

Your Artist Website Made Simple

Why do you need a website and how to think about it:

If you're at all serious about producing and displaying art, it's expected that anyone interested in your art should be able to learn about it and you via a website. The website should be thought of as an advertising "brochure" for your art which can be viewed worldwide in an instant. As I will demonstrate, it's surprisingly easy and affordable to establish a site and another point is that it's not really necessary to keep updating the site with new images, for example. Although you can update it as you see fit, once you have a representative site set up, it can be left for a considerable amount of time, as a brochure would function.

The elements of a website

A website is nothing more than a series of files and computer code to display the files which resides on a "host" computer which is continuously connected to the internet. The website has an address, called a domain name, like www.bobcookart.com, which uniquely identifies it. The address/domain name is also called a "URL" which stands for "Uniform Resource Locator" but we don't care what it's called since we're artists, not nerds.

For anyone to view the website, they fire up their computer, connect it to the internet, and launch a program called a browser. The most common browser is Windows Explorer but there are others such as Firefox, Chrome, and Safari which is dedicated to Apple computers. When the address (URL) is typed into the browser, the website pops up. Websites are more usually called from links. Just about everyone has used these. You receive, for example, an email and it says, "click here for more information". Clicking on the link tells your computer to launch its resident browser, automatically enter the website address and, boom, the site pops up.

For you to set up a website, you need a website provider which works with individuals and/or small businesses. The provider simply "hosts" your site which means it resides on a computer owned by the provider and somehow helps you design and maintain the site. In return, you pay a monthly fee to the provider. The monthly fee is generally between \$5 and \$25.

Choosing your website provider

It can be bewildering. If you just search for "website host", you'll find hundreds of companies vying for your business. Many offer all sorts of free trials and come-ons which are usually found on the Home Shopping Network in terms of style. But the search can be simplified.

First, for maximum simplicity, there are host providers who specialize on artists. If you search "artist's website", you find a bunch but I recommend Fine Art Studio Online. This business is run by Clint Watson who used to be with Greenhouse Gallery in San Antonio, so it's local. League members Lilli Pell and Martha Gibson have their artist websites on FASO and there might be others. Lilli and Martha are delighted with the service and laud its ease of use. It's pretty much just a question of popping images and typing in some text to set up and maintain your website. Clint also has an amazing array of other artist oriented services: blogs, email reports, marketing tips. Some of these cost extra money and Clint's competitors usually have

similar goodies. I tend to think that for us mid level artists none of these on line promotional tools work much. The problem is there are too many artists trying to reach a limited audience of buyers via these particular methods. I have some ideas as to how we can sell on line and I'll discuss them later.

Artist oriented website hosts have two disadvantages. First, they usually charge a bit more for the amount of website they offer. By "amount of website", I mean total storage, bandwidth (number of visitors supported), and certain features like number of web pages, number of site addresses and access to help lines. All the pricing choices can get pretty complex but in general, you'll pay a little extra for a specialty website host and this is quite understandable as they don't have mass numbers of customers so their costs are higher. The second disadvantage is that you have to stick to their template. You don't have design freedom. People who look at a lot of artist websites because they're interested in art will immediately flag you as a user of a canned artist website. That's not so bad. The issue is your art, not the wonderfulness of your website and the artists' sites can display your art just fine. But as you get into having a site, you may well find that you'd like to make it distinctive. To do that, you need a general purpose host and the main point of my presentation is to argue that it's easier than many people think to design and maintain a website from scratch. Any way you want.

I first decided that I wanted a personal website five years ago and I had no idea how to pick a website host provider. By happy coincidence, the Wall Street Journal ran an analysis of web hosts that focused on individual/small business sites right at the same time and they ranked them. Number one was "Homestead" so I signed up with them. The Journal was looking at ease of use, support, power etc. Another issue for any host is will they stay in business? If your website host goes kerflooey, so does the work you put into setting up your site and you might even lose content images and text if you haven't got them stored locally. In 2005, Homestead was an independent business but they've since been acquired by Intuit, a giant software company, so they should have great financial stability. Intuit kept the management team intact.

Homestead allows you to set up any sort of site you like so they permit greater creativity when compared to the artist specific hosts. And yet, they're not so hard to use, as you'll see.

[Homestead, getting started](#)

You access Homestead from their website: Homestead.com. You are invited to sign up for a free trial and there's a financially attractive five dollars a month hosting plan. That plan has some limitations such as four web pages. An artist can get by with four web pages (Jean's site in the demo is only four) and you can always upgrade later but if the creative website bug catches you, you'll want more and that will be the "gold" plan costing \$20 per month. It gives you a ton of storage (you'll never come close to using it up) and multiple different named sites as well as preferred access to phone service. The issue of phone service, by the way, is one of Homestead's advantages. If you call them, they answer quite quickly and you find yourself on the phone with an American who knows what he's doing and will not let you fail. Nothing against the good people of India who man so many call centers these days, but I'd just as soon keep the work here.

Once you sign up, Homestead invites you to start building your site. No waiting! But there is an issue. They offer hundreds of “templates” which are nicely designed website “skeletons” which are largely distinguished by the principal activity of the customer. So there will be templates aimed at realtors, musicians, plumbers, consultants and yes, they have templates for painters and photographers. I’ve messed with these and strongly advise you to give them a miss. They seem nice but you’ll find it takes more time to populate the templates than to build a site from scratch. Really. And since you’re an artist, you’ll inevitably find yourself disagreeing with aspects of the template and trying to change it and that won’t quite work like you think it should.

When you start from scratch, you’ll get a minimalist site which will only serve to focus attention on your work, where it should be. And you can add design elements if you wish, as you go along.

[Web design software](#)

To build a website from scratch, you need some web design software. You may have heard of programs like Cold Fusion, Front Page or Dream Weaver. These are powerful programs which can produce highly sophisticated sites but they’re costly to buy and have a fairly steep learning curve. With Homestead, however, you get a free software package called “Sitebuilder” which downloads free to your home computer. It’s surprisingly powerful but its real advantage is its simplicity of use. It comes with instructions which you can print out for consultation but it also has on line help and if you get stuck with anything, just call Homestead.

So once you get Sitebuilder on your computer, you initiate your web design by launching Sitebuilder like you would any program. It will invite you to name your site (put in anything at this point; it’s easy to change later) and select “start with blank page”. When you see the blank page, name the page “index.” Every website needs an “index” page and it’s also called the home page. On the right, you have some choices to establish basic parameters of your site. You can change the background color from the default white (many folks like a dark background and light colored text). The default size: 800 pixels wide is also optimum. If you make it narrower, your website won’t fully use the screens of computers which access it. If you make it wider, it will extend over the edges of screens of many computers which have “squarish” displays. When this happens the screen will show scroll bars and this is inconvenient.

Everyone know what a “pixel” is? It’s an element of a digital image and a simplifying aspect of websites or any computer display is that there are always 72 pixels per inch. So when I say the website should be 800 pixels wide, divide by 72 and you get a bit more than 11 inches and you can see that that fits most computer screens.

OK. Ready to roll with content. Here’s a list of things that I’ve added to Jean’s site in the demo. Sitebuilder can do more but it’s not really necessary to get into it that deeply. As I said earlier, it’s a question of getting the bug. Or not.

[Text](#), [Shapes](#), [Images](#), [Scroller](#), [Additional pages](#), [Navigation](#), [Links](#), [Contact link](#), [Video](#)

Text

Click the “add text” button and a little box appears. Select the text in the box by click/drag with the mouse and replace it with whatever you want to write. Or if you have text saved temporarily in your system’s “clipboard”, you can paste it. While it’s still selected you can pick font and color. You can grab the box and move it around by click/drag on the border and you can similarly resize the box. Note the “clone” button. Once you’ve got some text how you like it and it’s still selected, hitting the clone button will copy it elsewhere on the screen. You then move it into the new position and replace the writing. This is faster than a separate insert action.

Shapes

You can directly import shapes onto the page. This gives a little graphic flair. The most common requirement is to bring in a rectangle. You can move it, change its size, by the usual click dragging and in the demo, I put it behind some text in a different color.

Images

Click “add image” and another box appears. You’re asked to produce an image which can come from the clipboard, a file in your computer or from a huge list of graphics that Sitebuilder provides. Most commonly, you’ll have an image in a file. You “browse” to it, select it, hit “open” and it will appear on the web page. In the demo, on Jean’s home page, I added one picture of her. In doing this, one has to pay attention to file size, however and that takes a brief bit of understanding. Remember to think in pixels and there are 72 per inch in any website. So, if you directly try to post a high resolution image from your digital camera, it may be 3000 x 2000 pixels and you’ll only see a small part of it greatly magnified. And Sitebuilder will try to stop this by warning you that the image is too big and offering to “optimize” it which just means shrinking it. So before you get to posting images check their size and you’ll need some sort of elementary image editing program (there are a bunch) which permit resizing images. Images which are static on a page usually look nice in the 200-300 pixel size. You’ll have some of these static images but since you’re an artist, the main task of your website is to show your work and this should be done via one or more gallery pages which begin by showing thumbnails. The site visitor will click on a thumbnail and then a full size image will pop up in another window. Everyone’s seen this, right?

Sitebuilder has a command which turns any image into a thumbnail with one click, but, whoops, the thumbnails are too small. I keep figuring Sitebuilder will permit picking thumbnail sizes but they haven’t gotten around to it yet so you’ll do it as follows.

Each image should be saved in two sizes, a thumbnail size and a full display size. You’ll need two different file names for each image. I just add “t” to the full size image file name to denote the thumbnail but any differentiation works. I believe that the thumbnail should be big enough to attract the viewer but small enough to fit a bunch on a page. I use 180 pixels wide for a landscape orientation image and 180 pixels high on a portrait oriented image. You can see how this looks on Jean’s website. The full size image should be 600 pixels high and whatever width goes with that because that will fit the pop up window fully.

So once you've got the images sized and available in a file, it's just a matter of inserting the thumbnails onto the page. You can move them around and align rows and columns by just selecting and mouse dragging as the demo will have shown. You can, by the way, resize images on the web page after they've been inserted by click/dragging on the corner handles. Don't do this. If you try to make them bigger, they'll "pixilated" and look fuzzy. They'll look OK if you make them smaller but it's better if they come onto the page the correct size. Why? If you insert a big image and then shrink in on the web page, the underlying file is still relatively large. You've only shrunk the display. Large files are bad on websites because it makes the website slower than it has to be. Resizing on the page is only for lazy buffaloes.

Scroller

To have some fun with images and give you site a different look, you can add a scroller in Homestead. It's like a moving slide show of images and is therefore well suited for an artist's site. Click on the content tab and click "image scroller". A box will appear on the page which can be moved and resized. You are then invited from the properties editor on the right of the page to add images to the scroller which normally come from image files in your computer. After you've got them loaded, click the "preview" tab on the lower left and the scroller will come to life. Click back to "edit" and you can keep adding elements.

Additional Pages

It's efficient to have an idea of how many pages you want in the site and set them up at this point. You can always add more later. We'll use three more: About, Gallery and Contact which will yield a four page site. You simply click "new page" and then the "blank page" button. When the new page appears, set your background color as on the index page, name it and you're done. You'll now have all four pages showing as tabs and you can switch to anyone at any time.

The demo shows popping in a biography statement to complete the "About" page and that's just inserting text, so lets set up our Navigation between pages.

Navigation

This refers to the list of pages, like a little table of contents, that websites display so you can jump to any page. Click on "Design and Links" and then Navigation. Accept the default "Navigation1" name. Set up four links; point them to the four pages; name the links the same as the pages and then paste the Navigation menu on all four pages.

Links

You can select pretty much any part of your website and command it to "link" to something else. That something can be another page on the site, a completely different site or a different file. When the demo fills the gallery page, it shows how to link small, thumbnail images to full size images which appear in separate windows.

The basic idea is to select the item to be linked, click the “link” box in the properties editor and then complete the dialog box saying what you want to link to and if you want the new view to replace the current page in the browser or appear in a separate floating window.

Text can also link as was demonstrated in the “Click to view my blog” text which was placed on the home page.

Contact Link

Every website should have a contact page and the demo sets one up by simply inserting text and images. In this case some images were taken from the Homestead Image library. They can also be found all over the internet via a Google image search. We did add a special type of link. When the linked item (an image in this case) is clicked an email is directly send from the visitor’s computer to the website owner. This is done by filling in the email address in the Link dialog box.

Video

Back in the dark ages of, say, 2006, videos showing on a website had to be cumbersome hosted by the site. Cost some extra money too. Now we have Youtube. Any 12 year old can show you how to upload any sort of video (not more than ten minutes!) up onto Youtube. Homestead allows you embed a Youtube video via a link directly onto the page. A Jean Crow video, previously shot and uploaded, is linked onto the home page by clicking the “Content tab” and then “Youtube”.

E Commerce!

What about selling from your website? Homestead makes it easy. If you set up a Paypal business account, you can apply a Paypal “button” below any item you wish to sell with a single click. Visitors can then purchase items by emailing funds into your Paypal account. I don’t advise this, however. The Paypal business account costs a bit of money and it’s unlikely that web searchers will find your site out of the thousands that offer art. To sell art on line, you have to post it where the searchers will find it and for that I recommend ebay or setting up an Etsy store.