

Creating a Custom SharePoint Theme

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When it comes to branding in SharePoint, few things are as important as the effective use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). This is because CSS is the primary mechanism that Microsoft gives us to override their out of the box look and feel. One excellent way to use CSS to style SharePoint is to use a theme.

SharePoint themes take advantage of the CSS concept of “cascading”. The basic idea is that styles that are loaded last on a page typically override styles of the same specificity that were loaded earlier on the page. SharePoint themes are mostly made up of CSS that is overriding already defined out-of-the-box SharePoint branding. That familiar light blue and white UI can be changed to look radically different just by creating a custom SharePoint theme and applying it to a site.

SharePoint themes can affect colors, fonts, background images, paddings and margins, heights and widths, as well as being able to hide UI elements. While they are certainly powerful, SharePoint themes are limited in what they can change in the user interface. Because SharePoint themes are CSS based, you are still relying on whatever HTML is applied to the site from the master page, page layout, web parts, and other controls. A theme cannot add, remove, or change this HTML at all, so if you want to move something around the page or add completely new HTML elements, SharePoint themes will probably not fit the bill. In this article you will look at the mechanics of creating a custom SharePoint theme, the actual branding and CSS that you apply with your custom theme is beyond the scope of this article.

Components of a SharePoint Theme

Before you begin the process of creating a custom SharePoint theme, you need to understand where they live and what files are contained in them. SharePoint themes all live inside the 12 folder (sometimes affectionately known as the 12 hive). This folder can be found on a SharePoint server by navigating to:

```
C:\Program Files\Common Files\Microsoft Shared\web server extensions\12
```

The bulk of the files for SharePoint themes are located in the “\Template\Themes” subfolder. Inside this Themes folder you will see folders for every theme that is included with SharePoint. Each of these individual theme folders will contain:

- ThemeName.inf – The INF file will be named the same as the folder. If you open the LACQUER theme folder you will find a LACQUER.INF file. This file dictates the name of the theme in various languages as well as some other information that is typically not changed.
- theme.css – Contains the bulk of the CSS for the Theme
- mossExtension.css – Contains extra CSS applied to the end of a theme’s CSS in MOSS sites
- All supporting images and CSS

Along with the themes folder there are two other files located in other areas of the 12 folder that go into making a SharePoint theme work:

- C:\Program Files\Common Files\Microsoft Shared\web server extensions\12\TEMPLATE\LAYOUTS\1033\SPTHEMES.XML – This file contains XML that identifies each theme that will be available to all SharePoint sites on the server. It includes their names, descriptions, and thumbnail images.
- C:\Program Files\Common Files\Microsoft Shared\web server extensions\12\TEMPLATE\IMAGES – This folder contains many images but specifically it is the location of the thumbnail images that are referred to by the SPTHEMES.XML file

Creating the Custom SharePoint Theme

To create a custom theme it is usually easiest to copy one of the existing themes. While you can pick any theme, you will save a lot of time by choosing a theme that is similar in color to what you are trying to achieve. For this example you will start with the Lacquer theme and turn it into a theme named WingTip.

Here are the steps for creating the WingTip theme:

1. Begin by navigating to C:\Program Files\Common Files\Microsoft Shared\web server extensions\12\TEMPLATE\THEMES
2. Make a copy of the LACQUER folder and name the new folder WingTip.
3. Inside of the WingTip folder, rename the LACQUER.INF file to WingTip.INF.
4. Edit WingTip.INF file and replace all instances of OOTB Theme name “Lacquer” with your theme name “WingTip”.
5. Everything else in the INF file can remain the same. Save and close it.
6. While you are in this folder you can edit the theme.css file and make a simple change. Add a style to change the background color to something obvious like red. To do this, add some code to the very top of the theme.css file:

```
body { background-color:red; }
```

After adding this line, save and close the theme.css. Note: you can make more changes later after the custom theme has been created. Also, this is the folder where any custom background images used in your CSS should be placed.

7. Next, navigate to C:\Program Files\Common Files\Microsoft Shared\web server extensions\12\TEMPLATE\LAYOUTS\1033 and edit the SPTHEMES.XML file
8. You will want to add the following lines right before the ending </SPThemes> tag:

```
<Templates>  
  <TemplateID>WingTip</TemplateID>  
  <DisplayName>WingTip</DisplayName>  
  <Description>Theme for WingTip Inc.</Description>  
  <Thumbnail>images/th_wingtip.jpg</Thumbnail>  
  <Preview>images/th_wingtip.jpg</Preview>
```

```
</Templates>
```

9. Save and close the SPTHEMES.XML file
10. Next, navigate to C:\Program Files\Common Files\Microsoft Shared\web server extensions\12\TEMPLATE\IMAGES and add a JPG named "th_wingtip.jpg". This can be a placeholder image; perhaps a copy of one of the Lacquer theme's thumbnail (thLacquer.gif). You can replace this thumbnail later with an actual screenshot of your finished theme.
11. To make the theme available in SharePoint, run the following from a command prompt

```
iisreset /noforce
```

After following these steps, the theme should be available to all SharePoint sites hosted on the server. To apply the theme to a SharePoint site, navigate to the site in a web browser, login, and click Site Actions > Site Settings > Modify All Site Settings and then under the Look and Feel section, click Site Theme. You will see a list of all the themes including the new WingTip theme. Select it and click OK. You should now see the new theme applied to the Site Settings page (and all other pages that you navigate to in this site).

When the theme is applied in SharePoint, files are provisioned into the current site at "_themes/WingTip". Inside of this folder, all of the contents of the theme folder from the server are copied in and both theme.css and mossExtension.css are merged together into a new file named Wing1011-65001.css. This combined CSS file is what is actually used to override the SharePoint out-of-the-box CSS.

Modifying the Custom Theme

Any changes you make to the theme will need to be applied to the theme.css file in the theme subfolder in the 12 hive. After any changes are made, you will also need to re-run the IISRESET command and reselect the theme from the SharePoint web UI (to reselect it, you can select and apply another theme and then reselect and apply your custom theme).

While this method works for updating a theme, it can be a little tedious when making and testing a lot of changes. To save yourself some headaches, you can use SharePoint Designer to change the theme temporarily and see the results instantaneously by refreshing your browser:

- Open the site in SharePoint Designer
- Navigate to _themes > WingTip
- Open Wing1011-65001.css and make and save your changes
- You can also add or change images in the same _themes > WingTip folder
- Your changes appear immediately after a browser refresh

Just remember that these changes are NOT permanent, you will need to copy the images and the contents of Wing1011-65001.css back to the theme.css file in the 12 folder before these changes will

last. If you forget to do this step, all of your hard work could be lost if another theme is applied to the site (this is because the provisioned _theme folder will be replaced with the newly selected theme). Because of this, always be sure to finish your modifications by replicating them back in the 12 folder.

Conclusion

That's all you need to know to create a custom SharePoint theme. To learn more about how CSS works and to explore how CSS is applied to a SharePoint site, check out the following links:

- W3C –CSS 2 Specification
- <http://www.w3.org/TR/CSS2/>
- W3 Schools – CSS Tutorial
<http://www.w3schools.com/css/>
- IE Developers Toolbar – Useful for exploring what CSS is applied to a SharePoint site
<http://www.microsoft.com/downloadS/details.aspx?familyid=E59C3964-672D-4511-BB3E-2D5E1DB91038&displaylang=en>
- Firebug Firefox plug-in – Similar to the IE Developers toolbar it can explore the CSS that is applied in a SharePoint site
<http://www.getfirebug.com/>

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SharePoint Branding Book: [Wrox: Professional SharePoint 2007 Design](#)