While stellar e-commerce site design once involved unending tedious coding, the good news is that a veritable slew of new software tools have emerged to help greatly automate the process. Heart-stopping photography, audio/video streaming, 3D imaging and hordes of other Web special effects are now within the grasp of any design-hungry PC user. Indeed, given that every construction industry player is continually seeking out ways to be just a tad edgier, dazzling and more magnetic the competition, such tools don’t come a nanosecond too soon.

What follows is a representative sampling to tried-and-true programs that can catapult an e-commerce site beyond the everyday along with some members of the construction industry that are using them. Not surprisingly, you’ll find most construction industry sites are using at least some of these tools. But there are a few construction industry sires that have leveraged a wide spectrum of design tools to create a truly distinctive presence on the Web. In either case, the best of the sires portray the recognition that e-commerce design involves much more than posting a billboard.
in cyberspace. Instead, these sites are designed to be places of businesses, a first contact, an interactive tool where prospective and existing customers can learn about a business and conduct business there, at least on a limited scale.

General Web Site Construction

If you’re serious about building a Web site, Dreamweaver 3.0 ($299) by San Francisco-based Macromedia is the industrial strength package you’ll want to learn. It is designed to let you build Web pages using images rather than HTML text, and integrates well with related tools, such as Adobe Photoshop. Other bonuses: DreamWeaver enables you to ensure your site can be downloaded by Net cruisers using older browsers; can be optimized to ensure it does not “overwrite” pages you’ve created with other programs and enables you to select and resize images directly on the Web page you’re creating. In short, it’s a powerful, pro level tool that is also accessible to the motivated beginner. Web: www.macromedia.com. Voice: (415) 252-2000.

A great industry example of what can be achieved with a program like DreamWeaver can be found at Drywall Information Trust Fund (www.drywallca.com), based in Saratoga, Calif. The Web site fires on all cylinders with its uncluttered interface, quick intuitive jumps to key interest areas, and clear, crisp eye-catching imagery. Here, less is definitely more.

Another site featuring overall design excellence can be found at Northern Illinois Painting & Drywall Institute (www.nipdi.com), based in Marengo, Ill. NIPDI offers a birds-eye view of its site on its home page, a graphical data drill visitors can use to find information quickly and eye-catching shape and color that creates interest without clutter.

Generally available as a programming option in any good Web design package, interactivity enables visitors to actually begin doing business with your firm. Beckman & Associates (www.beckmanassociates.com), based in Addison,
If you’re sharp enough to create your own Web site from scratch, bless you. For the rest of us, there’s NetStudio 2000 ($89) from Palo Alto, Calif.-based NetStudio. This is an easy-to-use program that enables you to rocket crucial design elements of your Web site from the dreary to the dramatic. Its best feature is the easy-to-grasp, no-nonsense, learn-by-doing tutorials.

Web Image Creation and Management

Construction industry Web site creators who need only peripheral graphics can probably get away with a less expensive program. But for serious graphics aficionados looking for industrial strength performance, nothing but Photoshop 5.5 ($544), by San Jose, Calif.-based Adobe, will do. Chances are, virtually everything you wished you could do with an image—combine, paint, modify, go crazy with filtering effects—can be done with Photoshop. New features include multiple levels of undo, text that is extremely customizable, a magnetic pen and a magnetic lasso.

Baker Drywall (www.bakerdrywall.com), based in Mesquite, Texas, leverages Web
photography quite effectively at its site, sporting crisp images of recent projects.

EL. Crane and Sons (www.flcrane.com/de-fault.htm), based in Fulton, Miss., features a photo image mosaic on its home page that is impressive without being overdone.

ICR Drywall (www.icrdrywall.com), based in Tyngsboro, Mass., offers an easily cruisable “thumbnail photo” gallery of recent projects. Thumbnail photos are extremely user friendly, in that they download much more quickly than full-size photos, and yet can be enlarged instantly with a mouse click.

Adding Animated Images to Your Site

Too often, animation creation software seems designed by digerati determined to make you “pay your dues” before you can uncover its secrets. Thankfully, this isn’t the case with WebSpice Animations ($149), by Ridgefield, Conn.-based DeMorgan Industries Corporation. Simply pop in the CD-ROM, point-and-click four or five times, and presto—you’ve lifted the animation you want from this program right to your con-
struction industry Web page. Really. Choose from 3D animated objects, letters, words, buttons and arrows—and leave people wondering how you became so gifted in Web animation so quickly.

Amelco Construction (www.amelcoconst.com), based in Gardena, Calif., uses an animated green globe to add some imagistic panache to its site.

Phase2Company (www.phase2co.com), based in Fort Collins, Colo., uses an animated American flag to rivet Net cruisers’ attention to its site.

While considered fairly sophisticated, panoramic virtual reality is nevertheless being used by some e-commerce sites create 360 degree “walk-arounds” or “walk-throughs” of products, company headquarters and the like. The standard-bearer of panoramic VR software is QuickTime VR ($399), by Cupertino, Calif.-based Apple. Essentially, users create panoramic VR experiences by photographing a number of angles of a scene or product, and then “stitching” those scenes together with the software to create a 360-degree, navigable experience.

Audio/Video Streaming

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TV or not to TV, that is the question.

Seattle-based RealNetworks are pioneers and audio/video streaming and are currently considered the industry standard for those who have no doubts. With its RealAudio and RealVideo Pro Bundle ($399), you’ll be able to reach 115 million RealPlayer users.

Its video scaling feature allows you to import video at any size and scale it down for use on the Web. And an optimal bandwidth programming feature enables the presentation to adapt to the specific bandwidth of the individual user. In English: Users will enjoy the experience whether they’re using a paltry 28.8 modem, or a Ferrari-speed T-3 Internet connection.

About the Author

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