

## **SME Websites & Standards compliance.**

Whatever you use your website for, be it a shopping cart, community portal or business blog, you should ensure that it is standards compliant, and that there is good separation of form and content.

### **Why standards compliance?**

Standards compliance means the site has been written to standards approved by WC3, it's the website equivalent of having good grammar. The language a website is written in is called HTML, (Hypertext Markup Language), and it has a vocabulary (tags) and a grammar. Good grammar is important because it means that the site can be translated by various different translators without a problem. One translator might be a web-browser like Firefox, and another one a screen reader for the blind. Standards compliance is the first step in getting your site accessible to those with disabilities, and in-line with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Standards compliance packs a double-punch too, search engines, (such as Google or Yahoo) 'prefer' sites which have been coded properly because they have a higher content-to-filesize ratio, meaning they can 'read' your site more efficiently.

### **Separate form and content?**

This is a little more conceptual, but the benefits are even greater. Because most modern web-browsers are happy to use the published standards for HTML, it is now possible to safely employ cascading style sheets (CSS) to define the look-and-feel of a site. This frees up HTML from the burden of controlling layout, and lets the HTML become descriptive of the meaning of the content (the words and pictures on the website). Because the content can be tagged in a meaningful way, for example using the heading tag for headings, it gives search engines a better understanding of the relevant parts of the document, and again, this naturally helps your sites visibility. Not only that, but changing the look and feel of a site can be achieved without necessarily having the entire site re-written from scratch.

When you're looking for a website design supplier, ask them about standards compliance, their approaches to the separation of form and content, and the effects this might have on your website. You can check any website yourself by going to <http://validator.w3.org/> and typing the full address (eg. <http://www.mydomain.com> ) in the address feild.