

Cross Browser Compatibility

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The Problem

Not all browsers are alike. The way your site appears will vary depending on the user's choice of browser, fonts installed on their computer, and how large they sized their browser window, and other criteria. These are not under the control of the web site developer. So, the goal should be to make sure your site looks as good as possible, regardless.

Too many sites are created and tested using only Internet Explorer. Developers often use Microsoft Proprietary tools such as FrontPage and .asp. While useful and valuable for developing web pages for Microsoft Internet Explorer, too often, the pages do not work properly with other browsers.

Browser Wars

Initially, the Internet did not include the World Wide Web. The Internet was a group of computers using tools such as "Archie", "Finger", and "FTP" to access and manage the content. Some of these are still in use, many of them have fallen out of favor with the advent of the Web.

In the 1990's the idea of the World Wide Web came to fruition. The Netscape browser allowed users to more easily travel the Internet via links. The ease of access opened the Internet to an entire generation of users. In 1994, Tim Berners-Lee and others that invented the World Wide Web created an international consortium, the "World Wide Web Consortium" (W3C) to develop and define standards.

Microsoft was a little late jumping into the Internet Browser Market. As they watched Netscape's popularity grow with the growth of the World Wide Web, they realized they were missing a large market. To compete with Netscape, they tried to leverage off their size. Microsoft decided that instead of following the W3C standard, they would create their own. They reasoned that their size would allow them to get by with it.

The resulting family of Microsoft Web development tools, Microsoft Java, ASP, FrontPage, etc. were optimized to work best with Internet Explorer, not with Netscape. The object was to drive users to Microsoft, and away from Netscape. Netscape responded in kind, creating web development standards that worked best with Netscape, but not with Internet Explorer.

Web developers at that time found it very difficult to accommodate both, and often had to choose. To try to be compliant to both, was becoming quite impractical. In fact, installing both Netscape and Internet Explorer on the same computer was quite difficult.

How About a Standard?

Stepping into the middle of the fray was a little known browser named "Opera". Although it had been around since 1994, it had stayed a little below the radar. Stepping boldly into the middle of the Netscape / Microsoft battle, they announced that they would not follow either Netscape or Microsoft's standard, they would follow the W3C standard. Not long after, Netscape followed. In time Microsoft became more compliant, but is still not within the

standard.

The result is that web pages are far more standard. Creating web pages that are predictable across multiple browsers is easier. It is not yet, however, something that may be assumed.

Cross Browser Problems

Many web development editors generate code that works best with Internet Explorer, but not so well with W3C compliant browsers. Microsoft FrontPage is renown for this. It is not uncommon to find a site that looks fine with Internet Explorer, but looks terrible with Mozilla FireFox. A more common problem is a site written with Microsoft ASP that does not work at all without Microsoft's Internet Explorer.

Many web developers do not have the technical expertise to understand the nature of these problems. Many others do not even bother to test with different browsers, saying that they are only compliant with Internet Explorer.

When Microsoft created Internet Explorer, they built in many "hooks" to allow access to the Windows Registry, and other controls in the Windows Operating System. In time, hackers have discovered these hooks, and use them to attack user's computers as they browse the web. So many user's have had their computer "hijacked", and rendered completely useless, that an entire family of anti-spyware and anti-adware software was developed. As more users moved to more secure browsers, such as Mozilla's Firefox, Microsoft found their share of the browser market plummeting. Some estimate that almost one-third of the browsers in use are non-Microsoft.

This means that up to one-third of the users to your web site are not using Internet Explorer. To only be Internet Explorer compliant is to ignore that third.

An Evolving Standard

The W3C standard is constantly evolving to meet the changing needs and technologies. At this time, the Consortium is focused on making the web easier to use with portable browsers. Palm computers and telephones are the future.

To meet this challenge, style sheets were introduced to the W3C standard. A site may use different style sheets for different browser devices. In this way, a web site can optimize it's appearance for the device in use.

To do this, parts of the existing standard had to be dropped ("deprecated"). The old formatting standards had to be moved out to allow the newer, more flexible, standard. One standard in particular, the definition of a page's typeface, the tag, was dropped. Most of the web site development tools in use still use these obsolete tags. Most browsers still support them. As the browsers begin to drop support for deprecated tags, web sites will begin to lose their formatting.

While this is probably not in the near future, there simply is no reason to not follow the new standard.

Keeping up with standards, paying attention to quality, and maximizing your return on investment, is very important to Osage Enterprises.

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