



A website of my own

By Jeremy Grierson

For the EMWA members who are freelancers, the most important step in getting new clients is probably their listing on the EMWA freelancers' page on the web. However, it's widely said that to have real business success in this 'Internet-age' one should really have one's own website. A number of the EMWA freelancers have already made this step, particularly the continental members, who show an overall acceptance rate of 69%, but curiously only 43% of the UK freelancers have taken this step. But the willingness to have a site does appear to be there, as attested by the number of people who have enrolled in the EMWA workshop on website development. I hesitated for a considerable time, with doubts over the possible advantages. I took the plunge in 2005 and my website finally appeared last summer. What follows is an account of my motivations and decisions that led to its creation.

Why?

While the freelance listing on the EMWA site presents an excellent advertising opportunity by providing a springboard to budding freelancers, the listing is necessarily uniform and concise. In contrast, a business website, with a personalised and more comprehensive explanation of services and experience, allows the differentiation of one's offer, with the hope of making a lasting impression in the minds of potential clients. In an increasingly competitive field such as medical writing, I believe this is important.

How?

Although I had toyed with the idea of building my own site since becoming a freelancer and gone as far as to buy a book (still unopened), the precipitating moment was my attendance at Shanida Nataraja's course at the EMWA conference in Budapest. I had fairly high hopes of building a site myself; I had some past experience of computer programming and the logical process intrigued me—but the course left me a little deflated (Sorry Shanida!). For me, the take-home message was that one really needs to fork out £600+ for the best program and I know from experience the learning curves for these things are steep. So my project entered a sort of hiatus for 6 months as I dithered my next step.

Importantly however I had started to think more constructively about what I wanted to achieve. For me, it was necessary to present my services in French and English in a fairly comprehensive manner but not to create a site that was overly complex or overly detailed. The salient features were to be a professional appearance and speed of loading.

I also decided that my time was relatively more limited than my budget. So I began to look at other sites with a more critical eye and to think about how users would eventually use my site.

Then, early in 2005, while attending a conference for start-up companies, I happened across a company that offered turn-key sites at a set price (three levels of sophistication: three prices). That was an attractive idea! So I searched the internet for other similar companies and asked them for details. The company I choose in the end was not the one I had first seen, but one whose portfolio of sites impressed me more and who seemed willing to please.

So, after some negotiation over features and price, I committed myself to the development of a bilingual 3-page site, with a 'home' page, an 'about us' page and a contact page, thus, 3 pages in English and 3 in French. The site was to be adapted from a template, purchased from an American site specializing in such templates. (Perhaps had I known that such templates existed, I might have been tempted to go it alone, but then again, even having a template, one still needs to know what one is doing). From what I saw of the American site, there are hundreds of models to choose from, all grouped according to user occupation. Needless-to-say, 'medical writing' did not feature amongst the occupations and, with the advice of my 'consultant', I ended up selecting one for accountants (!). The product is rather like a PowerPoint template with text boxes and a header/title section that appears on each page. The drawbacks of this approach are the text boxes are not very flexible in terms of position and size (or at least that's what I was told!) and that somebody 'out there' may have a site very much like mine. The advantages, however, are that the site is already 'optimized' for different internet browsers and screen formats, and therefore relatively inexpensive to develop. And, in a certain sense, it is perhaps not such a bad idea to have the constraints of predefined windows: there is great pressure to be concise.

Naming

The most important item is, of course, the name of the site: the company's name. In a way it defines the company. How it looks, including choice of font and colour, should become standard on letterheads and business cards; so it is important to get it right. For the past few years I had been trading under my own name, but for a website I decided that this was not the best option; it was not catchy enough.

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I had had one or two names in my head over the past few years but when it came to commit them to print they didn't seem quite right. They were either too difficult for non-English speakers or not quite right for a service of scientific writing. However after a brain-storming session, I settled on Carduus Consulting (Carduus being a genus of thistles and so keeping a link to my Scottish roots). I checked on the internet to see if the name was already taken and, wouldn't you know it, there is an English company with this name (but no web site). Although it was doubtful that the name had been registered as an international trademark, I decided not to waste time and effort and to register my company name as Carduus Script Consulting. The website consultancy had been pressing me for the domain name for my site and while I was tempted to propose 'www.CarduusScriptConsulting.com', I felt that it was too long and I object to using hyphens and dots within the name. As www.Carduus.com was not an option, I quickly settled on www.CarduusScript.com.

Content

Selecting the model had been the easy bit! I now had to decide what to put in and how to organise it. The idea of subject headings with hyperlinks had attracted me at first because they are rapid (especially if they reference a different part of the same page) but I feel that when there are numerous headings in which one is interested, then the process of going forward and back on hyperlinks become tedious. So I fell back on the trusty old bulleted lists to present my services. The headings and the description of services (plus the translations) took quite a bit of thought and several evenings of deliberation to get right.

The second page concerned the company: I wanted to briefly summarise my experience, enough to give a good impression, mention my Scottish links (much appreciated by my French clients) and explain the name of the company. Once again to write the words and to get them to fit neatly in the space available required several evenings of trial and error.

The third page, the contact page, was relative straight forward because the basics were already in the template and my website consultant just had a few technicalities to deal with. Importantly, I am assured that in its present form the contact page cannot be accessed by web crawlers, which are pernicious software devices used to collect contact details from sites with the goal of sending junk mail.

I had expected to be able to fit three to four images into the site and had gone to some trouble to find and prepare suitable photos, but it turned out that the space on the site was rather too limited with the template, and the possibilities for adaptation less flexible than anticipated. Consequently there are just two (very small) photos on the site.

Success?

So, with a bit of juggling and numerous evenings spent over a hot computer, the site was finished. It is not perhaps perfect, but it looks tidy and professional. What is still left to do is the optimisation of the key words to improve the

rankings in the search results of search engines. Although the site was entered manually to numerous search engines following its completion, it does not come up high when one taps 'medical writer' into Google. This, I am told is a whole different ball-game and a new art in getting sites well-ranked. I'll soon be back in contact with my consultant for this.

Have I had any new clients because of it? Well, I think the answer would have to be "no"—not for the moment. But I do think that it is a worthwhile investment and it has forced me to develop my company's name and logo and to look critically at my offering. Clearly these are all long-term benefits.

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Dramatically fewer home-grown scientists in the pipeline in Britain

School children in the UK have little interest for science. The numbers of 15-year-olds taking physics and chemistry exams have dropped by over 70% since the mid-1980s and the students taking A-level chemistry, maths and physics have fallen by 34% since the early 1990s. Robert Matthews writing in July's issue of *BBC Focus* believes it would be difficult to persuade teenagers that science is fun or a means to get rich quick. This just leaves the possibility of presenting a career in science as a rebellious course of action—a way to be different from your parents. Parents are those people who grumble about the state of the world but don't do anything about it. Science could be sold to teenagers as a means of actively making the world a better place. This strategy was successful in enthusing many to take up scientific careers in the 1950s but then fervour was dampened somewhat by the ozone hole, Chernobyl, and DDT debacles.

According to a survey conducted by the National Union of Students, university students also place a premium on companies with sound ethics policies. In the survey 79% of the students said they did not want to work for a company with a poor ethical record. Scientists for Global Responsibility is a UK-based organisation that promotes ethical science, accountability, peace, social justice and environmental sustainability. It has produced a booklet featuring 12 scientists from different disciplines who have prioritised ethical concerns in their careers. The hope is that their stories will help others to confront issues and map out their own career paths (<http://www.tinyurl.com/oard2>).

Source: 'Handful of Know-nothing science students will be taught by teachers who know even less' by Robert Matthews in *BBC Focus* July 2006.