



This month Graham Stewart takes the first steps in creating the Cellar Web site by deciding the strategy and outlining the overall design that will best serve that strategy.

# From the cellar

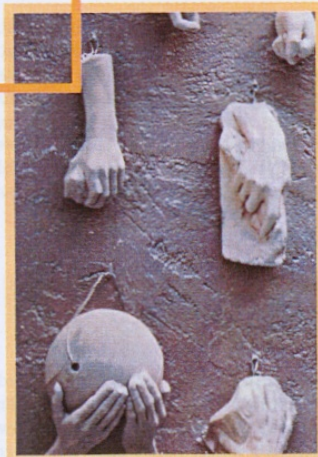
The month started badly when we discovered that a company in the US had registered [www.thecellar.com](http://www.thecellar.com) the very day after we had begun our own process of registering the name. Spooky, or what? The [co.uk](http://co.uk) name was still free but with the [.com](http://.com) site gone we decided to look for an alternative name, for the very reasons I outlined in last month's column. At the time of writing this we are discussing with Virtual Internet ([www.vi.net](http://www.vi.net)) - our chosen hosts - a suitable alternative.

This enforced delay in getting our site up and running means we are not presented with the temptation to start creating pages and banging them onto the Web with horrible little 'under construction' signs everywhere. (If you visited [www.cellar.com](http://www.cellar.com) in the last month you would have seen one of those signs). This is akin to a surgeon starting an operation before he's finished reading the patient's charts.

**'Don't put anything on the site that isn't ready for viewing.'**

All the good Web sites are being updated constantly to reflect changes in business or technology. Does that mean you leave an 'under construction' sign on your site permanently? Of course not. I've come across a number of sites that allow you to click on an option and then display nothing but the 'under construction' sign when you hit the new page. Those are not sites that I hurry back to. Rule one, therefore, is: Don't put anything on the site that isn't ready for viewing.

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So where do you start? Perhaps you have a great idea for a logo or a colour scheme, or a novel means of navigating round the site. You can see your company name spinning or throbbing or flashing and blinking, in huge letters across the top of the page or, more subtly, down the side. There are frames and menus and arrows and buttons, and copyright signs and dates and counters. It's a real web page.

Unfortunately, a lot of the sites that are doing little more than wasting disk space and bandwidth are nothing but a mixture of the above elements. They are like flashy advertisements for products you cannot remember a minute after the commercial break ends. It's like designing a car from the paint inwards.

Where have they gone wrong? Somewhere between realising the potential of the web and getting their site on-line they lost the plot. There could be a large number of reasons for this but the single most common is lack of planning. And the most important part of planning a web site is to determine the strategy of that site. Strategy may sound a grandiose term if you are a one-product company that wishes simply to use the web to advertise your wares. However, if we translate strategy as 'areas of concern' or, more straightforwardly, as 'focus', then it should be clear that if a site is designed without its strategy being clearly delineated then chaotic mess can easily ensue. Rule two is: If it doesn't fit obviously within your strategy then leave it out.

### **The Strategy**

The strategy for the Cellar site is simple: We want to provide a resource for small businesses wishing to exploit the potential of the web. That's really a mission statement but it gives us our focus and provides a measure against which to compare all ideas for content on the site. For instance, a section of the site that reviews books on web advertising or marketing fits the proposed model, whereas an area devoted to reviews of the latest gaming software is a less obvious fit, however enjoyable testing the games might be for us creating the site.

One philosophy maintains that there are three distinct categories of web site; those that inform, those that entertain, and those that sell something. Some, of course, can be a combination of two or all three but each successful site will have been designed with one of the categories uppermost in the mind of its creators. This sounds fairly sensible but as the web develops more and more sites seem to blur the boundaries between the categories almost as a matter of course. Jeffrey Veen, who is the Interface Director for Wired Digital and author of *HotWired Style: Principles for Building Smart Web Sites*, sees sites as placing themselves somewhere 'on a continuum between a library and a gallery'. This concept allows greater flexibility in thinking of how to present the contents of your site and it has the added merit of paying attention to the fact that web pages are part of a visual medium as much as a textual one. It also means you don't have to make such clear distinctions in your planning between what you see as informative and what is entertaining, for instance.

It is our intention to make the Cellar site entertaining and, at some stage, to involve selling. Our primary aim, however, will be to inform. Following the Veen philosophy that would make us a library with frequent exhibitions that from time-to-time sold off some of its surplus stock.

OK, so you get the picture. What does it all mean to you as a customer of the site?

We want to be the site you turn to for the latest news that affects businesses on the web, whether the news is financial, political or technical. There are many sites on the web that contain an abundance of information to keep the geeks happy. Few, if any, however, seem to be aimed directly at the small business trying to set up or run a site with no I.T. department or the budget for expensive consultancy work. There is also a plethora of sites whose primary focus is U.S. businesses. We will focus on the British and European markets.

Our site won't provide an extensive tutorial in JAVA, for instance, but it will contain a brief overview of why JAVA is important and how it is being used. The same approach will be used for all the prevailing hot topics on the web. This won't make you a JAVA (or PERL or Visual C++) programmer or an expert in TCP/IP but it will help you to spot the difference between the wanton use of jargon and the presentation of useful information.

## **The Design**

By the time you read this we should have resolved all our initial set-up problems and be creating the first pages for the site. In the next column I'll talk about the software we used and how we got the stuff to appear like it does on the site. For the rest of this column, though, I'll take you through some of the thought processes behind the design.

There are three main areas of the site: news; knowledge; tools. Our home page will list those sections of the site and give a very brief description of what they contain. It is important that the home page is not cluttered with choices and that it is quick to load. Another key issue we have to keep in mind is the variety of browsers and browser versions that you may be using to view the site. There is no point in us creating flashy pages that only 60% of our visitors can see. I am doing some consultancy work at the moment for a company in New York that is hoping to put a web-based tool on the desktops of literally many hundreds of equity traders throughout the States. One solution, of course, would be to provide a specific browser as part of the product but that ignores the reality of a huge variety of corporate standards. Even within companies it is easy to find different browser versions on different PCs.

One of the things we can do to refine our use of the latest authoring tools is to learn what you are using to view the site. We will slot in a feedback form to try and capture these demographics. At the same time we need more specific feedback from you as to what you like and don't like about the home page. We may even put up alternative home pages that you can criticise (or praise!) at will. Do you like the logo? What about where it is positioned? Is image or text navigation better? Do we need both? We're not trying to get you to do the work for us but we are very aware that it is easy to get lost in the thrill of creating and forget about the target audience. We are in the fortunate position of having the very people we are creating the site for being with us through the development of the site. It would be foolish to ignore the potential this offers for providing exactly what it is you want to see when you visit the site. This goes for content, too, of course, but in the first instance we are concentrating on the design. This is a point that is well worth stressing: The site is being designed for the visitor, not the company that owns it.

When you come to create your own sites all the feedback we generate will provide clues for your own designs. A whiteboard area will be included so that all the comments can be viewed. If discussions become really animated we can look to providing a real-time chat room as well.

What will be in our three sections?

**News** will contain current British and European web-related stories. This will build into an archive as new stories are created and added to the list. It will be possible, too, to register for an e-mail version of the news so that headlines can be sent direct to your mailbox and you will be able to link directly to a story that interests you. In addition to giving the news we will try and add some comment as to why the story might be important.

**Knowledge** is the section that will hold all the articles on hot web topics, whether that is languages, technical specifications, communications protocols, or future directions in web tools. All articles will be aimed at the level of a web-literate but non-technical reader. Links to sources of more technical information will be given.

**Tools** is the area where we will review and discuss any and all of the software or books that we use in the creation and upkeep of the site. From here it will be possible to go to sites to download or purchase the programs and books.

### **Small Beginnings**

The above is a vision of the site a short way down the line. There are other areas we could begin to include and develop but our purpose in the short term is to show you how a site can be created and what the design issues are. The content of our site is not going to match the content that you will want to include in your own. When we have enough on the site to show how the design elements hang together we can move to the next stage of looking to promote the site and then move towards some form of electronic commerce.

Our first target is to get the home page up and to define the consistent look and feel of the site. This latter means that we have a logo that appears on every page and there is a single 'feel' to the site which means you do not confuse it with any other. Within each section there will be a subtle differentiation that further tells you that, although you are still very definitely in the cellar, you are in News or Tools, for instance.

Our quest for constant feedback from you means that the site may develop more slowly than a purely commercial one would. I hope, however, that this is more than compensated for by the quality of what we finally produce.

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