

Cleveland Web SIG @ Notre Dame College 2/17 & 1/20

Writing a Web site can be a lonely humorless affair, unless you regularly attend the Cleveland Web Special Interest Group, which provides a cavalcade of monthly meetings. They usually start at 10:30 a.m. on the third Saturday of each month and are open to anyone who wants to further their “Web authoring” skills. Of course, if you do become involved, you will want to join one or another of the two local computer clubs that co-sponsor the Cleveland Web SIG. These are the Greater Cleveland Digital Publishers Users Group and the 25-year-old Greater Cleveland PC Users Group.

The Saturday, February 17th meeting focused on online surveys. During the previous month 22 members of the SIG completed an online survey to determine future-meeting topics using a free service provided by Survey Monkey. To those who answered the survey the most important SIG subjects are: Cascading Style Sheets, database driven Web sites, PHP (a programming language designed for producing dynamic Web pages), accessibility, security and podcasting. Two other survey services, Wufoo and Websurvey were also reviewed. An important question when using these services is, “Who really owns the data on their service?” Another question, “How to encourage people to complete a survey?”

In the next few months the group also plans on taking a field trip to the Technology and Integrated Media Environment (T.I.M.E.) at the Cleveland Institute of Art. Find more about the Web SIG, including access to its Yahoo group, and directions to future meeting locations (usually in Solon) here.

The SIG’s January 20th “Mighty Miscellaneous Meeting (3M)” session provided a good taste of this group’s quirky nature (often there is laughter at Web SIG meetings). Co-leaders are Stuart O. Smith Jr. of South Euclid and Frank Mitch of Akron.

The topics included grabbing video and audio to document your actions using the Web or software; Microsoft Office Live offering free domain name registration and Web site; why you want a Robot.txt file in your Web site’s root directory and how to place it there; Server-side Includes, especially CAPTCHA (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart), which can only run on a Web server.

Daniel Kozminski of Solon uses TechSmith’s Camtasia Studio “for personal reasons.” The software will record video and audio of any session on a PC, such as working with software, or completing a form on the Internet. And it has extensive editing features. “I like gadgets and technology, so Camtasia fits right in,” he said. “I have given thought to designing some tutorials but as of yet I have not done so. Originally, one of the reasons I bought the product was to have the ability to create and edit movies (video). I have subsequently progressed to a more professional software for this purpose, Sony’s Vegas.”

Kozminski told a typical story of how a minor software/human interface glitch can burn time. “I had problems with a ‘record sound’ icon on the Camtasia Recorder interface. On the older version of the software that I own it is hard to tell if the icon is pressed in (to record sound) or if it’s out (no sound is recorded.)” He said it took him a couple hours to solve this one. TechSmith also publishes SnagIt the popular screen capture program. More about TechSmith’s Camtasia can be found at: <http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp>.

Yes, with Microsoft Office Live you not only get free Web hosting, you can register a domain name for free too. “The Basic version is a great bargain for a small business or an individual person,” said Frank Mitch who set up a Office Live Web site and domain name some months before.

“There is no requirement that you must keep your domain name with Office Live. It is registered free annually. If you quit Office Live you will have to start paying for domain name registration but you do not give up the domain name; you can transfer it elsewhere,” Mitch told us. With MS Office Live you get: one free domain name per credit card, 25 email accounts, site designer tool, Web site performance reports, and online support. More about MS Office Live here.

“Got a web site? Are you talking to robots?” said Jan Limpach, owner of Keyphrase Marketing of Elyria. “Called by many names the robots / web crawlers / spiders, all come looking for this file and the instructions in it,” said Limpach. While you want to attract the good ‘bots, members of the group agreed that the bad ones will get in regardless if you have a robot.txt file or not. After Limpach’s presentation and a brief read of his Robot.txt presentation here, I easily placed a robot.txt in my Web root directory: Read more here.

The Server Side Includes presentation was started by Bill Cohen-Kiraly former Web SIG leader from Solon and professional Web designer. While this article is not getting into his presentation, he calls himself “The Publishing Heretic” and has a Web site to this effect here.

While completing an online form or searching for something sensitive, you may have encountered a randomly generated graphic image with a series of letters and numbers, sometimes looking like they are melting in a witches brew. This is CAPTCHA (defined above). A human reader can decipher the characters from the swirl in the graphic (hopefully) and type these characters to access the next step in a process.

A Captcha system does its random generations on the Web server and can’t be set up on the client (user) side of the Web site design. The characters are swirling so bad robot snoops can’t read them while hopefully humans can. At the 2/17 meeting Wendy Winans, who operates Bradyworld.com, told how she tried to set up Captcha and couldn’t get it to work. Find more about Captcha here at their site: <http://www.captcha.net>.

“And if you are posting email addresses on a Web site, you have to be more careful than a year ago,” said Stuart Smith, a professional Web designer, who made the Captcha presentation. “Some bad ‘bots now check for the use of the letters AT in place of the @ sign. You have to do more now to fool the ‘bots.”

So, my email address shown below, to further fool the bad ‘bots by not using a simple AT as traditional in Cool Cleveland, is displayed in a style inspired by the Web site of Cleveland’s own hacker’s conference, Notacon.

By Cool Cleveland contributor Lee Batdorff bat -at- adva -dot- com