

Dissection of Web Design Firm Selection

By Merilee Kern

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Table formatting needed. See
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By Merilee Kern, Online Marketing Consultant

Because you're reading this article, it's presumably safe to assume that you either have a Web site or are planning to launch a Web site in the near future. Undeniably, the most important decision that you made, or will make, relative to your Internet presence is selecting the firm tasked with making your vision a [virtual] reality. Throughout this ever so important discussion, I will present a series of steps that may be employed to ensure that the Web design firm selected for the original launch, or relaunch, or your Web site(s) is absolutely, positively, and unequivocally the right firm for you (caveat: as well as one can make this determination in advance).

Inherent in the Web design firm selection process is the need for a well thought out project Request For Proposal (RFP). As an e-business practitioner, it's imperative for you to start this process with a clear understanding not only of the pending Web site's goals and objectives, but also of the project scope as a whole. The process of developing your RFP, whether it be for a new site design or redesign, will also help you establish other important project parameters such as desired features and functionality, technical considerations and/or restrictions, timeline and, perhaps the most important parameter, the budget. In addition, the RFP should clearly convey exactly what type of information you are SEEKING from the candidate firm, which will aid in your final selection process.

Upon completion of your RFP, many criteria for design firm selection should automatically emerge by virtue of the features/functionality desired as well as the ultimate goal of the site. For example, if the ultimate goal of your site is to disseminate information ala "brochureware," a firm who specializes in back-end programming - often more pricey than a strictly graphic design firm - need not be considered. Similarly, if an eCommerce-enabled Web site either with or without integrated transaction processing is desired, firms who have experience with and/or that specialize in developing this more sophisticated environment should be exclusively sought. The development of your RFP is the absolute Step #1 in dictating exactly how to execute Step #2, as described below.

Step #2 entails establishing a set of minimum criteria that each design firm must meet in order to be

considered for inclusion in the project bid process. While much of this criteria is established through the above-described RFP development process and is largely determined by the nature of the deliverable sought, other criteria to include are those that will give you a further comfort level with the firm, itself. A sample list of minimum criteria might be as follows:

- Prior Development of multiple Web sites with similar functionality to that needed/desired
- Through past experience, seemingly adept in those technologies needed/desired
- Easily accessible portfolio of past design projects with similar functionality to that needed/desired
- Current/past clientele in affiliated industries
- Demonstrated ability to establish creative and intuitive graphical user interfaces
- Demonstrated experience developing Intranet / Extranet solutions
- Impressive self-promotional Web site (intuitive and attractive GUI, pages load quickly, etc.)

Once determined, this set of criteria should be used to facilitate Step #3 - the inception of a "short list" of Web design firms to whom you will shop your RFP for consideration in the bidding process. Generally speaking, I recommend that the short list contain no less than 3 potential candidate firms, and no more than 6. Actually locating candidate firms that meet your specific set of criteria can also be tricky business if you do not have the proper resources at your disposal. Sure, tapping the search engines is one way to go, but can be an arduous process. A far more streamlined approach is to access those sites that maintain a directory and/or an active network of accomplished Web design firms, such as:

- Digitrends
- About.com
- The List
- DesignShops.com
- AAA Web Design List

...just to name a few. Other sites, such as eConstructors (www.econstructors.com) and NewMediary (www.newmediary.com) will even allow you to post an RFP into their network for review by design firms that may not make the short list of those you will actively pursue, but feel that they can best meet your project needs. All firms under consideration for the short list should be fairly equitable in terms of field experience, technical skill set and quality of work so that comparisons made are apples-to-apples vs. apples-to-oranges.

Once you've done your homework and your short list of candidate firms is in order, Step #4 is simply the function of submitting your RFP to the appropriate firm contact. Assuming your RFP has been properly designed with all requisite information contained therein, Step #4 can remain a short and sweet email transmission unless it's your general preference to speak with the candidate firm in person and/or via telephone.

Step #5 is where the "fun" begins. Upon timely receipt, and ONLY timely receipt, of all requested proposals, this step entails the comprehensive review of the skills and abilities of your short list of firms against one another relative to the specific project at hand, as well as against the expanded selection criteria you will need to establish to facilitate final design firm selection. There are a number of ways to go about the process of evaluating the hundreds of pages of "I'm the firm for you" speak, but in my experience a "solution/selection matrix" is the most effective and objective mechanism for evaluations of this nature. Though a solution/selection matrix, it's simply a matter of using the information provided in the proposals and gathered through your research efforts to score/rate each firm relative to your specific set of pre-determined criteria. As indicated in the following example of a solution/selection matrix with an expanded criteria set, the highest sum total score determines which firm becomes the top candidate, and so on. Do note that in conjunction with this quantitative matrix process, it's imperative to check as many references as possible to get a feel for how past and/or current clients regard each firm. All else being equal (matrix scores, etc.), such references, recommendations and testimonials may determine which firm is actually awarded the

project contract.

KEY: 5 = superior 1 = below average(high score preferred)

Firm Candidate #1	Firm Candidate #2	Firm Candidate #3	Firm Candidate #4
Responsiveness through RFP Process	5	5	4
Proposal's Adherence to RFP Guidelines	5	5	4
Proximity (availability for on-site training)	5	4	4
Back End Programming Sophistication	5	5	5
Front End Interface/Branding Talent	5	5	5
Experience with Dynamic Publishing	5	5	5
Emphasis on E-Commerce Solutions	5	4	5
Affinity Industry Experience	5	4	5
Voluntary Provision of References	5	5	1
Budgetary Inclusion of Hosting	5	5	1
Budgetary Inclusion of Banner Ad Development	5	1	5
Budgetary Inclusion of Search Engine Submission	5	1	5
Budgetary Inclusion of Staff Training	5	5	1
Ability to Meet Deadline	5	5	5
Cost for project	5	4	3
Intuition / "Gut Feel"	5	5	4
TOTALS:	80	68	63

Now that you've made it to Step #6, it's time to bite the bullet and "officially" select the firm with the winning proposal and bid. In the above matrix you'll note that project cost is one of the many established criteria for project award, as is recommended. Price, alone, should not dictate which design firm is selected. As happens all too often, the low cost leader based on this virtue, alone, is also the low quality producer. Sometimes, you truly do get what you pay for.

Upon making your determination of the "winner," as well as a back up contingency selection, you should be able to articulate quite clearly to others (potentially decision makers) in your company, as well as to those firms who did not win the award in accordance with proper protocol, exactly why you selected a given firm as your final choice. The following is an example statement of fact as to why a "XYZ Company" Web design firm had been chosen:

"Not only is XYZ Company the most cost-effective solution, but their knowledge and implementation of advanced Web technologies, coupled with their prior development of sites with similar functionality to that required for our project, make them uniquely qualified for the job. Additionally, XYZ Company's close proximity to our location will facilitate enhanced communication and training between their development staff and our site managers.

If, for whatever reason, XYZ Company becomes unable to meet our project specifications, ABC Company is selected as the second choice for our "interactive agency of record." They, too, are adept with the technologies required to meet our needs, and have displayed a high level of professionalism throughout this selection process. Their solution is marginally more expensive than XYZ Company's solution, but still within our targeted budget range."

So, now that your Web design firm has been selected, what's the 7th, and final, step you ask? Well...just sit back, relax, and enjoy the ensuing development process! Since you've clearly done

your homework through Steps 1-6, above, and have assuredly selected a design firm that's perfectly suited for your company's unique needs and business goals, your chances have been maximized for not only a smooth development process, but also for a deliverable that meets, and perhaps even exceeds, your expectations. The selection of the right design firm can make you a star! Due diligence is key.

Author's Note: The above process can also be employed for smaller post-launch design and/or Web site feature/functionality enhancement projects, as well as for any other projects that necessitate the use of an outside 3rd party agency. The principals and methodology described herein are sure to streamline the selection process of getting from point A to point Z as efficiently as possible, and with optimum results.

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