

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS...SMIL (That's right... SMIL)

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By Ronni Rhodes

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Did I get your attention? I hope so because we need to talk about SMIL and how its use can turn your streaming media presentations into television-like experiences for your web visitors. SMIL (pronounced "smile") stands for Synchronized Multimedia Integration Language and was developed by the W3C Synchronized Multimedia (SYMM) Working Group to allow the synchronization of audio, video, text and graphics in web based presentations. It was expressly developed to enhance the quality of streaming media and can support multiple types of data, compression algorithms, and bandwidth environments. It was designed so that anyone familiar with HTML and some XML commands could employ it to create television like presentations.

Philipp Hoschka, Chairman of the W3C group and editor of the SMIL specifications says: "...the Web lacks a simple way to express synchronization over time, for example, 'play audio file A in parallel with video file B' or 'show image C after audio file A has finished playing.' SMIL enables this type of information to be expressed quite easily, allowing television-like content to be created..."*

I hear you asking yourselves "what does this technospeak have to do with me?" If you create web based advertising and would like to offer your clients a compelling new way to deliver it, this has a lot to do with you. If you're a website owner longing for a means to showcase your products and services with economical elegance, this has a lot to do with you, too.

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Why? Because the Web is inherently interactive and visitors can follow the links imbedded in a SMIL presentation directly to your website. There they can obtain additional information or, more importantly, be taken directly to an order form for the product or service described in that presentation. "Users can switch from 'couch potato' mode into interactive mode with a simple mouse click," says Mr. Hoschka.

Let's talk about how you can put SMIL to work for you.

In the entertainment industry? An entertainer wants his visitors to know where and when he'll be performing. Scroll the schedule of his club dates next to the window playing a video clip

of his specialty. As he sets his performance schedule for future dates, the clip can be quickly updated to reflect this. Include some text ads from the clubs involved, give their "live" URL's, and let them help pay for the production!

Selling real estate? Photos or slides taken with a digital camera can be coordinated with an audio commentary and text. Tell your potential clients about the geographic area, the schools, recreational opportunities and transportation situation. Place commercial messages from merchants in the area, with live links to their websites, into the presentation and generate additional revenue to defray some of the costs.

Are you in the training business? Courses can be devised which integrate voice and images. Live links can be introduced to take the students to other sites and information pertinent to the material being taught. Keep updated company policies online and couple them with news items and other materials relevant to the employees. Motivational trainers can use text, audio, and video to sell their training materials when their audience is most inclined to buy!

Doing e-commerce? Show photos of the product range with an audio track talking about each product as it appears. Use this in conjunction with text to take your visitors directly to the order form for the product while they're anxious and motivated to purchase.

Work with other merchants of complementary products; generate revenue by placing ads for their goods throughout your presentation.

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Offering a service? Slide presentations can be timed so that bullet points come up in sequence on the screen at specified time intervals. These could change color as the presenter moves from point to point. Testimonials could scroll as you discuss your customer satisfaction policies. Restaurants could show a clip of the chef preparing his "signature" meal while the recipe is read or scrolled for the visitor.

I've talked about Rich Media, of which streaming and SMIL are integral components, in many articles. (See: <http://www.wbcimaging.com/articlesbyexperts.htm>) Now Rich Media is in the spotlight as traditional advertisers, losing faith in the "tried and true" banner advertising campaign, start to hop aboard the streaming bandwagon.

As these advertisers shift their emphasis from banner click-thrus to ads that are specifically used for branding,

greater emphasis will be placed on Rich Media. With Rich Media, there are numerous opportunities to present the complexities of branding that cannot be done with static banners – greater interactivity, sound, motion, and the ability to display creatives in a larger space. As this occurs, SMIL will become the key to making these ad campaigns an entertaining and "smooth as television" experience.

I'd like you to think about television news. It's pretty straightforward; information about the events of the day. But the sophisticated audiences of today demand more than just "talking heads" on their television screens. So the news is packaged as entertainment, with music and graphics to grab the eyes and ears of the viewer. When advertisers realize that web surfers are seeking this same experience, there will be a rush to duplicate this on the Internet.

Then, all you have to do is...SMIL.

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Making The Business Case For Web Standards

By Karl Groves

Making The Business Case For Web Standards

by: **Karl Groves**

Through the explosive growth of the Web, companies have realized the benefit of building a strong online presence. By publishing a website to the Internet, companies are able to build their brand, market their products, support existing customers, release publicity pieces, and even take orders. Lost in the feverish pace of growth however, has been an eye on the effect that their current web-building practices have on the bottom line and the future of their online presence. Not only does the website content itself have an impact on the company's income but so does the way the site itself is created.

Building your site with a commitment to web standards – and continuously testing to ensure it maintains its adherence to those standards – can save your company money and even increase website related income.

What are web standards?

Web standards are, for purposes of this discussion, carefully designed sets of rules and protocols that drive web-based content throughout the Internet.

Specifically, web standards revolve around: Structural Languages – such as HTML, XHTML, XML, SMIL, SVG, MathML Presentation Languages – such as CSS, XSL Document Object Model ECMAScript

These web standards have been defined by the Worldwide Web Consortium (W3C) and other standards bodies to ensure the interoperability and access of documents placed on the web. Documents that follow the established standards will benefit in many ways: Lower maintenance effort and cost Lower cost for redesign Improved usability and accessibility Broader compatibility across platforms and devices Reduced hardware demand and cost

Site wide look and feel consistency

Designing to current standards enables the site to maintain the same look and feel theme throughout the site. Standards also allow the site's look and feel to change rapidly with little additional load on personnel resources.

Improved usability: smaller document size loads faster

Designing to current standards means that – by proxy – the documents will be smaller. Because of this, the pages will load faster for the user. Download times have been shown to be a factor in website usability. A perceived delay in site presentation undermines users' evaluation of the site. Users systematically rate slower sites as less interesting and having lower quality content. In addition they report that delays interfere with task continuity, their ability to remember the site, and use flow. Exceedingly slow sites can lead users to believe an error has occurred. Finally, users correlate site performance and security: Chronically slow sites are considered to be less secure resources for

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purchase. (

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Better cross–platform compatibility

As browser manufacturers come closer to adhering to web standards, it is becoming clearer that creating standards–based pages can be an increasing assurance that the site will operate across multiple platforms. "Rendering fine" is a myth born of misunderstanding. Considering that 5 different rendering engines are used to surf the web using dozens of browsers (and versions of those browsers) on 3 platforms, attempting to test the site for rendering in every configuration is next to impossible. Coding to standards then, is the only practical solution for ensuring compatibility – now and in the future.

Prepares for the future

"Rendering fine" on current browsers is no guarantee that a site with invalid markup will render fine in the future. Moreover, it is no guarantee that a site will render fine (or at all) in the growing number of non–traditional devices such as PDAs and cellular telephones. As browser manufacturers make further efforts to make their products adhere to standards, the point of "rendering fine" in target browsers becomes moot, anyway. Standards–compliant markup will be even more of a guarantee that it will work on all platforms than error–laden and proprietary markup.

Extensibility

Designing to the current standard means sites should be marked up using XHTML – an XML–compatible version of HTML. Using this format will enable the company to venture into the inevitable world of XML without the need for major modifications to the site structure. XML features can be added quickly and painlessly.

Lower maintenance and easier troubleshooting

Personnel can come and go – but the code they create will stay behind. If that code contains error–laden, invalid markup and "work–arounds" for rendering in target browsers, it will cost the company money in personnel time to find the bad markup and make it right. "Because standards are very well documented, another person taking over some standard–compliant code can hit the ground running – and will not need to become familiar with the previous developer's coding practices." – Tristan Nitot, Netscape Communications (

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Regardless of who does the site maintenance, designing to standards ensures shorter time spent hunting down problems. While poor rendering may very well be a buggy browser, in most cases "rendering improperly" usually means "something is wrong". Validation is one of the ways to uncover exactly what the issue is. By maintaining a standards–compliant site, you are providing yourself with insurance that if something goes awry, you will be able to more easily and quickly get to the possible

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cause. Simply put, if you know everything else is OK, you can focus any troubleshooting efforts on what has been changed instead of looking at what else already existed that could have caused or exacerbated the problem.

Accessibility

Designing with web standards makes accessibility an easier goal to achieve, as standards have been created with accessibility in mind.

Proper markup goes beyond "validity". Each element in (x)HTML has been created with a specified purpose, and so creating a standards-compliant site also means using the most appropriate element for the task at hand. Doing so increases accessibility. Proper markup gives alternative access devices the ability to provide context to the page's content.

Reduced bandwidth cost

Last, adhering to standards-based markup can reduce the amount that a company pays for bandwidth. As stated above, adherence to standards has the effect of reducing the size of a document – by up to 50% or more by some estimates. This can lead to big savings in bandwidth charges for high-traffic websites.

Standards just make sense

So what does all of this really mean? As the company's website becomes more important to its bottom line, standards can help position the company as a leader. Those who choose to make the commitment to quality will find a payoff that begins immediately and lasts into the future. Right now, you'll save on development of new content. In the future you'll benefit from reduced maintenance and increased agility. Standards compliance just makes sense.

Additional Resources [HTML Standards Compliance – Why Bother? Why Should You Validate Your Web Pages?](#) [WASP: Fighting For Standards Liberty! Quality! Validity! Why We Won't Help You](#) [How User-Agents Handle Tag Soup](#) [The Business Value Of Web Standards](#) [Web Standards For Business](#)

Karl Groves is a freelance web designer who has done production work on sites for National Cancer Institute, Network For Good, Aerospace Medical Association and more.

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