

10 Key Questions to Ask When Choosing a Web Designer

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Let's face it. Running a business is not easy. With so many different aspects of running a successful business, you have to be confident that you are choosing the right partners along the way to help you achieve your business growth goals quickly and effectively.

Your presence on the Internet could be the best marketing investment you'll ever make. Or it could be a complete flop and lead you to the belief that the Internet doesn't work in your line of business and that you just wasted a lot of your hard earned money.

Choosing the right web designer involves more than simply finding someone who has the technical wherewithal to design a web page and program it so that you show up on the Internet if someone types your website address into their browser. There are several questions to consider up-front to avoid a costly experience that provides little or no return on investment.

Here are the 10 questions you should ask when choosing your web designer:

1) How much experience do they have?

Experience is more than just the knowledge of HTML, XHTML, XML, CSS, PHP, ASP, JavaScript, and so on. Most college students with any amount of experience can play around with these common web development languages.

How long has their company been in business? Have they worked with other businesses in related industries to yours? How has their work impacted their client's businesses?

Ask for specific examples or case studies. Look at their design portfolio. Do they use Photoshop or a similar graphic application for professional web design?

Design is the most important single element of your website. Research reported by the BBC, has shown that visitors will make a decision to stay or go within a 20th of a second upon visiting your site. Not only does it need to look great, but your business, your product, and your Unique Selling Proposition (USP) must be instantly identifiable if you want to keep the visitor on your site.

2) Are they marketers or technologists?

Obviously technology is a requirement of your online success. That being said, great technology alone rarely leads to a significantly higher bottom line.

There are many ways to use Internet technology to reduce costs and improve business efficiencies. But the best way that the Internet can impact your business is by generating more leads and increasing your sales.

Success on the Internet is about effective marketing. Your web designer has to be able to assist you with identifying your company's unique selling proposition (USP); what separates you from your competitors, and communicating it effectively to your audience.

You'll need to understand your audience; what their needs are, how much information they need to feel comfortable and what process they use to make decisions. Your web designer should have a system for helping you uncover this information and incorporate it into the architecture of the web site.

3) Can they help you come up with copy for your website?

Writing professional content for your website may be the most difficult thing you've ever had to do. To be effective, your website should have a minimum of 10 to 15 pages of content averaging 300-500 words.

As business owners, we're inclined to write about ourselves, our accolades and accomplishments, or commitment to service, or our excellent products. For web content to be effective it should focus less on us and more on our readers.

Unless you are a professional copywriter or know someone who is, it will be in your best interest not to try writing all of the content yourself. Often, it will delay the launch of your website by months and the end result will be a website that does not communicate effectively to your audience.

Ask the web designer if they have professional copywriters they work with. Professionally written copy on your website will significantly speed up the project completion and will almost always provide a faster return on investment.

4) How can they help you find the right images or graphics?

Did you know that 55% of people are visual learners? The visual representation of your product or service on your website is imperative in communicating your message effectively to your audience.

Somehow, you will need to come up with high quality images with people and objects that relate to the product or service you are selling. You may already have some images to use. They must be at least 1024 pixels x 768 pixels in resolution in order to display clearly on the internet. These images can easily be reduced in size, but smaller images can never be increased in size.

Ensure that your web designer can edit the images using Photoshop or similar software. Often, images have distracting objects or people in the background that need to be cropped out. You should also consider adding effects to your images, like borders, shadows and other effects.

The most effective way to come up with high quality, effective imagery for your website is to use stock photos. There are many resources available to source stock photos which can usually be purchased for low cost.

You should ask your web designer if they have access to these resources and if they can help you make sure that the graphics on the website will look both abundant and professional. Every page should include some imagery within the text area of the page.

Be aware of copyright laws. It is illegal to take any image from someone else's website or any copyrighted document and use it on your site. Even if

you are planning to display images from your suppliers' websites or marketing materials, you must ensure that you have their written permission to do so in order to protect your own interests.

5) How much will it cost?

Just like any product that you might buy, there are different types of websites and many options that can all add to the cost.

Simply stated there are 2 types of websites; static and dynamic. Static websites are also known as brochure websites and are limited by functionality and how easily content can be changed or added. Static websites can be built for prices ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars depending on the level of design and amount of content.

Static websites have a fairly short lifespan since they are difficult to maintain and expand upon and offer little in the way of functionality. They are a lower cost solution initially, and often lead to a higher cost over time.

Dynamic websites offer more robust functionality. There is usually a combination of static content pages and database driven information. They commonly include a content management system so that the owner of the site can easily make changes or add to existing content. These websites are flexible, expandable and can offer any type of functionality that you can imagine.

Dynamic websites can range from a few thousand dollars to tens of thousands of dollars. There are many out-of-the-box solutions available. These pre-developed solutions offer lower-cost and robust functionality and expandability.

It is important that your web designer can not only provide this functionality but can modify or customize the functionality to meet your specific requirements as needed. Programming is a very time consuming process and will always cost more. The more customized your solution becomes, the higher the cost.

Dynamic websites have a much longer life-span because they are flexible, expandable and customizable. It's unlikely that it will last forever without

an upgrade, but you should be able to get several productive years out of it before upgrading.

6) How long will it take?

It is important that whomever you decide to work with is more than a one-person operation. There are a number of different skill-sets required create an effective website and Internet Marketing System, and there is a lot of time and effort involved.

You need to hire a great designer, a programmer/developer, a copywriter, a Search Engine specialist, a Project Manager, and a Certified Internet Consultant to advise you on how to make the best use of it all. If you find all that in one person, you have just struck gold!

Many website designers attempt to provide all these services as an individual rather than a team. It almost always leads to a longer than expected delivery time and a less than anticipated return on investment.

Ask your designer how many people are on their team and how they will ensure a quick launch of your project. A robust, dynamic website and Internet Marketing System should be delivered in a 60-90 day timeframe.

Advanced customized solutions can take significantly longer, so be sure to include a discussion around timelines and deliverables at the inception of the project so that you can reduce the likelihood of unexpected delays along the way.

7) What happens after your website is launched?

The internet is full of a vast expanse of forgotten websites. Since the late 90's businesses have begun taking the plunge into the World Wide Web. Unfortunately many of them simply checked it off their list and moved on.

Many website designers target businesses that have this checklist philosophy because it is quick and easy. Typically it's a short-term relationship. Once the site is launched, the relationship is over. The only time you'll hear from them is when they invoice you for your monthly or annual hosting.

If you are serious about using your website as a marketing tool for your business, it is critical that it not become stagnant. Your content must be kept up to date. You should be continuously adding information, updating your specials, posting news or events and anything else that will give visitors a reason to keep coming back.

A dynamic website should include a content management system so it will be easy to make changes yourself, if you have the time to manage your own website. Not all content management systems are the same, so ask to see it and test it. Some are more difficult to use than others.

Regardless of whether you'll be managing your content yourself or not, you will need to be sure that your web designer is available for ongoing maintenance and upgrades to your website.

Your web designer should also be able to provide you with statistical reports of how users are interacting with your website. More than just how many hits or visitors you are getting, you should know which Search Engines and which specific keywords are sending the traffic. How long are they spending on your site and where are they losing interest? You should also be able to track how many or what percentage of your visitors are taking a desired action on your site. All of this can be measured using web analytics software.

Ask your web designer if they provide these valuable statistical tools and the ongoing consulting required to help you make the best future business decisions and maximize your return on investment.

8) How will they ensure that you will get lots of traffic to your website?

Having a nice website by itself isn't going to make your cash register ring. This is the biggest problem that small and medium sized businesses face on the Internet. Many business owners thought that they needed a website so that they would appear legitimate and that having a website would mean that droves of people would be finding them and contacting them. And more often than not; they were disappointed with the results.

Don't fall prey to having a website that doesn't work! You have to choose a professional who not only can help you design a great website, but can

help you be found on search engines for keywords and phrases that are relevant to your business, industry and location.

The percentage of internet users who use search engines on a typical day has been steadily rising from about one-third of all users in 2002, to a new high of just under one half (49%). Source: PEW Internet & American Life Project. Just because you have a website doesn't mean that you will be found. There are specific things that must be done in order to ensure that you show up on the first page of a search.

It can be confusing and often daunting, trying to comprehend all the industry buzz words. As a business owner, you care about one thing only; your bottom line! Be sure to choose someone who will immerse themselves into your business to ensure that you achieve long-term results.

9) Can they host your website securely?

Would you trust a stranger or someone you're not 100% sure of to take care of your business for a year, a week or even a day? Probably not! The hosting for your website should be as important to you as the minding of your actual business.

Hosting is necessary for your website. Simply stated, your website is made up of a series of files and programs that need to be stored on a computer, called a server, which brings up the information when someone types your website address into their browser. Not all web servers are the same.

You should ask your web designer where the servers are located. It's not unusual for some to host websites on their own server, in their local office or even their basement or storage room. This is not a secure choice.

Ask if they backup the servers; how often and with what redundancy. If you plan on using the web for marketing, then you'll be making frequent changes to the content and will probably have data stored on the server that you won't want to lose.

Do they offer an uptime guarantee? You don't want people getting a 'page not available' error just when they're ready to give you their business.

Make sure that the site is guaranteed to be working at least 99.9% of the time.

Can they host your email? Many website hosts do not support email hosting. It is in your best interest to have an email@yourcompany.com. It is more professional and gives you the impression of a larger company; even though you may be a one or two person business. Be sure to keep future growth in mind as well. You should be able to add up to an unlimited number of email addresses in the future.

10) Will they deliver?

Like any intangible purchase, you ultimately have to take a leap of faith with the belief that everything that has been promised will actually happen. Be sure that you do your homework. Ask all of the questions discussed here.

And be sure to ask for references and call them. You should be able to get a good feeling for the quality of their work and their ability to deliver based on these conversations.

Most importantly, choose someone who you like. This is a long-term relationship and it's critical that you find someone who you can relate to.
