

Independent Consultants Take Over Web Design

By Chris Kalaboukis

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Chris Kalaboukis
chrisk@on-ware.com

SwapSmarts <http://www.swapsmarts.com>

Whether you are a web designer, or have worked with web design vendors, the web design business has changed greatly over the last few years. While there has been great change in this marketplace, there are a few main streams which are developing, most of which are positive trends for the independent web consultant.

Larger Fortune 500 firms now have handed most of the responsibility for web work to their internal Information Technology (IT) depts. While marketing continues to have a say, IT will make most of the vendor decisions. This is a shift which could be problematic for web design shops or individual consultants if they have traditionally dealt with marketing departments and maintained those relationships. Marketing and IT departments have traditionally been at odds within most companies. Many web design firms may not have the technical breadth and depth to be IT consultants; therefore they have never really built strong ties with IT. Since they have not built these ties, it becomes more difficult to gain business from IT departments. However, many independent consultants who moved into the web space do have an IT background, and therefore they can easily make the transition to becoming a consultant to an IT dept.

As the web moves beyond the brochureware stage for these clients, as they provide more functionality; they are more and more intertwined with their legacy systems. As they become more connected to the business systems, the standard bearer of business systems, IT, becomes more involved. As IT becomes more involved, they will tend to turn to the contractors they have been using: usually independent IT consultants or larger consulting firms which they may already have on board to do other IT consulting work.

The web is moving from medium to application. As it moves

from medium to application, the user experience becomes part of an application, as opposed to the user experience being the application. For example, when the web was young, the web was more of a medium: similar to TV and radio, it was not that interactive, and while there was some interactivity, this interactivity was usually not interconnected to core business practices. The look and feel, the interface, the ultimate user experience was the goal to hit. In a few cases, there was a defined task flow which the user could follow, but in the early days, users were more expected to explore than to be guided.

Now, as the web becomes more of an application, the look and feel is not as important as being able to assist the user to complete the task at hand, a skill which requires more than adept graphic design (which does help but is not the whole picture)

Ad-hoc interface standards have now emerged: it is no longer necessary to come up with new interfaces and task flows every time: standard web paradigms have emerged which can be and should be reused in new designs. For example: a product company website should have these standard navigation items: products, support, customers, about us, contact us.

As budgets tighten, clients no longer see a vast difference between larger web design shops such as Scient and Razorfish, 2-5 person firms, or even independent consultants, working from their homes with very low overhead and able to provide similar services at lower cost.

As big web shops have dissolved into breakaway smaller shops with the same personnel, these breakaway shops have been able to take and complete business the original shop could not complete profitably. In some cases, independent consultants can do the same work at a much lower cost by pulling together an ad-hoc team of developers to work on a project by project basis.

What we are seeing is the commoditization of the web design experience.

The larger web design firms are seeing lot of competition from small 2-5 person shops, or independent contractors, working from their homes, with low overhead and/or off-shore resources, being able to compete on price, and stealing contracts from larger web design shops on that basis.

Large companies, facing budget cuts, are no longer interested in dealing only with name brand firms: A Fortune 500 such as Cisco is just as happy to deal with Brand X Design as they are with Razorfish, because when you put the end-result designs side-by-side, they can't see the difference to

justify the cost. While there usually is small dissimilarity in quality and usability, to the layperson, this difference does not present itself as enough of a value-add for the added cost.

Small firms or independent web consultants are taking over the space the big boys used to play in and are doing it profitably. The moral of this story is: don't be afraid of going for the bigger clients: in this marketplace, even the bigger companies are looking to small firms and other free agents: as long as you produce a professional design and have the right skills: you can compete with the big boys, and in this economy, win on price and still do great work, both for your clients and for your portfolio.

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