

PC NEWS

Alaska Computer Society – PC Users Group

May 2002

Volume 10, Number 1

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Meeting Announcement

Seven Most Common Quickbooks Mistakes

Thursday, May 9th, 7 P.M.

Lecture Hall of the Carr Gottstein Academic Center at
the Alaska Pacific University

The regular monthly meeting is held in the Carr-Gottstein Building on the APU Campus. The meeting begins with a brief introduction and an opportunity for members of the audience to bring up problems they are having with their pc's. Other members of the audience generally respond with suggested solutions.

Following this introduction, Dick McCart, of Accounting Solutions LLC, will present the "Seven Most Common Quickbooks Mistakes." Mr. McCart's presentation will be followed by an opportunity for questions from the audience.

The meeting ends with the door prize drawing and an opportunity to select software for evaluation.

Please visit the map on our web site at <http://www.acs-pcug.org>

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1 Themes and Templates: FrontPage and PowerPoint

By Dawn Scott

Who Should Read This:

If you design web sites with FrontPage or do PowerPoint slide shows, you have probably used a variety of templates and themes that ship with these products. Sometimes it seems all the themes have been exhausted, and there just isn't one that fits the bill for the web site or presentation you want to prepare. In that case, try the below sites to research the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pre-designed FrontPage and PowerPoint design formats.

The folks at www.pixelmill.net are a re-seller of themes and templates for FrontPage and templates for PowerPoint. They also provide components, or elements like graphics, etc.

Microsoft Themes define the look of navigation buttons, page banners, fonts, font colors, styles, horizontal rules, bullets, and a few other features. By applying a theme to your web, all of these features will be changed.

Microsoft Page Templates, on the other hand, specify a specific page layout. They may incorporate Theme elements (for example, navigation bars), but have a pre-defined page design. It is then up to you to add your own content and create a web site with more pages.

Microsoft Web Templates help you to create a new web. Using a Web Template will create a web that has a certain navigational structure in place already, with several pre-designed pages. Using the Web Template will help you to get started; it is then up to you to add your content and add or delete pages.

Cost Involved:

Prices vary, from \$7.95 to \$24.95 or more. You can refine your product search to just specific designers (there are many), specific categories, specific design features (Flash, curves, etc.), and more. You can get a preview of

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what the theme or template will look like in use. Themes range from the fun (basketball, cooking, various holidays, etc.) to the serious (accounting, legal, etc.).

Mouse Effects:

Many products feature mouseover and mousedown effects on their buttons—when you point to a button it will change, when you have clicked on the button and it has become selected the button will change again. Such effects are a lot of work to do for yourself, and are all done for you inside of a theme for as little as \$7.99.

I have purchased two FrontPage themes from this company and the download and installation are straightforward. They publish a newsletter, and offer a free theme each publication. For practice, I just downloaded their free theme this month. It was an executable file that took about a minute to download. I executed the file, it installed with a 5-step wizard and was immediately available when I launched FrontPage. They have over 1,300 FrontPage products, and over 250 PowerPoint products, plus a few components, a new feature.

More Templates and Themes

At www.outfront.net, you can find a variety of templates and themes, also with Flash and other features. They identify their site as a FrontPage learning community, and offer a variety of resources such as tutorials, FAQ's, an online community, and more. They have several designs with fast-loading Flash intros, that you can alter using Swish (a \$50 product compared to the much more costly Flash). They also offer customizing of any of their designs, and customize design services as well as consultations at \$75 per hour on how to maximize your use of their templates.

At officeupdate.microsoft.com/templategallery/ you will find a variety of templates for PowerPoint as well as Word, Excel, and others. These are free products. This site executes Javascript code that will download and install the template onto your system from the Microsoft template web site.

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2 Book Evaluation:

by Fielder George Dowding

Web Design In A Nutshell

A Desktop Quick Reference

Second Edition

by Jennifer Niederst

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101 Morris Street, Sebastopol, CA 95472

O'Reilly's "Nutshell" Handbooks

A search for the word, "nutshell" on [O'Reilly's](#) web site brought up fifty-seven titles. Each "Nutshell" typically has the words, *A Desktop Quick Reference* as its subtitle. "A Nutshell Handbook" as well as the cute animal that graces the cover is a trademark of O'Reilly's. I purchased my first "Nutshell" (**UNIX in a Nutshell**) in 1996. It is subtitled, *A Desktop Quick Reference for System V & Solaris 2.0* Further, the publisher's information page indicates this "Nutshell" for "UNIX" was first published in 1986. Thus, **Web Design In a Nutshell** 2nd Edition, joins a long and honored line of O'Reilly's "desktop quick reference" books.

The Author

According to the information provided by O'Reilly:

Jennifer Niederst is creative director of Songline Studios, publishers of innovative online products. She began designing documents for the World Wide Web in mid-1993 as the original designer of the identity, interface, and graphics for Global Network Navigator (GNN), published by O'Reilly & Associates, Inc. Prior to her life online, Jennifer worked as a book designer for O'Reilly & Associates, Inc., and Little, Brown & Company. She has also worked as a free-lance graphic designer. She attended the University of Notre Dame where she received a BFA in design and photography and a BA in art history.

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This combination of academic credentials and experience in designing documents for the web in its early days, predisposes me to a positive attitude toward this desk reference. I am further encouraged because she, “eats her own dog food¹.” She writes in her preface, “I wrote *Web Design in a Nutshell*² because it was the book I needed—one place to go to find quick answers to my questions.”

Jennifer was not alone in this project. She acknowledges “a small army of people [who] were instrumental in the writing of this book.” After she credits Bill Peña for the chapters on JavaScript and DHTML, she names ten technical reviewers along with their specific areas of expertise. She recognizes the large crew who helped in the actual details of preparation and production and makes special mention of “Tim O’Reilly for his careful crafting of the ‘In a Nutshell’ series and for giving [her] the green light on this book back in 1998.”

A final point of encouragement is this second edition has been published a mere two years and nine months after the first edition. Clearly, the intent is to keep pace with developments in web site design.

Overview

The book itself is a hefty volume of about 640 pages including front matter and a glossary and an index at the back. There are thirty-two chapters and six appendixes organized in six parts). Bleed-edge tabs permit quickly finding a specific chapter or appendix. The index features a full length, gray, bleed edge for even quicker access.

The Parts

The arrangement of the first five parts which form the core reference material is like a sandwich. Part I is an overview of how the web works, and Part V is an overview of what Jennifer calls “Advanced Technologies.” The meat of the reference, authoring, graphics, and multimedia, is covered in great detail in Parts II, III, and IV, respectively. The appendixes and back matter constitute Part VI.

¹This phrase originally was applied to software companys that used their own products.

²It is not clear, but apparently she is referring to the first edition, January 1999.

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I found the organization around the six parts easy to grasp, and was able to quickly find what I needed to solve a problem that came up while I was in the midst of writing this review. Here then is a taste of the contents.

Part I: The Web Environment

I was a bit surprised by this first part and the titles of its seven chapters. However, after reading a few paragraphs in the first chapter, *Designing for a Variety of Browsers*, I quickly got an appreciation of the problem facing Jennifer and the way she had solved it. Clearly, the best point to begin the process of web design is to examine the methods, features and limitations of the means of presenting the content in the context of the current state of the art. The cutting-edge techniques may then be presented after this firm foundation is established.

Each facet of the web is discussed in some detail. Jennifer begins with the browser and monitor (chapters 1 and 2). Then she diverges a bit to discuss *Web Design Principles for Print Designers*, chapter 3, obviously one of her strong points. Next she tackles the server in chapter 4 and *Printing from the Web* in chapter 5. She rounds out her survey with chapters on *Accessibility*, chapter 6, and *Internationalization*, chapter 7.

Typical is her first sentence in Chapter 6, *Accessibility*: “Responsible web design includes making pages accessible even to users with disabilities.” Exploring the ramifications of this statement, she notes, “Vision impaired users may use a text browser (such as Lynx) in conjunction with software that reads the contents of the screen aloud.” This chapter fairly warmed the cockles of my heart. This is what the web is really all about. She correctly credits the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) with initiating the guidelines for making the web universally accessible. She follows a listing of the complete guidelines by practical suggestions and techniques for achieving this goal.

Part II: Authoring

Web page authoring is covered in excruciating detail. Part II is the thick slice of roast beef in this sandwich. As expected, Jennifer presents plain html, tables, frames and forms in chapters eight through fifteen. She focuses on *Specifying Color in HTML* in chapter 16 and covers *Cascading Style Sheets* in chapter 17. *Server Side Includes* is the topic for the last chapter of this

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part.

Part III: Graphics

In Chapter 12 of Part II, *Adding Images and Other Page Elements*, Jennifer “focuses on the HTML tags available for placing elements such as rules, images, or multimedia objects on a web page.” In the five chapters of Part III, she provides the detail needed to understand the techniques for including graphics in web pages.

In chapters 19, 20, and 21, she discusses the technical details of the three image formats in use, GIF, JPEG, and PNG. Jennifer gets high marks in my book for even mentioning in chapter 19 the Unisys patent and their practice of charging licensing fees to developers incorporating GIF compression into their products. She states, “Unisys does enforce its patent and charges software companies fees for including GIF support, but GIF shows no sign of disappearing any time soon.” In chapter 21, she states, “PNG’s are recommended for the type of image that would typically be saved as a GIF.” In the next paragraph, she continues, “PNG’s better compression . . . [and] more sophisticated interlacing technique . . . starts displaying the image in 1/8 the time.”

Part IV: Multimedia and Interactivity

As I write, this is all Greek to me. Jennifer devoted four chapters (24 through 27) to *Audio on the Web*, *Video on the Web*, *Flash and Shockwave*, and *Introduction to SMIL*. Rather than exhibiting my ignorance, I will just note she has, at the end of each chapter, an encouragement to seek outside sources of information.

Part V: Advanced Technologies

This is the part that has me straining at the bit. She covers in five chapters an *Introduction to JavaScript*, an *Introduction to DHTML*, an *Introduction to XML*, *XHTML*, and *WAP and WML*.

These topics all have me slaving for an opportunity to make use of their features. “JavaScript was first introduced by Netscape in Navigator 2.0, as a simple scripting language that could be embedded directly in web pages.” I have, however, never taken the time to learn anything about using this now ubiquitous client-side scripting language. Jennifer kindly includes

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a table showing support by the various browsers by platform, version, and JavaScript version.

This reference is not ment to be a tutorial, but Jennifer includes a good deal of background, standards, and examples for someone (such as I) who may be unfamiliar with the topic to at least make a start at learning about and begin designing web pages with the feature. I am currently using an application that stores its files as XML documents.

So far, I have not come into contact with Dynamic HTML or the Wireless Application Protocol and its standard Wireless Markup Language. I have been migrating the web pages I produce to be compatible with the XHTML standard. I am looking forward to becomming more and more familiar with these technologies.

Part VI: Appendixes

There are six appendixes, *A* through *F*, which Jennifer uses to display tabulated information. At first glance these tabulations seem to be very comprehensive. I particularly appreciate appendixes *C* and *D* that cover *Deprecated Tages* and *Proprietary Tags* respectively. I plan to stay away from these.

Also listed is a glossary and index. Again at first glance, both appear to be very comprehensive.

Conclusion

I hope I have illustrated my enthusiam for this reference work. If you work or play in this area, I would say this is a must have desk reference. The list price is \$29.95, which strikes me as a bargain.

3 Steve Bass: Shopping Tips for Internet Shopaholics

By: Steve Bass, Pasadena IBM Users Group

Last month I described my experience spending over \$150 to save about \$4 on vitamins I bought on the Internet. This column takes care of the other side of the story: Tips on tackling the problems of Internet buying.

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Fighting the Free Syndrome

How much do you make an hour? If you're clocking more than, say, \$5 an hour, don't waste your time hunting for discounts that come and go. The worst ones to try finding are free shipping or \$10 off with your first order. A better strategy? If you bump into an offer from Half.com, say, and you're in the market for a bunch of used books, it's a slam-dunk. Otherwise, don't bother tracking them down.

Factor in Shipping

Paying attention to shipping costs may seem obvious, but there are variables to consider. You might think you'll save on shipping by choosing a site that charges a flat fee for shipping no matter how many items you purchase. That's likely true unless the site's products are inflated to cover the shipping costs. With some items—vitamins, for instance—that's not such a big deal as most sites charge a flat \$4.95 for standard shipping. (One exception, though, is AdvanceRX; they charge a flat fee of \$3 for the entire order, and the product pricing is lower than other drug sites.)

Listen to Users

The wealth of opinions on the Net is overwhelming and you need to tap into it before making any major purchase. There are two spots I listen in on, are useful in its own way. First try the newsgroups and do it using the [Google.com](http://www.google.com) search engine. When I was interested in a camcorder, I typed "Panasonic Camcorder" into the Google search field and clicked on Groups. Goggle will provide a list of groups that contain the two words. It's a little daunting from here because you'll face at least 10 groups. Choose the one that's closest to your search. For instance, Humanities (Fine art, literature, philosophy) and Misc (Employment, health) won't fit while Comp (Hardware, software, consumer info) sure will.

You'll then see a dozen or more sub-groups belonging to Comp, each with a green bar showing the likely hits in the groups. Type "Panasonic Camcorder" into the field again and choose "Search only in comp."

The dilemma, as you'll soon find out, is there's a lot to sort through in order to find the recommendations and discussion you're looking to read.

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The other spot I really like is Epinions.com. It's filled with people like us providing their observations and experiences with products. Don't be put off by thinking these are just willy-nilly opinions. Granted, some are, but most people are careful and thorough in their reports, few seem to have an ulterior motive, and those that do are easy to spot.

Try Epinions by typing, "Choosing an Air Conditioner" into the search field. Scroll down to "Member Advice" and you'll get a sense of what Epinions offers. Better, search for an item you're very familiar with and see what others have to say.

Make those Comparisons

You're crazy if you shop on the Internet without using a price comparison site. There are many available, and here's a sampling:

- Mysimon.com
- Dealtime.com
- Pricingcentral.com
- Bizrate.com
- Smartshop.com
- BuyBuddy.com

If you're wondering which sites I use regularly, take a gander at some of my favorites:

Pricescan.com: A neat site with an assortment of ways to search for products and spots to purchase the item. The site does an exemplary job at digging up pricing for a myriad of products including for books, computers, office equipment, home and garden, and other categories.

DestinationRX.com: Does a remarkable job at neatly displaying a grid with product, vendor, price, estimated shipping, and total cost. Great: Sorting by column—cost or price—is easy, and getting details about the vendor is a click away. Not so hot: "Total Cost field" doesn't take into account price per unit, so comparing a bottle of 100, 60 milligram vitamins with the same bottle of 100 milligram vitamins isn't accurate.

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CanadaRx: A member of another user group told me about Canada.rx. She said, “I thought you might be interested in this solution for prescription drugs. A friend is diabetic and has who knows what else. His doctor faxes his prescriptions and he receives a package a few days later with no hassle from the post office. (His only real difficulty lay in convincing his doctor to send the fax and that only had to be done once.) His credit card is charged approximately one-third the price he’d pay locally. I asked him for the URL and this is his response:

It’s CanadaRx. No www, no.com, nothing but CanadaRx.³ They keep changing the entry screens, making it sometimes difficult to find the screen one wants. But it’s all there. All that’s needed in patience. Persistence helps some too.

I checked and the prices really are substantial lower than most discount pharmacies.

Pricewatch.com: This site has been around the longest and provides a fast, convenient way to find the best prices on computing hardware.

Addall.com: Think Amazon has the best prices in town? Nope. Half.com, BooksAMillion.com, and others often beat Amazon. The saving are enough that it makes using Addall.com a must every time you shop for books.

PCworld.pricegrabber.com: I’m a little biased here, so pardon my conflict-of-interest for a minute, and try PCWorld’s Product Finder. Primarily hardware, software, and electronics, it gives you a way to find products, and check and compare their prices. Three things I like better here than the other sites: I can easily track a product, watching for price changes, just by supplying my e-mail address. Next, if the product’s been reviewed by PC World, one click gets me to the article. Finally, the site gives me access to the full spec sheet of the product, something I find invaluable.

Cnet’s **shopper.cnet.com:** Does a decent job with hardware and software but only so-so for consumer electronics. It’s sometimes difficult separating ads from product reviews.

Steve Bass is a Contributing Editor with PC World and runs the Pasadena IBM Users Group. He’s also a founding member of APCUG.

Write to him at Steve_bass@pcworld.com.

³Ahem! Your browser fills in the “www.” and “.com”. Try, www.canadarx.com Ed.

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Check PCW's current edition at www.pcworld.com/resource/toc/index.asp and sign up for the Steve Bass online newsletter at www.pcworld.com/bass.letter.

4 Short Subjects:

Bio-Mechanical Generator

I remember hearing about a family that attached an exercise bicycle to a battery and then the battery to the TV, and made their kids peddle for TV. I thought that was a great idea. Well, now you can buy a couple of smaller, commercial products with the same concept in mind. The AladdinPower hand-operated generator (\$59.95) recharges batteries for cellular phones, CD players, rescue lights, radar units, radios, and just about any product that uses rechargeable batteries; two to three minutes of hand pumping yields 20 minutes of use. The package includes the hand-powered electric generator, charging regulator, universal connecting cell phone cable, and an emergency high power flashlight. Also in production is a foot-powered model (\$149.95) to energize larger items, such as laptops and camcorders. Check in with AladdinPower for updates: 813-975-7177 or visit www.aladdinpower.com for details and spec's on these products.

Call for Volunteers

The ACS-PCUG is run by volunteers. If you see a job that needs to be done, volunteer! If a position is vacant and it is in your area of interest or experience, volunteer! When we next have elections for officers and directors, volunteer!

The best place to get started is to attend the monthly Board of Directors meeting. It is held in the AARP meeting room on the second Thursday of the month beginning at 7 P.M. The AARP is located in the Northway mall next to Office Max.

Your Opportunity to Share:

If you have some fun or useful web sites you wish to share with fellow ACS members, please write up a paragraph or two about the site(s) and submit them for publication to newsletter@acs-pcug.org.

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5 The Back Page

Next Month:

Linux In The Office

Mike Barsalou will bring a laptop with Linux on it to demo Linux, some of the utilities, and the free office suite called StarOffice. He will give a short overview of the system, its history, how it can work with or on a Windows box.

He will have copies of the StarOffice to give away on CD's.

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