

Take Your Aviary Into Cyberspace

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I recently overheard a woman in a coffee shop remark, "If I see one more dot com ad I'm gonna scream!" She is not alone in her frustration, but a person can avoid the future of commerce and entertainment for only so long. It reminds me of when my parents were the last people on our block to trade in the black & white TV for a color set. They could not understand what all the fuss was about. Their little black & white television set worked just fine, thank you.

Welcome to the 21st century!

The Internet is not part of the future of business – it *is* the future of business. Why should those whose business is aviculture be left behind? The Internet has been set up in a way that makes it one of the most egalitarian forums on the planet. Anyone can buy a domain name for a mere \$70 (pre-pays two years) and upload a web site to either a free or relatively inexpensive web hosting service. Imagine having a storefront for about \$20 a month! Now imagine that this storefront has a nationwide audience.

Having a web page does not necessarily have to be a chore. It can be a fun, rewarding challenge. When I started with a little free site hosted by my ISP, I had no idea that I would end up with multiple web sites on various topics and as a guide at a major portal (About.com). Now it is not only a hobby, but a side business that I thoroughly enjoy.

At the end of this article, I have listed numerous other resources, such as good examples of quality web sites, free and low-cost web hosts, and other tools of the trade that you can find on-line.

The Nuts & Bolts

First things first – get on the web. Surf; play around; and check out the

other sites related to yours. See what other people are doing and how they are doing it. I run a guide to bird sites at About.com that lists about 700 sites on a variety of bird-related topics: <http://birds.about.com>. Start clicking through the sites listed and find out why the web is so hot these days.

Reserve Your Domain Name Now

If you have a very common name for your aviary, chances are it is already gone. Sometimes you can do a variation on that name. For instance, if Aworldofbirds.com is already taken, you might be able to reserve Aworldofbirdsaviary.com. Be careful when you reserve a name that it is not protected by a trademark. Remember that if someone has trademarked a name and you reserve that for yourself, the rightful owner will not be happy and will have legal rights to the name. There is no point in putting work into building a brand that you do not have a legal right to promote as your own.

If you want to reserve a name but do not feel that you are ready to put up a web site yet, there are many companies that will "park" your domain name for free. This means they go through the tedious process of registering your name then put up a page that says, "Future home of appleyardaviaries.com." Many of these services will also give you free email forwarding with unlimited aliases. This means your new email address can be anything@appleyardaviaries.com and the service will forward your mail to your regular email address (such as you@mindspring.com). I have listed these places in the resources section at the end of this article.

You also can get free sites without a domain name, but it looks much more professional to have your own domain.

First of all, a long sub-domain address such as www.freesitesforall.com/barnyard/birds/appleyardaviaries is very hard to remember. A few free hosting services will give you a name such as appleyardaviaries.freesitespace.com, which is a little better. However, appleyardaviaries.com certainly is the easiest to market and gives you a brand name that can quickly become well known on the web, especially if the quality of your site is high.

Web Hosts

If you are ready to fly into cyberspace, there are both free hosts (the trade off is usually a banner ad or pop-up ad appearing on your pages) and paid hosts who will register your domain name for you then open your space on their servers, often within 24 hours. Beware of hosts that are just a little too cheap. Generally, you do get what you pay for and web hosts that charge very little will often have the problem of hosting too many sites on a single server. This means delays, too much down time, and frustrating "404-Not Found" messages when people try to go to your site.

Building Your Site

There are many simple-to-use "WYSIWYG" (what-you-see-is-what-you-get) programs available that make building a web page as easy as following a recipe. Everyone stumbles at first. Sometimes it can be frustrating. I remember the first time I uploaded my web page and I could *not* figure out why my graphics and photographs were not showing up. I spent hours analyzing the page I made, reading the instructions, re-uploading the page to no avail. Finally I emailed a friend and got the answer in a few minutes – not only did I need to upload my basic page, I had to upload my graphics and photographs to the server as separate entities. I help many people with their sites these days, and this is one of the most common issues when people first start building pages. You will be delighted by how many experienced webmasters are willing to give you a hand with great time-saving tips and advice.

Once you become more experi-

enced, you can learn how to edit the actual html code that makes up web pages. This gives you more control over the look of your pages. If you want to see what a web page really looks like, go into your web browser's "View" menu and select "Page Source" or "HTML". This is the "language" that forms the page. It will look like a foreign language to you, but over time, many people make the effort to understand it and gain greater control over the look of their web pages.

A very basic page with some nice photographs of your birds and an email link can be sufficient if you just want to get something on the web. In the end, sites that also have some articles on basic breeding techniques, a breeder's philosophy, diet and nutrition, and the personalities of various species, tend to gain the most audience. It is better to have a site that is more than just an advertisement, even if that means only having great links to other sites with information on keeping birds. If you specialize in Amazon parrots, a comprehensive guide on their care and training will be invaluable to many people, not just future clients. It reflects well on your aviary when you give accurate advice on the care of birds (there is too much misinformation out there.).

You don't have to build your web site overnight. You can add a new section once a week or even once a month. Structure your site in such a way that it is easy to add a new link to your main page that will lead to a new section or article on birds. Some examples of quality web sites are given in the resources section.

You will need what is called an ftp program to upload your pages. These programs sound intimidating, but they are very easy to learn and once you follow the instructions to log into your site, the uploading process is self-explanatory. There are numerous free ftp programs you can download from such sites as:

<http://www.download.com>.

One of the most popular is a program called Cute FTP.

Building an Audience

You will need to submit your site to

the major search engines and directories. This tends to be the most time-consuming part of developing a web presence, but it can be well worth the effort. Be sure to use the meta-tag resources in your web builder programs since many search engines favor sites with strong key words in these tags. Also, your main page will do better in search engines if it is not just a photograph and link that says "Enter." A paragraph with repeated use of relevant key words (parrots, birds, babies, amazons, hand-fed, etc.) will greatly improve your position in some of the search engines.

One of the best resources for building an audience is a free mailing list service. Companies such as Listbot offer a very reliable service that requires confirmation from subscribers to avoid problems such as spoofing of addresses. I put an email sign-up box on my main pages and let subscribers know they can sign up for updates to the site. I have a separate sign-up for people who want to be notified when I have babies hatch. These tools have been invaluable and I have more than 1000 subscribers after only a year.

Safety and Security

Use the same precautions when dealing with Internet customers that you use with your traditional customers. Do not give out information that could compromise your security. If someone contacts you via email, give out only basic details. Certainly do not answer questions that could be efforts to "case your aviary." If someone wants to move forward and reserve a bird, have them call you. I have a voicemail/beeper number for this purpose that cannot be traced back to my aviary address. The person has to leave their phone number, then I contact them. Most thieves are not going to give out their home phone number, so this can weed out some of those who might just be trying to find out if they can get to your birds.

The next step is an interview of sorts. When you call the person, listen to them, make sure you are not answering questions that are not vital. If someone starts out asking how many birds do you have, do you breed

them in separate cages, indoors or outdoors, or similar questions, be careful as you would in any situation where someone seems to be trying to find out the physical makeup of your aviary.

Generally, if a person is asking questions such as how do you hand-feed and socialize the babies, what sort of diet do you wean them onto, what kind of personality does an Amazon have, or the like, this is someone looking for a pet. Follow your instincts and do not give out any information you do not feel absolutely comfortable about giving.

A customer met in cyberspace is not any more of a danger than a customer who reads your ad in the back of a bird magazine. There is some perception that Internet contact is somehow more risky than phone contact. I have found this to be absolutely untrue. If you follow the same guidelines you normally do to protect your flock, you will rarely have a problem.

Another protective measure I have is to require a deposit on the bird. Generally, my birds are reserved as babies before they are weaned, so this works out well. They mail me a small deposit to hold the baby until it is weaned. Again, someone with an ulterior motive is not going to send you a check with their name and address. In most circumstances, this requirement will weed out nefarious types. Caller ID can be another basic tool for ensuring that the person who is contacting you is who they say they are.

A Few Extra Tips

When you build your aviary in cyberspace you will slowly begin building not only an audience, but a reputation. How you deal with people on the Internet can greatly impact how people talk about your site. Word of mouth can be one of the best promotional tools out there. You will be seen as someone who knows about birds, so your e-mail traffic will increase. The general rule of thumb is to answer inquiries within 48-72 hours.

Because of this increase in e-mail from strangers, you must get a good virus software program and update your .dat files on a regular basis. I do

A basic web page with a catchy logo and nice photograph or two of your birds can be your first step in developing a web site.



Photos of baby birds are always popular. Who can resist such adorable creatures?

get e-mailed viruses on occasion, and usually the person sending them has no idea they have done it, since they are victims as well (the happy99.exe virus is a classic example). Because I update my virus definitions on a weekly basis, I always catch these viruses. I will then send a notice to the person who e-mailed me that they have a virus attaching to their e-mail and need to visit a virus protection site to clean their system.

It is also a good idea to learn how to really use your e-mail program as more than an in and out box. You can build folders for specific types of e-mail and create filters to screen out spam and to better store important correspondence so you can track down a single e-mail easily.

While many people feel that the Internet is not for them, I strongly believe that anyone who takes a chance and dips their toe into cyberspace will quickly see its value and just

how fun it can be to have an aviary on the world wide web.

Resources

A good place to start if you are a total newcomer to the net is:

<http://www.learnthenet.com/>

Free parking

If you are not ready to build your site, but do not want to lose your domain name, you can park it here for free. You still have to pay the Internic registration fees of \$70 for two years.

<http://www.domainsarefree.com>

Web Page Building Programs (wysiwyg):

- Netscape Composer (free with Netscape): a bit buggy, but simple to use
- Front Page (free with latest version of Internet Explorer): allows on-the-fly editing
- Hot Metal Pro (\$99): simple to use and more powerful than free versions: <http://www.softquad.com>
- Dream Weaver (\$250): considered the best, but expensive; not for beginners <http://www.macromedia.com>
- For graphics, I highly recommend Paint Shop Pro. It is very inexpensive (compared with Adobe Photo Shop) and it is extremely easy to learn. You can learn to make your own buttons using a photo of one of your birds in about 10 minutes. <http://www.paintshoppro.com>

Web Hosts

- <http://www.webhostlist.com>: They list the top web hosts based on a number of criteria.
- <http://www.webaxs.com>: They give 400 megs of space, free chat, discussion forums, shopping cart, and more. Very reliable and you only pay on a month-to-month basis, so you are not stuck in a contract if you ever decide to change hosts. Package deal: \$15 a month. Set-up fee: \$25.
- <http://www.hypermart.com>: they give you 10 megs of space for \$99 a year. They have free space as well, but this entails having pop-up ads that can be very distracting.
- <http://www.hiway.com>: Often rated as one of the most reliable web hosts on the net, they are a bit expensive and generally require at least a 6-month commitment. I have a non-bird site with them and it has never gone down in over two years. Simple discussion set up and free chat. They also have secure e-commerce programs if you want to sell products directly from your site.

Web Tutorials & Related Free Software

- <http://www.webmonkey.com>
- <http://www.cnet.com>
- <http://www.download.com>: Search term ftp for CuteFTP.

Free Mailing List Services

- <http://www.listbot.com>
- <http://www.onelist.com>

Free Bird Graphics & Animated Birds

These sites allow you to copy their graphics and use them on your site in exchange for a link back to them giving them credit for the graphics. It is highly recommended that you not "take" graphics from just any bird site and put them on your pages, since this can be a copyright violation and you can be kicked off your server for this type of infraction if the owner of the graphics complains.

Aqua Oceans::

<http://www.aquaoceans.com/gifs.htm>

Bow Creek:

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Plains/4921/parrotback.html>

Inca's Graphic Grotto:

<http://thebestplace.to/getfree/birdgraphics>

Aviaries On-Line

These are sites that not only can promote an aviary, but give valuable information to surfers who are trying to find information on the care of their birds. Some of these sites focus more on care and general information, whereas other focus more on their aviaries and available birds. Both approaches can help give your aviary a "brand name."

- <http://www.avesint.com>: A site (sight!) to behold. Wonderful photographs of the species they breed.
- <http://www.desotoaviary.com>: The focus here is more on the aviary and available birds. Articles on diet and other topics are excellent and informative. Good example of a classy "storefront" on the web.
- <http://www.landofvos.com>: an eclectic (or is that "Eclectus?") mix of great articles on diet and health, fun features, and photographs.
- <http://www.seffera.net/birds>: Emphasis is on education for the pet owner with many informational articles and the First Internet Bird Club.
- <http://www.parrotletranch.com>: Good example of unified design for an aviary site. Easy to navigate.
- <http://www.parrotparrot.com>: This is my parrot site that focuses on lovebirds and the smaller parrots. Note how mailing list sign-up is strategically placed in important sections such as the toxin alerts page.

Major Search Engines & Directories

Submit your site to each one of these and check your position regularly.

- <http://www.yahoo.com>
- <http://www.dmoz.org>
- <http://www.infoseek.com>
- <http://www.altavista.com>
- <http://www.excite.com>
- <http://www.lycos.com>
- <http://www.webcrawler.com>
- <http://www.mckinley.com>
- <http://www.northernlight.com>
- <http://www.google.com>
- <http://www.alltheweb.com>
- <http://www.msn.com>
- <http://www.hotbot.com>

