

Top Ten Things to Look for in a Web Developer

By Kristie Tamsevicius

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In many ways, working with a web developer can be likened to trying out a new hair stylist. While at work, you notice that your friend has a trendy new hairstyle. Excited at the thought of a new look, you ask them for the stylist's name. Trusting your friend's recommendation implicitly, you call Fi Fi's House of Style to book an appointment.

Walking into the salon, you are impressed by the fancy décor as you plop down into the lush leather chair. As pieces of hair fly left and right, you tenaciously watch as Monique, a woman you hardly know, cuts and shapes your hair.

She insists that this new style will reveal the "new" you. Alas, you turn around to look in the mirror and she says "How do you like it?" Taking a deep breath, you force a smile and say, "Hmmm, well uh...it's different" and proceed drudgingly to the counter to pay the \$55 bill out of obligation.

Unfortunately, that's how some people feel when hiring a web developer to build their web site. You approach the designer with only a vision of your web site and entrust the look, feel, and message to them. For better or for worse, your fate is in their hands. Hiring a web developer doesn't HAVE to be a scary journey into the unknown. I'll tell you WHAT to look for in a developer, what to know BEFORE you look for a

developer, and WHERE to find a developer.

== Top 10 Things to Look for When
Choosing a Web Developer. ==

1) EXPERIENCE - An experienced designer will have more skills to create a sophisticated looking and functioning web site. They will have more tools and tricks and knowledge to help you accomplish your business goals.

Here's 101 questions (well almost) you can ask your potential web developer.

- Can you see their design portfolio?
- Do you like the designer's own business web site?
- How long have they been doing web site design?
- How many web sites have they developed?
- What areas of web development do they specialize in?
- Do they know how to hand code HTML or do they only use an HTML editor?
Hand coding can allow for an extra level of precision that may be difficult to achieve with various HTML editors.
- Do they know Javascript?
- Can they do database work?
- Do they have a professional graphic design team or do they create the graphics themselves?
- Will they help you market your web site?

The whole process of interviewing the designer will not only give you the answers to those questions, but gives you insight as to who the designer is, their level of expertise, and how well you can work together.

2) TOP QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE

Equally important to experience is quality customer service. After all, what good is having a top designer if they are too busy to answer your emails and jump in during an emergency?

Ask for a list of references, and CALL them! Don't be afraid to ask them if their web developer is responsive to their needs and assists them in a timely manner.

3) PROFESSIONAL, ORIGINAL WEB SITE GRAPHICS

The ability to create professional, original web graphics will quickly distinguish the Cousin-Jim-Bob-amateur-designer-wanna-be's from the pros. Anyone can put words on a page and create links. But, only a skilled designer will have a good sense of page layout, how to create a good color scheme, and be able to create tasteful graphics that will enhance the web site.

Take a look at other sites the designer has created. Do they demonstrate a considerable range of "styles" or do they use templates? Do the web sites feature original web graphics? If you want a one of a kind web site to brand your business, you must insist on original graphics for your web site.

Can they create "extras" such as flash, animation, or mouseover effects?

4) MARKETING SAVVY

Having a crème-de-la-crème web site will do you no good unless you can build a steady stream of traffic to it. Here's some questions to ask your designer to determine what level of marketing assistance he will provide you:

- Will they help you create meta tags for your web site?

- Will they register you with the search engines?

- What search engines do they submit to?

- Do they mass submit, or will they hand submit your site to the important search engines?

NOTE: If they claim to be experts in search engine positioning, check first to see how highly listed THEIR web site is, it's the proof-in-the-pudding to whether their techniques work!

5) CREATIVENESS

One thing you'd better know up front is how involved your web developer will be in the creative process. Unless you are an experienced marketer, you probably will need at least a little help writing web copy and

planning the layout of your web site. Will your web developer help you develop content?

Writing for the web is a little different than writing for a print marketing piece. By using someone with experience in writing web copy, you can ensure that the message as well as the look of your site is geared to sell.

Also, be aware of over-creative know-it-all designers who won't listen to your input. It's your web site, and you should have creative input. The key is to finding a developer that will listen to your suggestions and work WITH you offering ideas and advice when planning your site.

6) PRICING

The cost of a professionally designed small business web site can run anywhere from \$500 to \$5000. To ensure you don't overspend your budget, you need to get a written estimate. Depending on the complexity or your project, you may even have to pay to get an estimate. To get a complete picture of all costs involved, have them break out costs for domain name, hosting services, graphics, web development, and marketing fees separately.

Will you be required to put down a deposit? Some firms may ask for half of estimated fees up front as a deposit. What methods of payment do they accept? Will they accept credit cards or do you have to pay by cash or check?

Do they charge a flat rate or by the hour? Typical hourly web development fees can range from \$30 to \$200 per hour. But beware: cheaper is not always better! Whatever the hourly rate; make sure it is justified by the amount of experience and skill set they bring to the plate. While a designer who charges \$30 an hour might seem like a deal at first, it might take them twice as long to accomplish a task.

What items will cost you "extra"? If there are items that will NOT be included in the estimate which will be additional, make sure

to get the ala carte pricing. And finally, find out what the costs for web site maintenance will be when the site is complete. If you will be updating your site frequently, this ongoing cost is an important one to keep in mind.

7) COMMUNICATION SKILLS

How easy is your designer to talk to? Do you trust them? Can you understand what they are explaining to you or do they use techno-babble. Do they take time to listen to your needs? If you are going to have a good long term working relationship, it's crucial that you feel comfortable with one another and can communicate clearly.

8) TIME FRAME TO COMPLETION

Ask how long the web development process will take. And then you may want to ask their references how close they came to completing the project on target. A simple web site could be developed in one or two weeks, while a larger more intense site could take several weeks or months. Knowing what to expect can help you manage your expectations.

9) FULL RANGE OF SERVICES?

Does the developer offer a full range of web site services? Will your web developer help you: acquire a domain name, set up a web hosting account, market your web site, write copy, and/or provide cgi and database programming?

Working with a developer who can handle all these details will save you time, money, and frustration. You can rely on their expertise to handle some of the more technical questions that may arise. If they don't provide these services, then ask if they have companies that they recommend. Be sure to get prices from those vendors too so that the total web sites costs don't sneak up on you.

10) AVAILABILITY:

Are they a full time web developer or is web design a moonlighting job for them? A full time developer will probably be able to complete your site in a shorter time frame than someone who is squeezing you into

his or her spare time.

What are their hours? Are they open to you calling with questions? Can they start your project right away? If you need maintenance down the road, how soon can you expect changes after you submit them?

== DO YOUR HOMEWORK BEFORE YOU GO TO A WEB DEVELOPER ==

If you want an accurate assessment of what your web site will cost, you must have a clear idea about what you need. Take some time to answer these questions BEFORE you talk to a developer.

1) How will my web site function?

- a) As an online store where actual product is sold?
- b) As an online brochure to inform the consumer about your company or services
- c) As an online community

2) What will your web site look and feel like? What will be the corporate culture of my site? Will it be light and fun, or hi-tech looking, or business-like and professional?

3) How many pages and what specific pages do you need for your web site? Here are some typical pages to think about for starters:

- Home
- About
- Products/Services
- Order
- Contact
- Resources
- Free Newsletter.

4) What is my budget? Be reasonable, if you only have \$500 you won't get too much out of your web site. There are affordable designers who can design a small business web site ranging from \$700 to \$2500 in price.

5) What is your deadline for project completion? Are you pressed for time or do you have several weeks to play with? If you need your site in a hurry, you may be

able to get it sooner by paying a "rush" fee.

6) Will you require any specialized programming such as a shopping cart, a database or a contact form? If you need these items, make sure your web developer has the skill set to meet these requirements.

7) What level of assistance do you need in development? By knowing in advance how much and what kind of help your project requires, you can confirm that the developer you are considering can (and will) provide the level of service you need.

- Do you need full site design & concepting?

- Do you have the concept and just need it created into HTML pages?

- Do you just need some new graphics and a web site makeover?

- Do you have an existing logo or will they need to create a new one?

8) Find samples of web sites you like! Create a listing of URLs for sites that you like and note what you like and why it appeals to you. By showing this to the designer, it gives them a better idea about what you are looking for. This can better assist them in providing a quote and in concepting a graphic design to match your vision.

== WHERE TO LOOK FOR A WEB DEVELOPER ==

Once you know your project needs, you can start your search for the ideal candidate to develop your web site. Here are a few places where you can look to find a web developer who meet your specific needs.

1) Web Developer Directories:

A web developer directory offers searchable listings of web developers. By just typing in your project specs, price range, and technical needs you will be matched with some developers who meet the criteria you provide.

<http://www.econstructors.com/>
<http://www.comparewebdesigners.com/>
<http://www.webprosnow.com/>
<http://www.codecranker.com/>
<http://www.aaadesignlist.com/>
<http://www.web-design.com>

2) Authors of Web Development Articles in Web Developer Communities:

If you go to these web developer communities, you'll find articles written by designers who are some of the most savvy state-of-the-art designers in their field. By reading their articles, you'll get insight into who they are and their level of experience. Just check the author's bio at the end of the article to see how to contact them.

<http://www.sitepoint.com/>
<http://www.webdeveloper.com>
<http://www.webresource.net>

3) Get a Referral - If you see a web site you like or know someone with an online business, ask them who their developer was

4) Go Local - Let your fingers do the walking thru the yellow pages or search in Yahoo local web directories for your major metropolitan area. This will allow you to find a developer who is located in your local geographic area.

5) Search in the Search Engines - Search your favorite search engine and look under web developer, web site design, web designers, web development firms etc.

== READY, SET, LET'S GO!!!! ==

Since your web site will serve as your online business, it's crucial to find the right developer to help you create it. Having a customer friendly web site with attractive graphics, a clear marketing appeal, and easy navigation is key to online success! With a little luck and searching, I hope you can find a web designer whom can work with you to make

your online dreams a profitable reality!
Who knows, maybe customers will be checking
out YOUR web site to see who the savvy
designer is that created it!

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