



TenStep Supplemental Paper

31 March 2008

Cookies, Anyone?

Cookies are one of the most widely used, but also misunderstood, features of the Web. Their basic function is simple - they allow Web servers to store and retrieve information on the client-side. Although cookies can make the Web surfing experience more personalized and streamlined, many users regard them with suspicion because of concerns about privacy.

When used appropriately, cookies can be an invaluable tool for a Webmaster. You can use them to simplify sign-on procedures, set up shopping carts, and provide individual users with more personalized information on your site. Site visitors are becoming increasingly discriminating - they demand useful content presented quickly and clearly.

What Cookies Are

First, you must understand what cookies are. A cookie is a unique bit of information sent by a Web server to identify a particular machine and browser. Cookies are stored in a text file whose exact name and location depend on the user's operating system and browser. Cookies can contain specific information about the user including username, password, date of last visit, etc. Web servers use the stored information to identify the particular user by requesting authentication information. Cookies are browser-specific. A cookie set when you browse in Netscape Navigator will not be read if you visit the same site again using Internet Explorer.

What Cookies Are Not

Cookies cannot store any personal information about the user that the user doesn't voluntarily supply to the Web site. Cookies do not contain viruses. A server can only get data from the cookie it wrote to the cookie file. It can't go fishing by itself for information on the hard drive.

Useful Applications For Cookies

Web sites use cookies for a number of different reasons. Some of the most common include:

Site Personalization. You can use cookies to identify visitors and direct them to areas of the site that might interest them most. This can be flagging new stories or products added to the site since their last visit. It can also be used to completely customize pages based on stored preferences (favorite music, nonfiction categories, etc.).

Online Ordering. Many e-commerce sites use cookies to track additions or deletions to your shopping cart. Sites can use session cookies that are valid only for the duration of that particular visit. They can also be designed so that the user can return to the site days later and complete their transaction.

Website Tracking. Cookies provide you with a more accurate count of site visitors. Using cookies, you can insure that someone who visits your site three times per day isn't



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counted as a unique user each time. You can also see how often repeat visitors visit and what items they view most often.