



Guide to Finding a Web Developer

The criterion for hiring a web developer has been divided into two sections. They are:

- **Things to think about before you make your appointment**
- **Questions for the developer**

I. **Things to think about before you make your appointment**

a. Your role in the development of your website:

As a business person, you should take a proactive role in the development of your website. Website developers and designers are good at what they do but they do not know your business like you do. Your role in the development of your website includes:

- Browsing the internet for websites in your industry that appeal to you
- Studying Search Engine Optimization (SEO) so that you will have an understanding of why some websites are at the top of search engine results and others never get found
- Developing URLs for your pages that are search engine friendly
- Writing content for your pages
- Developing linking strategies for your site

Expect that you will have a major role to play in your website. It will be your job to update it regularly with refreshed content, images, videos and backlinks to your site.

Your Wyoming SBDC Network counselor can walk you through this process.

b. What is the purpose of your website?

The purpose of your site should be to sell products, to increase subscriptions or to generate leads...but more importantly, **it is to connect with the people you're supposed to serve.**

There are approximately 120 million websites in the world competing for the attention of Internet users. If **your** website doesn't connect with them, there's a website out there that will. And it's that website that will succeed, and not yours.

Your website does not revolve only around customers, but what is relevant to visitors, as well, analyzing who they are and what motivates them to buy.

c. What information will be available on your site?

Will you need a shopping cart, a database, newsletters, a blog, a photo gallery or calendars? Have some idea of how many pages your site will have. What kind of functionality will you want your site to have?¹ Options here include subscribing to newsletters, contacting a business through e-mail or registering for a log-in.

d. *What are your customers' problems?*

Think about what specific problems your customers have and then think about how to address these problems through your website. How can your product or service solve these problems for them? Answering these questions will become part of the marketing strategy for your site.

e. *How will your customers find you on the internet?*

When developing a website, the first thing you should consider is what keywords visitors will type into the search box to find you. These words should then be used throughout the text of your site in order to give you a higher ranking on the results pages of search engines. The key here is to connect with your customers through the use of these keywords.

f. *When should I upgrade my website?*

Upgrading isn't just adding new products, pages or content. It is keeping connected with the e-commerce/online industry, and implementing changes as needed. Do what needs to be done to keep you ahead of your competition.

Keep in mind that your website should not be static once it's completed. If you're not prepared to invest ongoing effort or budget into updating the site and adding new content, then its usefulness will wane in time. It would be like not changing your display window in a brick-and-mortar store. It's a marketing opportunity to draw new customers to your business.

Both customers and search engines like to see content updated on a regular basis. It shows that the site is actively growing and changing all the time. It promotes a feeling of stability with clients as they believe your business is expanding and developing with the times to better serve them. And search engines like to see change, as they will in turn give your site higher rankings if they see you updating content.

g. *How do you know if you have a successful website...how to you measure it?*

A business website should be measured by its conversion rate; that could mean the number of people that search its pages, sign up for a newsletter, request additional information or purchase a product. A popular website that receives tens of thousands of visitors a day but fails to convert visitors into taking the next step is not doing its job. If you have an informational website, it can be measured according to the number of visitors looking at your pages and how long they stay.

h. *So how do you find a developer?*

Start by getting some recommendations from people you know and trust. Then look at the developers' websites **and** those of their clients. Do these sites have that polished professional look that is a cut above the rest? Do all the links work? Does their website

¹ <http://www.practicalecommerce.com/articles/431/tips-to-hire-the-right-website-designer/>

give you the confidence this person has the experience and online business savvy to help you succeed? Do the websites by a particular developer all look the same? Some developers use the same few templates for all of their sites, which lacks creativity.

A seasoned developer will have an online portfolio for you to review and will not hesitate to get you in contact with clients. You want to see evidence that the developer has worked with a diverse client base having different goals and target markets while keeping abreast of changes in technology.

Examine his/her portfolio and ask these questions for each website...

1. What does the developer do to market the organization?
2. Is it easy to find your way around without getting lost?
3. Are you tempted to become a frequent visitor, a client, or a member?
4. Is there unnecessary flash or java script?
5. Is it fast loading and professional looking?
6. How do pages look when printed?
7. Can you open this site in browsers other than Explorer (such as Firefox or Opera)
8. Does it open in Mac?
9. Do all of the sites built by this developer appear to be built on the same template?
10. How long has the developer been in business?²

Take notes on what you like and don't like about these sites. It is also very helpful to look at your competitors' websites for ideas particular to your industry. How are they promoting their products? What do you like or dislike about their shopping cart? Be able to discuss with your developer preferences for your site.

As you look at these sites, do they look like they were made from the same template? Some web designers use pre-made templates that are freely available on the web (or a template they have built themselves). They simply plug your information into the template, which does not give you a professional looking site.

As you look for a developer, try to find one that it is stable and has committed to web design as a full time job and not something they do in addition to having a full time job somewhere else. It goes to stability and perhaps the timeliness of answering questions after the site is built.

II. Questions for the developer

a. What about web hosting?

You'll want to know what hosting will cost you and why the developer thinks a particular hosting company is a good choice. An inexpensive web host could turn out to be a costly mistake.

² <http://www.theistudio.com/professional.html>

Your website is worthless if it is not available, so find out if the hosting company has a 99.9% or better uptime record and if they offer an uptime guarantee. If your site does go down, you want support 24/7/365 via a toll-free phone number. If your developer is reselling hosting provided by a third party, make sure you understand who you would call for support.³

b. What steps do you take to ensure my site is error-free?

Everyone who uses a computer learns that “bugs” have a way of sneaking into software. Periodic scanning of your site will uncover problems like broken links, text that cuts off on the right when printed, or pages that don’t work in different browsers, before your visitors find them. Get details about a structured testing process by your developer. You want clean, functional site.

c. Have you ever run a successful business besides your current web design business?

If their first and only business is their web design business, they are likely lacking in the experience necessary for running a successful online business. They need to have a solid understanding of web marketing and online business strategies to design a site that will grow your business. Ask them about marketing strategies they will employ in your site to generate business.

d. Do you provide coaching services as a part of web development?

You will need skills and training to operate and market your site. You will need to keep up-to-date on the latest technology as it evolves. Does your developer have a website that contains articles or online training that will keep you current? How much time and effort is he willing to spend answering your questions?

e. Do you have a working knowledge of designing a website with accessibility issues in mind?

There are an estimated 50 million disabled Americans who are on the web at home and at work. It's a customer demographic that shouldn't be ignored.

Do you have any experience designing a website that is accessible to people with disabilities? Do you know what it is like to read with a screen reader? Have you communicated with disabled people to know first-hand what their needs are?

Collaborating with people with disabilities during the project development will help the developer gain a true understanding of accessibility issues.

Web accessibility means that people with disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the web, and that they can contribute to the web. Web accessibility also benefits others, including older people with changing abilities due to aging.⁴

f. What can you do to ensure that my site is found in the top few results pages of search engines?

³ http://www.crystalpointconsulting.com/how_to_hire_web_developer.htm

⁴ <http://www.w3org/wai/eval/users#at>

Website optimization is a critical part of website development. Your developer should talk about incorporating key search terms into the text on your pages and into the code behind the pages. Links to your site are also important to your ranking, so you should discuss ways to get your web address onto other sites, also known as backlinks.

You should also ask if he/she will incorporate title, keyword and description tags into the source code for your site for these keywords/terms. Some developers are of the mind that metatags are not necessary because search engines do not scan them anymore. However, search engines are constantly changing algorithms to keep ahead of spammers, so it is better to include the metatags. Also note that you, as the business owner, should take a proactive role in choosing keywords, titles and writing descriptions for your pages. Wyoming SBDC Network counselors can help you with this task so both search engines and customers can find your site on the internet .

Your web developer should emphasize ways that you can get your web address known through standard marketing techniques as well as through links and the search engines. Will he/she register your site with primary search engines? You don't want to pay to have your site registered with obscure engines that might be lacking in credibility. What strategies do they use to increase exposure and awareness of your site?

Studies show that pages taking longer than 8 seconds to load will start losing visitors, (30% or more according to one study). You want to hear that your developer keeps pages to a maximum size of 50k or less, preferably 40k, mainly by reducing and optimizing graphic images and eliminating redundant and unnecessary code. Attractive pages can be designed within these parameters, but only by web developers knowledgeable about web optimization. They should be able to speak intelligently and show you examples of image size reduction, screen resolution and CSS.

Navigation bars at the top and bottom of the site will aid optimization. Suggested links include Home, About Us, Product/Service pages, and Contact Us. FAQs and Site Maps links are also helpful in the optimization of your site. Your site should also include articles, testimonials, quotes or case studies using appropriate keywords. Your site should also include links to social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and Pinterest. Be sure that your developer links to your actual pages and not a *log-in* or a *share* page.

Privacy statements have become standard if you expect to collect personal information from visitors.

Good writing is a marketing tool, so it's important that your content is written in good web copy. Because people scan web pages rather than read them, your developer should emphasize tightly edited text with lots of subheadings and bullets, and not long paragraphs of hard to read text.

g. What is your timeframe for building the site?

This is a critical question to ask. Consider that in addition to expecting your designer to come up with a design, you, as the site owner, will be responsible for the content. Find out when the basic frame will be laid out for your site. You will need to have the content written and images selected by that time so that the developer can continue.

h. What is your policy for updating websites?

How will my site be maintained; links, content, videos? How much of it will I be able to maintain myself? What if I want to change some links? Will you train me on how to maintain my site? How do you define “maintenance” vs. an overhaul of the site? Are there extra fees for maintenance or is it included in the cost of development? Make sure that the responsibilities of both sides are written down in the contract.

What kind of guarantee comes with the development package? How about technical support? What if my site goes down? In whose name will the site be registered? Can I make changes or can only the developer change or upgrade the site? What are the costs? What happens if the developer goes out of business or if I decide to get a new developer? Can I take my website with me? Who owns the code, me or the developer? You paid for the site, which includes the code. Make sure it is yours and you can take it to another developer.

i. Do you offer ongoing support after your site is launched?

Website support means that you can e-mail/call/fax to get a prompt response to any question or concern you may have during business hours. Support also means that you are advised **proactively** about information critical to the operation of your site.

j. How much will a new website cost?

The developer will probably want to send you a proposal with a cost estimate based on the size and complexity of your site. You should ask what the proposal will include. You want an itemized, fixed price; don't allow them to run a tab until they finish the job. You also want a timeline so you know long your project will take. Also take in consideration your responsibility in providing content information in a timely manner. Ask if they offer a money-back guarantee if you are dissatisfied. They should stand behind their work.⁵ Also, ask how much updates to your site will cost.

⁵ http://www.crystalpointconsulting.com/how_to_hire_web_developer.htm