
Web 2.0

Phil Bradley

Things you can do with a home page

In this column I'm going to concentrate on what are generally referred to as 'home' or 'start' pages. I'm often asked which resource I couldn't do without, and my answer is always the same - Netvibes, which is the application that I use. Lots of people haven't heard of it however, so hopefully if you're in that boat you'll stop reading the article half way through in order to rush off and try it out.

What is a home or start page?

When your browser starts up, the page that it loads is your home page. You'll sometimes see sites offering to make themselves the home page - you can set a home page yourself very easily by going to some variety of 'Options, Internet, Home Page, Make current page home page' and click on that. When you next start your browser, that page will open - or in fact you could have several pages open in different tabs, which is how I work - Netvibes, Twitter, Gmail and Face-book are my standard open tabs (shortly to be followed by Google+, I suspect). Many organisations have the standard default of their website, intranet page or search engine as the home page. However, what I can pretty much be certain of is that the page that opens in your browser is going to be of limited use to you.

So, before moving into the intricacies of setting up a home page, let's take a moment to consider what you do when you go onto the net. You'll search, check your mail, see what's happening on Face-book, Twitter, the latest BBC news perhaps. You'll also want to check some key searches perhaps, visit one or two pages to see if they have been updated, check the weather for your area, perhaps see what your contacts on Flickr are doing - or a host of other things. All of these take time - just the simple process of clicking on links, visiting the page, going onto the next can easily use up an hour of your time. Consequently, you don't do it as often as you should, and then you run the risk of missing out on an important piece of information, and the whole information overload concept really kicks in.

What can you do with a home page?

This is where a home page can come to your rescue. There are several very good resources (I'll list them at the end) that you can use, but they all work on the same basic principle. They will have a variety of widgets or modules that you can choose, edit to personal taste and put onto a page. You may decide to have a widget that checks your email and returns a list of the subjects of your recent messages, or you may set up a number of canned searches and see the

results appearing instantly on the screen in front of you. You might have an ego search across blogs that you want to run in order to see if you're being talked about. You could decide to set up a weather widget to tell you what the weather is like in a particular place, or a nice little reference resource to let you check exchange rates.

Moreover, a good home page application will have several tags, so that you can flick from one to another - you may decide to have a tab that deals with a particular subject, with several canned searches, Flickr photographs and so on, all in one place. You could have a tab for leisure and fun and hobby based material - there's no end of these things. However, what they're all doing is bringing information directly to you - one of the key criteria for Web 2.0 resources is that you don't have to go out and look for material, it automatically comes to you, saving you huge amounts of time, and keeping everything together in one place. One quick example: suppose you check your email 5 times a day, and it takes you 30 seconds to go to the website, input your user name and password and get the mail up on the screen. That's 2.5 minutes a day, 12.5 minutes a week; 10 hours a year, just to check the mail - not even to start to answer it. By using a mail widget that constantly checks your mail you simply need to look at the module, see the mail you have waiting and decide if it's actually worth opening up the client or not. If you then take into account the time that you spend repetitively running the same searches, recalling bookmarks, visiting weather or currency exchange sites you'll see that a home page that brings all of these resources together in one place is going to be a great time saver. Indeed, since you can have the same start page on any number of machines, you

will have a consistent approach - essentially your own portal to the net.

Netvibes

As previously mentioned, there are various different packages that do a grand job, but my preference is the Netvibes resource at <http://www.netvibes.com> and there are several reasons why I rate this one so high. It's very easy to set up - simply visit the site and it will prompt you for a subject that you're interested in, such as 'CILIP', and it will then create a number of tabs for you as a dashboard, drawing content together for you: news, videos, discussions and so on, without you doing any extra work. You'll see the various modules on the page, and you can edit these as appropriate, delete them, or move them around the screen. You can then create more tabbed pages and populate them with literally thousands of different modules. Some popular modules that I use include a bookmarks option with various different tabs, so that I can flip between bookmarks for different subjects, feeds for what I regard as important sites, BBC News updates, a web search box, weather module, Highways Agency RSS feed, feeds from Delicious and Flickr, and a Twitter module.

However, the other real value of Netvibes is that you can also create public pages. These public pages, housed at Netvibes under your account can be viewed by anyone, but your personal pages remain private to you. On one occasion I did explain this rather poorly to a trainee by saying 'anyone can see what you're playing with publically, but no-one can see your private bits'. You can view my public pages at <http://www.netvibes.com/philbradley>.

Consequently it's easy for anyone to establish some pages on Netvibes without reference back to an existing website, and these can be maintained with hardly any expertise at all. You might also like to take a look at the Dublin City Public Libraries pages at <http://www.netvibes.com/dublincitypubliclibraries#Home> or the Glyndwr University pages at <http://www.netvibes.com/jeorrettp#General>, or indeed many others, by searching for them at the Netvibes ecosystem database at <http://eco.netvibes.com/universes>.

Other solutions

There are a great many home page solutions available, and I have a list of them at <http://www.philb.com/iwantto/web2startpages.htm>, but my advice is to stick to Netvibes - it's been around for a long time, it's in profit, easy to use and allows public sharing. However, if you're still not convinced, I would suggest taking a look at iGoogle which you can find at <http://www.google.com/ig> or if you'd like to create something for a friend, colleague or elderly relative who can't really handle lots of options take a look at MyFaves at <http://myfav.es/> which has just five big buttons on the screen, which you can customise, or Tizmos at <http://www.tizmos.com/> which is a tiny bit more complicated, but still very simple. You can also share it as well - so my version is at <http://www.tizmos.com/philbradley> in case you want to take a look.

Summary

A home page will save you time and effort. They're easy to create, requiring no technical knowledge at all, and can be updated and

changed within seconds. Because they are hosted in the cloud you can get access to your site from any machine, so you have a consistent access point to the Internet. If you want to take a look at Netvibes in more detail, with a webcam commentary from me, point your browser at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNT6gpm55fs>.