

Why Personal Websites Matter

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I learned HTML back in 1997 to put up a webpage for students of an introductory programming course. Apart from that webpage it never occurred to me that a personal website can be useful. The big question always has been, why waste the time. Sure, I could put a few personal pictures and other stuff but what good is that?

The crucial insight came only after I started this website. In the three months since I started my website, I have discovered that a personal website is not about putting private information online. It is about making available information/opinions that a person finds interesting, and in the process indirectly documenting his/her interests, opinions, skills, and personality.

PaulGraham.Com <<http://www.paulgraham.com>> and **Stallman.Org** <<http://www.stallman.org>> are websites of two well-known individuals in the computing industry. The two websites make very different statements about the respective individuals. Paul Graham's site is neat, and organized. Richard M. Stallman's site has lots of information and links related to his ideologies. Even the choice of the domain name reflects something about their personalities. Paul Graham has chosen a dot com, while Stallman prefers a dot org.

A valid question at this point is that what would one gain by making such information public? The short answer is, just about anything. A popular website provides access to an audience. How someone uses that access is upto that person.

Money can be made from a personal webpage but almost always indirectly. A good personal website creates demand for a person's services. A resume is one or two pages of text. A website can be any number of pages of text and graphics.

My friend Amaan Akram created his website [WarpedSpace.org](http://www.warpedspace.org) <<http://www.warpedspace.org>> some years back. He is a computer graphics (CG) artist who has no formal training in art, and no relevant job experience. Last I talked to him, he was planning on moving to London to work as a CG artist. The company that hired him was interested enough to arrange a work-permit and a visa for him. Could he have gotten hired on the basis of his resume?

A resume can contain false information. It is much harder to fool people with a website. A person can claim to be a very organized person in his/her resume, but a website will make the truth self-evident. The person evaluating the website can go back in time and see how the site looked six months, a year, two years back. Of course unorganized, lazy, and stupid people want to hide these qualities by not having a website. On the other hand smart individuals are simply handicapping themselves by not documenting their marketable skills.

Creating a good website requires time and effort. A good website is not about graphics, and fancy layout. It is about high quality content. High quality content is information that many people are likely to find useful. Such information takes the form of tutorials, interesting articles, fascinating images, and the like. No one can come up with high quality content overnight.

If a person is consistently able to come up with good content s/he will be recognized for that. People will perceive that person as an expert on topics s/he writes regularly about. There is no organization which awards people titles such as expert and wizard. Experts and wizards are known as so only on account of their reputations. Articles on a personal website are a great way to demonstrate one's knowledge and build a reputation.

Try searching for "lighting tutorial" in a Google searchbox. Amaan Akram's lighting tutorial will come up topmost in the list of results. He wrote that tutorial back in 1999. Unfortunately, he never read this article (he couldn't have) otherwise he might have posted dozens of CG tutorials by now. His website could have been ten times more popular than it is now.

Good content always find an audience on the web. This being a consequence of the dearth of content on the web. The web is vast but it is also very shallow. If the web was not shallow people would be using search-engines only occasionally. They would be relying on their bookmarks to find all the

information they require. People are always searching for content, and if someone puts content on the web, it will be found. Time spent on creating a high quality website is never wasted. It will attract an audience but might not do so immediately.

A website can also be used to collect information. Polls, statistics, and old fashioned requests for information, all depend on having a popular website. Once a person has a popular website they can ask for help with almost anything.

I routinely do programming work for **classic-trash** <<http://www.classic-trash.com>> a popular gaming website. I got to know the administrator of the site only because he posted an advert for a programmer on his website. In exchange for programming work, I get free hosting, a shell account, links, and other small favors. If the administrator of classic-trash had to pay for programming work he probably wouldn't be able to make improvements to his website.

In the future personal websites will have an increasingly important role in our lives. Individuals and employers will depend on them to make decisions. People who have invested time and effort in creating interesting websites will have a distinct advantage over people who expended their efforts elsewhere.