How to choose a web solution

In today's business world, many connections are made over the Internet. Companies without websites or with outdated websites run the risk of either losing clients or never being found by potential clients in the first place. When your company needs a website or a massive redesign, you will most likely turn to a web design professional. However, all of these design firms are not created equal, so here are some points to help guide you on your path to choosing a designer.

1. Determine your company's needs.

Are you a small business planning on using the internet solely as a marketing tool, or are you an online specific company that depends on internet sales? This variable can make a large difference in choosing the web design firm that is right for you and your company.

If you plan on using your website as an online brochure, a means of attracting and maintaining clients or customers, you will need something eye-catching. In this scenario, looking at a web designer's portfolio and deciding whether or not you like their design style would be the first step. The success of an informational site depends mainly on the presentation of its content. Choose a company whose portfolio provides examples that appeal to you, examples that you remember. There is a very good chance your customers will feel the same way.

If your website is an electronic catalog and actually makes the sale or if you use your site to gather and return customer questions and information, then programming is a major concern. You need a company that can provide the programming support to collect and store your data and/or process your financial transactions. In addition, you need a company that can create a design that makes your site easy to use and pleasant to experience. How often have you given up and looked elsewhere when it's just too hard to navigate a form or find a page? Having a

company with a design and programming team that works together will result in a site that is visually attractive and functionally efficient.

   2. Find out how long the company has been in business.

In today's market, companies earning their revenue on the internet can come and go quickly. Will that company be around long enough to complete your website build or to maintain it afterwards? If they offer website hosting, will they be able to provide a seamless experience, without the monumental hassle of having to transfer your site to a different host?

In a niche market flooded by a large percentage of small, independent designers, most seem to come and go with the turning of the seasons, and often end up leaving their clients with a disorganized website and no one to maintain it. On the other end of the spectrum, larger companies have also come and gone, sometimes due to acquisitions, losing clients in the shuffle or taking a more impersonal approach to customer service matters, such as maintenance and troubleshooting.

Longevity, as in any business, means more security for clients. Due to the youth of the World Wide Web and it's relatively brief life so far as a marketing tool, ten years is an impressive amount of time to be able to successfully run a web design firm. Companies who were able to continue doing business through the dot-com crash are much more likely to be around in the future, and will be there to maintain client sites, troubleshoot problems and help you update and enhance your site as your needs expand. They also have the type of experience you should be looking for.

Inquire about the size of the company. If it's a one-man shop, one would be well advised to keep looking. Ask for a business card and make it has a business address and a few ways to reach the company. Inquire about the company's

business hours. Don't trust your company's web presence to someone for who web design is a part-time job.

3. Make sure the company offers both programming and design, and that it's not the same person.

Often times, single-person operations are one of two things: a good programmer or a good designer, mostly the former. This becomes a problem because both programming and design move extremely quickly in the web world, so much so that one person can not possibly be current on newer developments in both facets. With technology changing so quickly, designers and programmers must have the time to be vigilant in updating their skill sets, so that they may be able to offer their clients an eye-catching, functional website.

Graphic design-specific firms usually have excellent design skills, but require outsourcing to complete the programming aspects of a site, presenting possible problems. Due to their need to outsource the functionality of the site, the design company must then raise the client's price to be able to recoup revenue after paying the contracted programming firm.

Find a company that deals with businesses of a similar and slightly larger size than your own. A company that shows huge corporate clients as the mainstay of their portfolio is not likely to spare the time and personal attention needed to give a small to mid size company the unique design that best serves their needs. And a company that has never designed more than a simple site for a very small business is not likely to provide the expertise to handle any but the very basic requirements of a website.

4. Does the company also offer hosting services?

Not all web design companies have the resources to host websites after building them. This can make things difficult on the client because there are so many different programming languages used for websites, with no industry standard. Consequently, different hosting

companies may have servers that only support one or two languages, and without guidance, it can be easy to choose the wrong one. The benefit to having a web design team that also hosts sites is that they're already setup for their specific programming language, eliminating the client's need for guesswork. The website is designed and tested on the same software that will host the finished live site.

When inquiring about a company's hosting services, ask where their server is physically located. A red flag should go up if they keep their servers in their office. The vast majority of office spaces aren't equipped with the wiring capabilities or the internet and power-source backups required to keep your website online at all times. Look for a host who keeps their servers in an off-site facility. These specialty facilities will have server backups, power generators in case of a power outage, high connection speeds and redundant internet connections. They will also have tight security. All these factors combine to keep your website running as quickly and consistently as possible.

   5. Take a good look at the company's portfolio.

Many, if not all, web design firms have an online portfolio of past clients. If this is merely a client list and doesn't contain links to the actual sites, BEWARE. A quality company will have their portfolio clearly labeled and will show pride in their past work by having either a screenshot or link to the client's site. Be sure to check the bottom of the client's page carefully, looking for the web design company's branding. There have been occasional instances of firms taking credit for the work of others.

In general, designers will have a certain style in which they design the look and feel of all their websites. Take a look at the designer's portfolio. How quickly do the portfolio websites load? Do the designs fit with the client's line of business? Can you navigate the site easily and quickly?

6. Critique their past work.

It only takes seven seconds for a website to make an impression on a visitor, whether it is positive or negative. During those seven seconds, a website that's confusing or too busy and crowded will likely cause the visitor to become frustrated, causing them not to return in the future. A common problem in web design is a website that is far too complex, with dozens of buttons overwhelming the user on every page. It does little good to have great content if it is nearly impossible to locate. A client who gets lost repeatedly or frustrated by poor design and performance will look elsewhere.

Just as important as not inundating the visitor with a large amount of buttons is consistency. Do the company's portfolio sites remain consistent in button placement as well as design and layout? Choose a few of the portfolio sites and go through several pages on each one. A well-designed site will maintain consistency in button and navigation menu locations. Beware of a company that boasts sites that are difficult to navigate. Look for signs of unorganized navigation by checking different pages to verify that the location of all the buttons are indeed uniform throughout.

Check the design company's own website. While it is often true that a busy company may neglect their own site, it is still the company's example of what they can produce. Their site need not be huge and filled with the latest technology, but it should reflect good visual and functional design.

7. Is it a local company, or one that can only be reached by phone?

Today's technologically advanced world has taught society that it's okay to do business with someone on the other end of the phone or via email solely. In the online purchasing world, a system such as this usually works relatively seamlessly. However, when an intricate service

is being provided to a client, more input than a simple
phone call or email will most likely be needed on a
consistent basis.

The size of your site and your knowledge of the web
process must guide you here. If you feel comfortable
discussing details over the phone and previewing the
progress of your design on the web, then location is not
an issue. If this is your first website and/or you need to
talk often in person to convey your needs and review
designs and concepts, than look at local firms as your
primary option.

Inquire as to whether you will be able to view the
progress of the website build. A good design firm will
have no problem with clients being up to date during the
entire site build. Beware companies who will "let you know
when the site is finished." During the course of a site
build, details and opinions on design and content can
change. Not being able to view the site being built in
real-time can be frustrating and make you feel as though
you have no input in the project.

Some design firms actually offer a system whereas the
client can view the website up to the minute via a non-
public internet address. This way, if anything changes
during the project, the client will immediately recognize
what needs to be updated. This in turn increases the speed
with which problems are identified and fixed, thereby
increasing the speed and efficiency of the project.

   8. Ask about payment options.

At your initial meeting, ask how the web firm bills for a
complete website build. Pick a company that is willing to
work with you. The best plan is one that motivates both
you, the client and the web design company to deliver what
is necessary to complete the project.

Don't agree to a contractual agreement where work won't
begin until full payment is received. A website build is
already a long and complicated process without having to

worry about motivation on the part of the design team, which in this scenario has already received full payment.

Beware also, if initial payment is too small. There is a lot of preliminary work needed to design a successful website. A company that doesn't expect to cover those costs may be cutting corners or taking on too many projects at the same time, lessening the concentration level of their firm on your site or causing elongated site build schedules.

Most web development firms will ask for a down payment of around half of the total invoice, with the balance due upon completion of the site. This helps motivate the client to spend time discussing their needs and delivering their content. It also assures the design company their work will be rewarded and keep the site build moving at a consistent pace.

Some companies might even offer monthly financing arrangements as an alternative to a split final invoice. Often times, this will require a certain percentage down-payment upon contract signing, usually around twenty percent. However, some companies may offer a special payment that meters out the full contract value in an equal-payment monthly system.

Again, each website and each client is different. It is important to find a good match between your company and the web design firm you choose to design your site.

9. Summary

The web is a constantly changing environment, and you need to select a company you can work with now and in the future. To keep visitors/clients returning to your website the content and design must change as the needs of your company change and as styles change.

A website is not a "build it and forget it venture". Seek out a company that is not only here to design your site now, but will be able to make the constant small updates

needed to maintain your site and keep it current. And when it is time to provide a new look that better reflects a changing business environment, it is nice to think your design company will still around to point out the need and provide the expertise.

Working together with you to best serve your business.
Stickydigital Inc