-in installed.

Another benefit of this type of Web site construction is you have pixel-by-pixel control over the placing of elements. If I want that div moved up 1 pixel and over to the right by 3 pixels, it's a no-brainer and should take all of about 10 seconds. The same can't be said for the site built using HTML 4.01 and tables. A lot has been written in recent years about the benefits of building sites to the W3 guidelines and using XHTML. Well, the proof is there in the dollar and cents. Their costs are about the same in the pre-development phase, but you should be able to build your page templates 25 to 50 per cent faster, including sign-off and changes, and populate the content in record time. This translates into direct savings for your company.

All that is left is to ask yourself if you're ready to take the plunge. Can you live with a site that looks different between browsers? If the answer is yes, start preparing your migration plan. The first step should be "no more doing it the old way," and then schedule the revamp of older pages on a priority basis.

If you're not ready for the big plunge, just start with transitional XHTML like I did. This will make the migration to full XHTML easier when you're ready. With just a bit of planning, you'll be well on the way to building the Web site of tomorrow instead of the Web site of yesterday.

K'necht is a regular speaker at Internet conferences and president of K'nechtology Inc., a technology strategy, search engine optimization and Web development company. He can be reached through his XHTML-based Web site at www.knechtology.com

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