

What is a Webmaster?

This opinion paper was written by Greg Turner upon the request of the Jacksonville Business Journal for an article which appeared in the December 8-14, 2000 edition.

The reason behind my search was simple enough, my role at work had been redefined from a focus on Web marketing to a focus on Web development, and I wanted to know how much more (or less) I was now worth. I didn't think of myself as a "Webmaster", but time and time again, this was one of the terms that came up as I worked to do comparisons based on skill sets, so I investigated further. It seems that almost everyone is having a hard time defining what a Webmaster *really* is. Like some positions – particularly in new fields, this tends to be very subjective with the lofty title "Webmaster" being bestowed on people that generate content (generally marketing professionals), people that generate graphics (generally graphic artists), and on those that bring all of the content and graphics together into a cohesive unit through the application of markup or code (generally programmers). As the Web is such a new field, there are a host of titles that end up without a clear definition.

So, let's talk about what's in the title Webmaster. In my mind, Webmaster is a title that is pretentious to say the least. It doesn't describe what a person does, for indeed very few people have all of the skill sets required to "master" the Web. For all of the great developers – few know how to effectively market a site, for all of the great marketers – few know what makes a site usable or how to test a site, for all the great graphic designers.... Not to boast, but to make a point, I have strong experience in Web marketing, Web design, Web development, construction of Web graphics, Web content generation, Web site information science, Web architecture, Web site usability, and a few other things, but when the CEO of the company that I work for accidentally referred to me as the "Webmaster" I was truly bothered because (the title doesn't describe my job and) I only know the tip of the Web iceberg. Defining the title "Webmaster" has become such an issue in some places that about two years ago, Canadian officials created an official definition of who could and who could not be called a Webmaster.

The reality of Web design today is that tools are making it so easy to develop a site that my sister (proudly computer illiterate) could go to the store, buy any of a host of development tools, and be up and running on the Web in a few short hours. Does this make her a Webmaster? I think not, yet I continue to see wave after wave of new entrants in the Web development market relying on the tools to do the job, but they really don't know the problems or inefficiencies that can be involved in this methodology. Further, most haven't the foggiest of ideas about Web testing, Web marketing or site usability – all of which are keys to having a successful site. Generally, I am sure that such people still provide a valuable service for they provide relatively cheap services in a very expensive field. Unfortunately, given their actual level of expertise, the pay they receive far outweighs the economic value of their contribution, but most of their clients will never know this, because they know even less about the opportunities and costs of working with the Web. Additionally, I have actually had to set people back on a realistic path after their inexperienced "Webmaster" had led them astray – not out of malice, but out of ignorance. All of this ends up causing Web projects to cost more than they should. The funny thing about all of this discussion, is that I haven't even touched on things like \$200/hour Web developers that don't know even the most rudimentary of Web marketing tactics. Just like an inexperienced "Webmaster", Web developers that lack the skills to maximize the return on investment (ROI) from a site tend to lead to an inflationary trend in the Web development field as people are paying more than they normally would for the skills that they are getting.

So, after all of that looking and all of that soul searching, what am I? Well, I know that I wear a lot of hats throughout the day, but I know that I am not a "Webmaster." At the office, I tend to wear one of two hats "Web Project Manager" where I plan/manage the development and testing of Web projects. In this role, I work directly with content developers, graphic artists, developers, testers, and marketers, making sure that they are on schedule, and on target. Another hat that I wear is "Web Operations Manager." In this

role, I research/purchase domain names, server monitoring services, monitor online marketing performance, and perform tasks associated with making the Web work right*.

I could go on, but what is the point? The reality is simple. Almost no one has mastered the Web, and very few ever will. There are simply too many components covering too many disciplines for one person to ever "Master" them all.

* Since writing this paper, the author has gone on to become a full-time Web programmer and consultant.