Setting Up Your Web Site

by Joe Stoddard

Note: This is the first half of a two-part series.

You've been using e-mail, and you may even have had your kids build you a free Web page with their America Online account. Now it's time for the next step: building a real Web site that can help you communicate with prospects, clients, and subs — as well as serve as an electronic billboard for your business.

Should you hire someone, or do it yourself? It's perfectly okay to get help once the site is online but, unless you like problems, don't make the mistake of turning over the keys to anyone before your domain name is registered and hosted somewhere. In other words, if you want it done right … well, you know the rest of that story. The good news is getting your site up and running isn't any more difficult than buying a book online.

Internet Stuff You Need to Know

Every computer on the Internet (including your computer when you go online) is assigned a number called an IP address, which is four sets of digits separated by periods (see Figure 1). Think of these as the phone numbers of the Internet. A computer called a domain name server (DNS), or just "name server," does the dirty work of looking up the typed-in Web site address (for example, www.jlconline.com) and comparing it to the Web sites in its database. If there's a match, it connects you. If there's no match, it forwards you on to another DNS server somewhere else — and on and on until you make it to the Web site you were looking for. This happens billions of times each day, making the DNS database the most requested information on the planet.

Who takes care of these legions of DNS servers? The Web hosting companies. Why is that important? Because DNS servers are computers with IP addresses, too, and you will need information for both a primary and a secondary DNS server when you register your domain name. You can register your domain name before you have a host account set up and "park" it at Network Solutions (www.networksolutions.com) — but you'll have to change the account information later when you find a hosting service.

Choosing a Hosting Service

To find a good hosting service, start at TopHosts.com (www.tophosts.com). This site maintains a "Top 100" listing of available hosting services, as well as providing good information about Web hosting in general. Stick with firms in the top of the pack, and it's doubtful you'll have problems.

Most Web hosting services offer a variety of hosting plans starting at around $10 to $15 per month for very basic service, but you should plan to spend more on the order of $30 to $50 for the additional features you're likely to need, such as more disk space to store your pages and more bandwidth — a bigger pipe so more users can access your site. One hosting service that I've been very happy with is Burlee Networks (www.burlee.com). Burlee provides its own brand-new high-security data center, a wide variety of hosting plans, and reliable tech support.

Web server considerations. The Web server is the computer/software that houses your Web site and then delivers the pages to your users. Most Web hosts offer both Windows NT/2000 and LINUX/UNIX-based hosting accounts. Hosting services like to use LINUX, a free computer operating system, because it's reliable, customizable, and — free. Not

Figure 1. Every computer connected to the Internet is assigned an IP address — four sets of numbers separated by periods. To find yours, connect to the Internet, open a DOS window, and type "ipconfig" at the command prompt.

having to pay hefty licensing fees to Microsoft means they can offer LINUX accounts slightly cheaper to you. For the average user, the differences boil down to Ford versus Chevy — either type of server will power most Web sites just fine; however, as a building contractor, there are some Microsoft technologies that you need to be aware of before you decide.

The case for Microsoft. Whether you love Microsoft or hate 'em, the fact remains that over 90% of everyone you deal with uses Microsoft Office documents. Microsoft has developed special software, known as FrontPage 2000 Server Extensions, that extends the capability of other Web servers to better deal with Microsoft technology. With the Microsoft server extensions installed at your host, you can upload Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Access files to your Web site to share with the people you work with. Better yet, they will be able to save the files back to their computers in the program that created them (Figure 2).

FrontPage 2000, which is part of Microsoft Office Premium, and also available as a stand-alone, provides an excellent way to get your first site online in a hurry and an easy way to

manage and edit your site later. Even if you plan on digging into more advanced Web development tools as you gain skills, make sure your Web host can install and maintain FrontPage 2000 server extensions for you.

Another important Microsoft Internet technology is .asp, or Active Server Pages (not to be confused with Application Service Provider, or ASP). The .asp technology is widely used to customize a Web site for each visitor — for example, loading only the project photos or job schedule for a particular client's job when he/she logs on to your site. You might not have a need for this advanced capability now, but plan ahead. Active Server Pages are not the only way to add interactive features to a Web site, but in my opinion they're one of the easiest and best for the average contractor. The catch is that .asp work best when using WindowsNT/2000 and Microsoft's own Web server, *Internet Information Server* (IIS).

Registering Your Domain Name

Once you've selected a host for your new Web site, it's time to register your domain name. Even though your host will offer to do this for you, it's important

to do it yourself. Domain names can be registered for a year for $35 per dot-com. To register a name, simply go to the Network Solutions Web site (www.networksolutions.com), look up the name you want using the search box, and follow the instructions on the screen.

There are three contacts you'll provide for each domain you register. You should make yourself both the administrative and the billing contact, and your hosting service the technical contact (Figure 3). After you register your first domain name, you'll be assigned a "handle" — a nickname that identifies you and makes it easier to make changes to your account or to register additional domains.

Tips for picking a domain name. Most consultants will tell you shorter names are better, but I think it's more important that a visitor can take a wild guess at your domain name and still find your Web site. For example, if your business name is "Joe Bob Carpentry," a good choice would be www.joebob-carpentry.com. I would not make it "jbcarp.com" just for the sake of shortening it — that would be too hard to guess. Hyphens (-) should be avoided (even if your business name is hyphenated), and underscore characters (_) should never, ever be used if you expect users to find your site.

.com or .net? The most common root domains are .com, .net, and .org. You should always try for a domain with a .com extension because that's what users will type in first. When you select your domain name, Network Solutions will give you a list of other similar names that are available (Figure 4, next page).

I often register the minor domain roots at the same time if they're available. At $25 to $35 each per year, it's cheap insurance against a competitor playing dirty tricks on you — for example, registering the name themselves and re-directing your prospects to their Web site.

Another popular technique is to register common misspellings of your domain name and then re-direct users who stumble across it to the "right" domain. For example, you could regis-
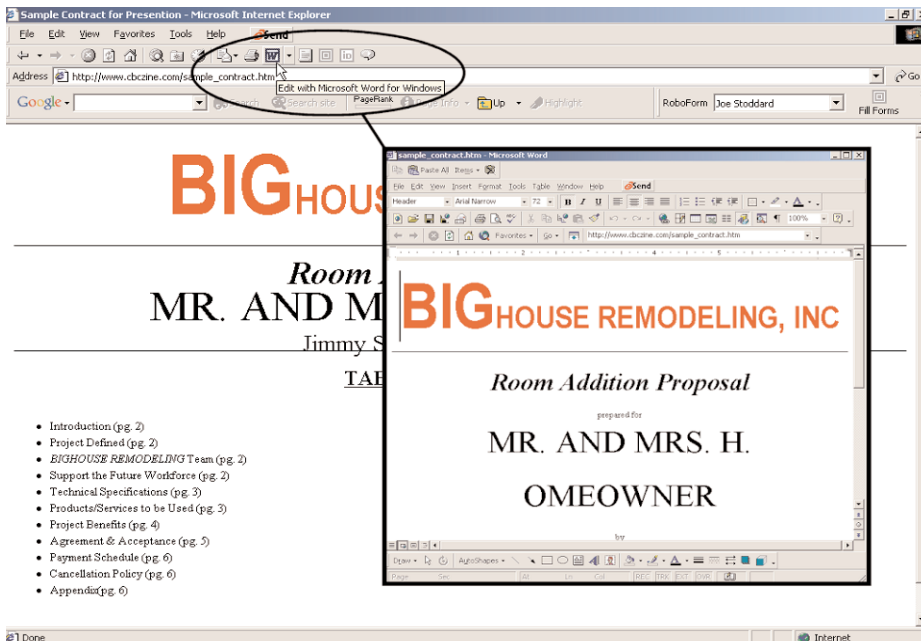

Figure 2. Microsoft FrontPage 2000 server extensions installed on your host's Web server allow you the ability to upload Microsoft Office documents in a form that users can retrieve and save to their computers in native format (inset) — important for online collaboration with clients and subs.

ter www.joebobscarpentry and re-direct it to www.joebobcarpentry. It's impossible to predict every mistake a user might make typing in your domain name, but take a look at your regular snail-mail. Are there common misspellings that occur over and over? If so, you may want to consider registering some of them.

Making changes. By being the administrative contact on your domain you can easily make changes without consulting anyone or getting permission — for example, to change your host service provider because you're not happy with them or have outgrown them. To make changes, click the "make changes" button on the bottom of the Network Solutions home page and follow the prompts. After requesting the changes, you'll receive an e-mail asking you to confirm what you've done. One tip: 90% of the changes you'll need to make are done with the Service Agreement form. You can go straight to this document by clicking "List Forms" on the account management screen.

Next Time: We'll upload a starter site using Microsoft FrontPage, complete with some project pictures and drawings.   ◤

Joe Stoddard is a certified professional building designer, former homebuilder, and a contributing editor at The Journal of Light Construction. *He can be reached at the* JLC *Online Computer Solutions forum at www.jlconline.com/forums.*
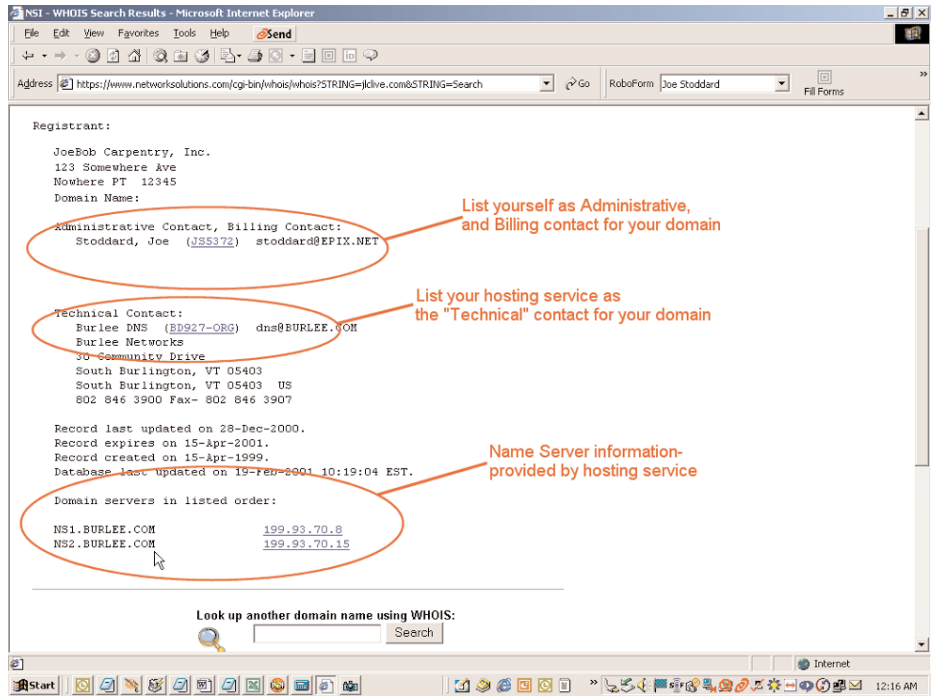
Figure 3. This screenshot from the Network Solutions Web site illustrates the information required when registering a domain name. List yourself as the administrative and billing contacts, and your host service as the technical contact. Note the Name Server information at the bottom — these computer names and IP addresses are necessary for visitors to reach your site on the Internet.
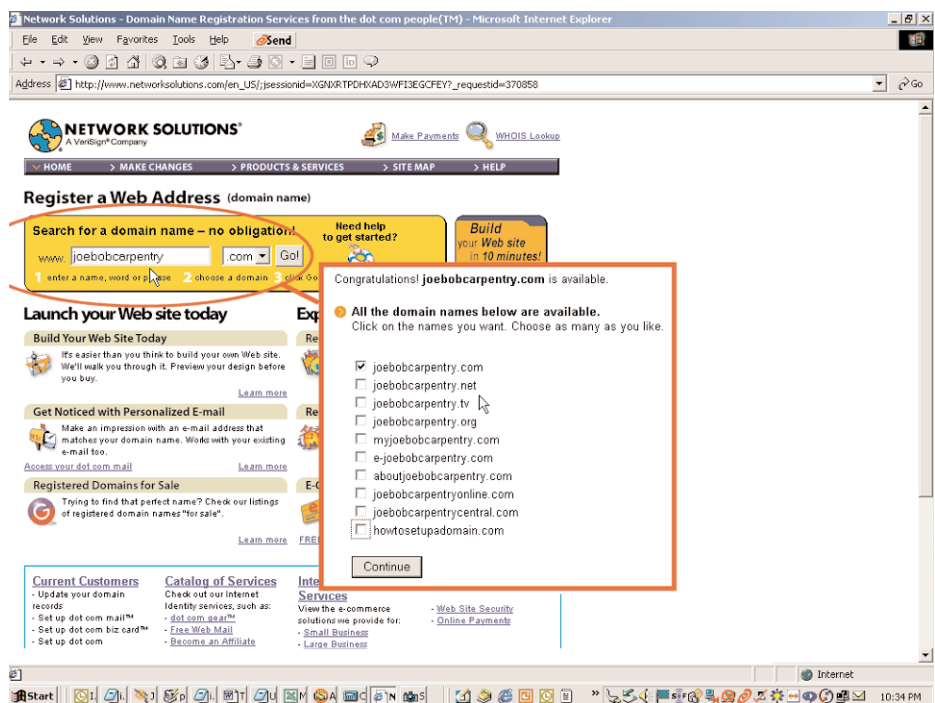
Figure 4. Most domain names are registered at the Network Solutions Web site. The search tool will let you check your name's availability, as well as providing a list of other similar names (inset).