

Fast Track to the Template Wing in the Joomla Asylum

By E.Kasey Kasemodel and Monica Todoran



If it's a Joomla-laced thorraine rush you crave, then here's what you do. Find someone with no idea how templates work, even better, find someone that doesn't know or care what Joomla is. To him/her, it may as well be Swahili. Have them point you at some old website and ask you to "make it just like that" because that's how it was done last decade.

Amazingly shortsighted requests don't just come from the technically challenged. There are plenty of graphics gurus who will crank out amazing prototypes in Dreamweaver that are light years away from something you can upload to a Joomla site. They will present their very slick looking design to the end user then try to find someone to "skin" the Joomla site with their design. There is no "Export to Joomla Template" in Dreamweaver ... or any WYSIWYG editor.

Not to be critical of either, they mean well. They want results and they're doing what they know how to do. But should you find yourself on the receiving end to build-out a Joomla template from such a request, plan on spending many nights in the asylum.

The reason is that you can't skin Joomla sites. Skinning is a term that was popular when HTML templates were the rave, back when you could export and be reasonable close to done.

In fact, using Dreamweaver to generate somewhat functional HTML is potentially a bad starting point for template design as this usually minimizes the emphasis of layout and function. Taking this route tends to prioritize how something feels, more than how it works.

As a comparison, in writing draft copy you wouldn't start in Pagemaker or InDesign. The first step in writing is arranging words into sentences. Trying to include style sheet design at the same time is a tactical flaw. (Unless of course you have two people working on the same project -- one writing, one style sheeting)

Template design begins with layout and function. You would start with "What content do you have and how should that fit into the new design?"

"Fit into" refers to template positions so the correct place to start a design is with a page filled with rectangles which maybe looks something like this:



There should be nothing pleasing to the eye on the first iteration of a template design

Take your trip through the Template Wing seriously. Do not underestimate the complexity of template building; reject impossible deadlines. Some will not understand why it is so difficult to duplicate a design that already looks good outside Joomla territory. Expect that.

But before you get everyone in a room to all agree on those positions and what they will contain, you should start this process by selecting the template design method you plan to use.

There are only three:

Type 1. Buy and Brand

Purchase Professional Off-The-Shelf

This one is the most popular and recommended especially when the level of Joomla skills, both as the integrator and/or the end user, are limited. It allows you to focus on organization of the content, learning how to install and modify (brand) templates. It's also a perfect scenario to allow the integrator to explain to the client how templates work and how content must be positioned into them. Professional templates are generally offered via club memberships and are very inexpensive relative to the other two methods.

Before deciding on this method, or any other, schedule at least two hours/weeks to visit at least three template vendors and get a feel for the quality and complexity of their products. Armed with this knowledge **then** go explain to the client the benefits and limitations of using an off-the-shelf design. Once you have completed this, then you will know if **Buy and Brand** is a viable design method.

If you search for Joomla templates in Google you'll get about 12 million results and as we all know, getting to the top of a search result only means they know how to get to the top of the list. If you are seeking template bliss, here are the places we recommend you visit on your quest:

<i>CompassDesigns</i>	<i>TemplatePlazza</i>
<i>Joomla Shack</i>	<i>yooTheme</i>
<i>youJoomla!</i>	<i>Joomla Junkie</i>
<i>Rocket Theme</i>	<i>Joomla Bamboo</i>
<i>JoomlaPraise</i>	<i>JoomlaArt</i>

What does Skye think about all this?
<http://apin.com/templates>

STRONG ADVICE

Do not attempt to quantify the effort needed to customize a template before you have worked on at least one complex Type 2 template design. It is a lonely and, depending on circumstances, sometimes disturbing experience to invest hours in modifying a template, just to realize, when you are done with what feels like 90% of the work, that the design does not entirely meet the requirements. If the client is the attached kind and requires exact duplication you either hit a dead end or have the alternative of working many more hours hoping you can find a path that leads to QC certification.

-Monica
<http://todoran.com>

Type 2. The Structural Tweak

a.k.a., Hammer, Saw and Blow Torch

The challenging side of using a professional template: Modern templates can be/usually are very complex so making structural changes requires substantial knowledge, effort and advanced pain thresholds. By structural change, this means making an off-the-shelf template look and behave like something it's not.

Example: You take an existing site and try to make it look 99% the same. The reality: Unless that existing site was built with one of those templates, that 99% match will never be achieved. Therefore, you will need to find something close, then saw, hammer blow torch the code to make off-the-shelf appear to be custom.

Another approach that's often used in doing site prototypes is to begin with a less complex template. You can find thousands of free ones at places like Joomla24.com.

But... free templates often look like free templates (they are butt-ugly). The upside: The simple ones are much smaller in size/scope meaning they're the ideal place to learn and possibly ... a way to find something that will act as a suitable prototype template.

Structural Tweak, con't

Choosing the right template is a critical part in the customizing process. Of course, it's a question of choice. Do you prefer to spend extra hours on looking for and studying templates, or use them in fixing structural inconveniences in the one that you chose at first sight? The former may be a better choice for two reasons: first, as long as you haven't actually started the work, there is always a way back and a better alternative; second, looking for the right template may help you get familiar with some other ones that you can use in future projects.

It Starts as a Prototype

When a Type 2 template project is started, it should be managed as any other software development project. But what's critical in this process is that the initial versions should always be referred to as a prototype meaning that the current template may not be the one used in production. Even more bluntly: The initial template may be tossed out if aforementioned dead end can't be circumnavigated.

There is of course the danger of getting too involved in customizing the wrong template. Abandoning a production template when you realize the extra hours you have to invest in it will not get you to the finish line is a painful act. This is the reason for maintaining prototype status until template layout and function have been confirmed. Adding to that complication, it's never clear when it's time to give up; there will be no "Template will never work" warnings.

Be aware of the fact that people may become very attached to what they are used to -- including their mistakes. There will be clients that will ask you to duplicate even their old design fallacies. Prepare them and yourself for working long hours in order to reproduce a structural or design gaffe that you knew would be there from the start. Again, this is why we use "prototype" during the start of a Type 2 design.

Who should lead a project? Graphics guru or template tweeker?

See page 4 of

<http://apin.com/docs/wd-process.pdf>

Type 3. Do It Yourself

Roll Up Some Big Sleeves

If you're the type to begin your template design process with a HTML mockup, then this may likely be the choice you're forced into.

You write the HTML, the CSS and the PHP. You make sure your HTML and CSS validates with w3.org and that it complies with Section 508. Make certain you have all browsers running as you'll need to make sure your custom template works in all of those, even Safari and Opera.

If you're going this route, then it is possible to start with that Dreamweaver approach of doing look and feel first. Still not recommended, but if you're going to build from the ground-up, then you using Dreamweaver to sketch ideas is viable as long as you don't lose sight of needing to convert how something looks into how it connects to the content.

DIY FYI: If you've not done many Type 2 designs, don't even think about this one.

How Long, How Much?



Like all software development -- that depends. In this case, it depends on the method type you've selected and to remain consistent, here are the answers in that order:

Buy and Brand

You can join a club for \$50, download a template and install it in an hour. Insert your custom graphics, adjust the positions to fit the content and you could easily have this one in one day.

Structural Tweak

Depends on how rigid the requirements are. "Make it look nice" costs less than "Must be identical to this." For something middle of the road, estimate 10-20 hours, delivery in a few days.

DIY

If the template builder is good, and the design isn't too complex, I would budget at least \$2K and look to have it ready in about 2 weeks.