Chapter 7

Styling Forms and Data Tables

As more and more interactivity is called for on the Web, forms are becoming an increasingly important part of modern web applications. Forms allow users to interact with systems, enabling them to do everything from registering feedback to booking complicated travel itineraries. As such, forms can be as simple as an e-mail address and a message field, or they can be hugely complex, spanning multiple pages. Form layout has traditionally been done using tables; however, in this chapter, you will learn that even complicated forms can be laid out using CSS.

Tables are slowly regaining their rightful position purely as a way of displaying tabular data, rather than a means of laying out pages. As well as needing to capture user data, web applications increasingly need to display this data in a usable and an easy-to-understand format. Form and data table design have been relatively neglected in favor of higher-profile areas of design. However, good information and interaction design can make or break a modern web application.

In this chapter, you will learn about

- Creating attractive and accessible data tables
- Creating simple and complicated form layouts
- Styling various form elements
- Providing accessible form feedback
Styling data tables

Many developers realize the pitfalls of table-based design and avoid using layout tables wherever possible. A small group of individuals have gone a step further and attempted to ditch tables altogether, re-creating things like calendar layouts in pure CSS. Well-meaning as this strategy is, calendars, by their nature, are table-based content. After all, they're basically just rows of weeks and columns of days. As such, there is still a place for the use of tables on the Web.

Even relatively simple data tables can be hard to read if they contain more than a few rows and columns. Without separation between data cells, information blurs together, resulting in a jumbled and confusing layout (see Figure 7-1).

Conversely, tables with a lot of whitespace can also be very difficult to read, as columns and cells start to lose their visual association with each other. This is particularly problematic when you're trying to follow rows of information on tables with very large column spacing, such as the one in Figure 7-2. If you are not careful, it is easy to accidentally stray into the wrong row when moving between columns. This is most noticeable in the middle of the table where the hard edge of the top and bottom of the table provide less of a visual anchor.

Figure 7-1. Compact data tables can be very confusing at first glance

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