WEB STANDARDS
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The World Wide Web is now a mature and powerful medium, lending itself for personal and business applications. Over the last seven years (2000-2007) much has been done to make the Web a more viable and accessible medium for everyone.

Web Standards
Traditionally the World Wide Web has been something of a free-for-all in terms of content, design practice and code standard. The lack of established standards within which to work led to ill considered methods of building websites, which in turn led to projects which were arduous to maintain, became broken when viewed on a different manufacturers browser, were inaccessible to many people, and were often costly to update and run.

Web Standards are now a mature and vital part of the modern Internet, helping to eliminate many of the problems mentioned above. A modern website...

... will not just work in Internet Explorer; it will work properly on any standards compliant device. That means on any browser on any operating system on any device; be that a computer, a PDA, a mobile phone, a brail reader, a screen-reader or anything else. In short, the website audience expands, and all of this is provided by one version of your website.

Previously you may have had to author multiple versions of the same website in order to cater for these different sets of user.

... is built for the future. In a year or two, when the new browsers, operating systems and mobile phones are out, your site will still work, exactly as it does now. You won't need to recode it, and so your site becomes much more future proof.

... is also backward compatible. It will work on most people's old technology, even if they've not upgraded their software in the last couple of years.

... often needs less bandwidth even though your audience expands.

... is easier to update and maintain, therefore reducing costs.

... does not alienate users with disabilities.

Old web design techniques and practices often made access impossible or severely degraded for such users.

The Law
It is not only the internet itself which has undergone a maturing phase, but the attitude of the people who use it, and the government too. It is now unlawful in Britain, the EU and the US to create a website offering a service to users which does not offer comparable access for all types of user. This means that if a website is inaccessible for a group of people, an equivalent site with equivalent content must be provided. Most modern websites are accessible right away, negating the need for multiple versions of the same website.

The exceptions to this generalisation are often pure Flash based websites, which due to their nature are not deemed accessible to some users. This will change as the technology develops, but for the moment 100% Flash sites should be accompanied by an XHTML version.

A brief overview of specific UK Laws with relation to Accessibility and the Internet can be found at the following URLs:

Hyperlink
http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_legalcase.hcsp

Hyperlink
http://www.btinternet.com/~martin.a.sloan/

Flash
Flash is a web application platform provided by a company called Macromedia. Flash allows many things which traditional websites do not, such as complex animation, music, sound, and advanced interaction.

It has many appropriate uses, but while Macromedia in association with the W3C continue to develop Flash and offer ways to make Flash accessible, it is often still not as easy to use for people with disabilities as a traditional website. This means that using Flash has certain implications for the responsible web designer.

Either Flash based content can be used to augment a standard website in such a way that a user does not need to rely on Flash for vital functionality, or a separate/alternate method of information delivery must be provided for those who can not use Flash.

CSS and XHTML
CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) and XHTML (eXtensible Hypertext Mark-up Language) are two of the main languages used in modern standard compliant websites.

XHTML is used to define the structure and content of the website, as though it were a typed document. CSS is a presentational language which controls how all of the XHTML content is presented. This means that one XHTML document can look completely different if a different CSS file is applied to it. The advantage of this separation of structure and presentation are many, but include improved accessibility, lower bandwidth consumption, improved ease of maintenance, and the ability to provide alternate presentation for different browsing devices.