

# CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

## A Word on the Web

By Douglas E. Welch

Many of you probably have your own personal Web site. You might even have developed a site about a specific topic that interests you. It might be a very popular site. If you are like other successful Web site owners, you might have wondered if there is a way to help defray some of the costs of running your Web site, or even turn it into something that could become the focus of your high-tech career. While earning a living doing what you love is a highly sought-after goal, turning your Web site into a commercial enterprise might not be the route to take.

There are several problems with turning your Web site into a profitable enterprise. Here are a few that just might keep you awake at night.

### Your Content Might Not Be Compelling Enough to Garner Subscribers

Too often, Web site owners don't understand the difference between what people "want" and what people "need." While they may have thousands of people using their "free" Web site, converting these users to subscribers is nearly impossible—unless your content is so compelling that your users *must* have it.

If similar content is available elsewhere, especially for free—even if it is more difficult to access—people will not subscribe. If people can live without your content, meaning it doesn't directly affect their ability to make money or improve their social standing, they will not subscribe. If people can do without the information, they will.

This discovery can be a crushing blow to some Web site owners when they realize that not everyone finds their site as useful as they believed it to be. The simple truth is this: If content is unique and compelling, people will pay for it. If not, it is up to you to make it so. Don't berate your user base for being stingy. Don't complain about all the time and money you poured into the site. Guilt tactics like this may actually drive away subscribers. As a businessperson, it is up to you to convince people to buy what you are offering. You cannot expect them to do it out of charity.

### People Don't Like to Pay for Something That Was Free

Regardless of any valid reasoning, explanations by the Web site owner, claims of poverty and the long

nights spent developing a Web site, users are disinclined to pay for something that has previously been free. In fact, they may be so incensed as to actively dissuade others from subscribing, as well. Is their anger logical? Probably not. Everyone needs to make a living, Web site developers included. Does that make any difference? No. People often do illogical things. Paying for something that was once free seems to go against people's base instincts.

Geocaching.com is currently embroiled in a loud "discussion" between its members due to the institution of a membership system that allows members to prevent non-members from viewing certain information. Previously, all information was available to all. While many of the members respect the owner's wishes to keep the site solvent, the simple act of adding a fee has caused nearly everyone to question the value of the site.

I believe that if you *ever* plan to charge for access to your Web site, do it from day one. Make the subscription ludicrously small, maybe \$1 for two years, or something like that. This sets the tone for your Web site from the beginning. As your site grows, you can begin raising this subscription fee for new users, while offering special offers to those people who supported you in the beginning. Charging users at the very start can help to prevent damaging conflicts later, when you need them the least.

### Sometimes a Hobby Is Just a Hobby

Too often, great Web sites disappear completely when their owners try to commercialize them. The owners pay out large sums of money to buy more hardware, expand the speed of their Internet connection, or purchase software to manage the site, just to discover that they can't get enough subscribers to pay the bills. Money runs out and the site disappears completely. In an attempt to grow, a great resource is lost.

Don't try to grow too big, too fast. It is better for the information to be available on a slow server with a small Internet connection than for it to disappear completely. Develop Web sites for yourself, and be happy if you can find some way to help them pay for themselves. Not every Web site has to become the next Yahoo! Sometimes, being a small fish in a big pond is better than not being in the pond at all. □

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