

How to Choose the Right Designer:

A Checklist for Professional Web Design



The Internet has changed the way the world does business - and that's just as true for the business next door as it is for the business on the other side of the world.

Consumers are increasingly using the Internet as their first stop to research all types of products, services, and businesses. Whether your business is a small mom & pop shop or a huge multi-national corporation, you can benefit from a professional website. From using your website to provide detailed information about your business to selling products or services online, you can use the Internet to constantly gather new consumers.

Why Hire A Professional?

For your website to be effective, it has to send a professional, clean, well-organized, responsive, lively, and up-to-date image.

You can do this yourself or you can ask a relative or friend to do it for you. The friends-and-family route, however, may be less than satisfying when simple design requests take weeks or months to accomplish, or more complex projects never get done. There is also the risk of offending the volunteer when the final deliverable is not what you envisioned.

If you choose to do it yourself, remember that learning to use the tools of website design takes time and commitment. Factor in time spent to update your Web and you may soon find that running your business has taken a back seat to maintaining your website.

These are lessons learned the hard way, which is why many business owners turn to professional website designers to create and maintain their sites. Ultimately, choosing the right professional designer is critical to your site's success.

Before you hire a professional designer to build or redesign your site, ask yourself, "What are my goals in building this website?" This paper answers that question and covers the most important topics to discuss before choosing your Web designer:

- Web Design Experience
- Technical & Business Skills
- website and Domain Name Security
- Photography, Graphics and Logo Design
- Writing Skills
- Ecommerce
- Online Marketing
- Ongoing Support and Maintenance
- Pitfalls to Avoid

Web Design Experience

Questions to ask:

- Will the designer supply contact information/references for websites they have designed?
- Will the designer provide a schedule and meet the deadline?
- How easy will it be to make updates and changes? And how will those changes be billed?

As you begin your search for a website designer, start with their reputation. Take a look at some of the websites they have designed and follow up with references. Look for a well-established firm that has a

proven track record for professionalism both in their design portfolios and their business practices. A professional Web design firm will be able to provide multiple examples of great website designs and references of happy and ongoing client relationships.

Ask your designer if they will provide a timeline for completing your website and ensure they are responsible for keeping the project on schedule and within budget. A professional designer will manage all the steps of creating your website, providing communication and updates as the project moves forward. As a point of reference, it should take no more than 30-45 days to go from the one-on-one consultation to discuss your business needs to getting the initial design of your website completed and deployed. The procedure and expected turnaround for any necessary updates, changes, additions and re-designs should also be discussed. Reputable companies will be able to give you an outline of fees and costs for any additional work so there are no surprises.

Technical Skills

Questions to ask:

- How much experience does the designer have with the latest Internet tools and techniques, including Flash, blogs, videos, animation, search capabilities, etc.?
- Will the site be written in code that is optimized for search engine indexing?
- Can the designer provide traffic monitoring and visitor reporting tools?

When you hire a professional designer, you are paying for effective design along with technical expertise. A good designer keeps abreast of the latest Internet tools and trends that make a website stand out from the crowd. For example, community-building tools make your site more interactive and search tools enhance your site's usability.

A professional designer will inform you of new Web tools that are most applicable to your business. The range of new tools and techniques available to Web designers is generally referred to as "Web 2.0" and includes:

- Video and audio and animation
- Community-building
- Blogging
- Targeted advertising and marketing
- Social media
- Buzz or viral marketing (Internet commentary and feedback)
- Sharing information with customers as well as marketing to them
- Brighter colors, richer designs, bolder use of text, and illustration elements

Each of these is important - and the reputable, expert professional Web designer you select will be able to walk you through every one of them, explaining what they do, what benefits they provide for your business, what they'll cost, and how they'll be implemented. On the other hand, a good designer won't hesitate to tell you if the high-tech Web 2.0 wizardry isn't appropriate for your site.

Most Web designers will also be able to implement various research tools that analyze your website's performance. They can, for example, analyze the performance of each website page so you can see how many people are visiting your site, how long they are spending on each page, and how long it takes for the pages to upload.

Website and Domain Name Security

Questions to ask:

- What Web security products will protect my website?
- How will my customers know my website is secure?
- Will my domain name be protected?

Strong attention needs to be given to protecting the data on your website from online threats and making sure your site maintains visibility 24 hours a day without interruption.

From protecting your email to securing your server and any transactions on your website, your designer should provide advice on protecting the exchange of data that is crucial to your site's integrity. For example, a well-designed website will install and prominently display any SSL Certificates or Site Assure Seals on critical pages throughout the site where customers may be hesitant to submit personal information or financial data. Securing your website is vital to gain customer trust.

You must also make sure your domain name (online address: e.g., www.xyzmycompany.com) is protected and always registered to you as the owner.

Reputable designers will always register the domain name to the client, not to themselves. Why is this important? Because in most cases, only the domain name registrant or website account holder can:

- Manage appropriate use of the domain name - which may include the name of your business
- Update or change content on the website
- Shut down the website
- Control the experience of visitors to the website
- Ensure the security of the site - and the security of your customers visiting the site

Helping you keep your domain name registration from unknowingly expiring, or worse, being fraudulently transferred (domain hijacking), is an additional service that should be offered by a reputable, professional Web design company.

Photography, Graphics and Logo Design

Questions to ask:

- Does the designer have access to professional stock photography?
- Can they create a custom logo?

Images, graphics, photography and a custom logo will help to reinforce your brand identity online. Design should be crisp and clean, making sure every page is easy to read and follows a logical reading path for both the human eye and the search engine spider.

Professional designs should provide the ideal balance of effective design layout and customized image features. The images used on your website should always reflect your brand identity.

Images and logos can enhance the look and feel of the Web page, but a designer should never use an image in place of written content - as it is the text that will be read by a search engine and used to find and rank your website.

Writing Skills

Questions to ask:

- Who will write the content for the website?
- Will the designer provide samples and references for previous writing work?

Professional copywriters will showcase your business in clear and memorable language, with an emphasis on accuracy and marketing.

The first page of your website should quickly and easily clarify the purpose of your business and make it easy for people to find out exactly what you do. Your customers will tire of a website that may look good but contains no meaningful content.

Text should be easy for your customers to read, but must also contain keywords for your business that will make the text more easily read by the search engine that finds and ranks your website. Be sure to determine who will be responsible for writing the text that will make up your website.

Ecommerce

Questions to ask:

- Does the designer have experience creating ecommerce and transaction sites?
- Which payment processing methods will they support?
- How will the designer ensure security of online transactions?

If your goal is to sell your products or services online, make sure you pick a designer who can demonstrate successful ecommerce Web design. You'll need such features as integration with accounting software, ability to offer discounts and special promotions, product quantity limitations that match your inventory, technical support and security compliance.

Effective ecommerce website design should support multiple payment options for your customers and make it quick and easy for them to search for, find and buy your products. Every page should include a standard layout that clearly identifies the important features such as: shopping cart, my account, purchase buttons, price lists, etc.

A professional designer will be able to guide you through the technology that will secure your ecommerce website and protect customer transactions. You'll need technology that meets or exceeds industry standards for the protection of credit card information; shopping cart security features that include the encryption of sensitive data transmissions; multiple firewalls; and access restrictions to the hardware which stores credit card data.

Online Marketing

Questions to ask:

- What Web promotion services are available?
- Do they provide search engine optimization (SEO) services?
- Can they offer pay-per-click and other online advertising capabilities?

Additional expertise of a professional designer includes online marketing that will generate more visitors to your website and make sure potential customers know your site exists and can easily find it.

Online consumers use search engines to find new products and services and professional Web design firms should be able to demonstrate experience with the latest techniques to ensure those search engines list your website. Some of the tools that your designer should be able to demonstrate include: Search Engine Optimization (SEO), online advertising, press release optimization, email marketing, link exchange, and more. Many online marketing tools should be discussed when your website is in the early design stages as they need to be incorporated into the coding of your website. A professional designer appreciates the need to have marketing functions built in to the website design.

Having professional expertise on hand can be helpful if you are considering online advertising to promote your business. Make sure your designer has experience with keyword selection, copywriting, search analysis and performance reporting.

Ongoing Support and Maintenance

Questions to ask:

- How easy will it be to build more pages and sections to the website?
- Does the designer provide Web hosting as an additional service?

Knowing exactly what you need from a website isn't always clear until your website has gone live and you can see how your customers are using it. So it can be helpful when your professional designer can provide you with a website designed to accommodate growth. Most designers can support ongoing maintenance packages that will enable you to modify or add to your website easily and as your needs change.

Your new website will need to be hosted before it can go "live" on the Internet. There can be many advantages to choosing a professional designer that also offers Web hosting. In addition to potential cost-saving benefits, having your website design and hosting services from the same company ensures a seamless transition from design concept to going live; keeps all Web-related contacts in one place and easy to manage; makes accounting easier; and provides direct communication between the designer and technical support in the event of a problem.

Pit Falls to Avoid - Reputation Counts

Questions to ask:

- How long have you been in business?
- Can you provide references and business credentials?

What makes a website designer a reputable professional? The simplest answer to that question is the same things that make your business stay in business: honesty, thoroughness, attention to detail, expertise, timeliness, and integrity. As with the products or services your business offers, any compromise or misrepresentation of any of those elements can harm your business. In the case of website design, those misrepresentations can result in disaster. Take, for example, the experience of the Holmes Pest Control company, whose hired Web designer went missing a year after building their website. This left Holmes with two websites that cannot be updated or removed from the Internet

because the domain names were registered to the designer, not to Holmes¹. The Holmes Pest Control experience is hardly unique, however, due diligence can help you ensure you're fielding calls or handling orders for customers, as opposed to calling your local Better Business Bureau.

Summary

In a crowded field of Web designers you need to learn how to sort the good from the bad. You cannot afford to leave the design of your website in the hands of novices. With your checklist in hand and a few key questions ready, you can avoid becoming another unsatisfied statistic and instead begin an online relationship with your customers with a professionally designed and optimized website.

About Network Solutions®

Network Solutions, a leading provider of Web solutions and the pioneer of the domain name registration service, draws on decades of experience to make it quick and affordable for customers to build and manage an online presence. Our full range of Web-related services includes:

Web hosting

Web design

E-commerce software

Search Engine Marketing

SSL Certificates

E-mail services

Domain name registration

For more information, please visit www.networksolutions.com or call 1-877-438-8599.

¹ [Business Week](#)