

Websites Start-to-Finish

Wanna Website? Better yet, wanna website within your time frame and budget? Choosing the right designer for the job is critical for success. But before you hire, or even interview designers, you need do some “goal-searching”. Defining your scope and educating yourself will help keep delays and disappointments to a minimum.

Every company needs a website which should include their logo, marketing message, location, phone number, and products or services. Your ultimate site may include information collection, product sales, or integration with internal systems. Once you determine what you expect from your website and what functionality you need, you can begin searching for a web designer. Bear in mind the best design professionals act as consultants – understanding your scope, and proposing solutions.

Step 1: Build a “Wishlist”

Whether you're creating a website from scratch or updating an existing one, the first thing to do is to identify your goals and objectives. It's not good enough just to have a website; you should expect tangible results from the investment and setting goals will help you measure your results. Here are some common website objectives. Do you want to:

- Provide information? Many businesses just need services offered, contact information, directions, and hours. This type of website is the least expensive and works for doctors, dentists, restaurants, vets, local stores, pet service providers, and other small businesses.
- Sell your products online? An Ecommerce solution is more expensive, but can yield big profits for companies that offer unique products and can ship them.
- Provide customer support or customer service? Many companies have reduced staff just by including FAQs, Email capability, complaint forum, policies, instructions, troubleshooting tips, use and care info and more on their website. Some solutions include Real-Time chat with a customer service representative.
- Gather data for sales or marketing purposes? Like email messages, newsletters, testing products and services. These features can be added to static and Ecommerce websites.

Once you know the goals, you can address more specific questions:

- Do you need a URL (domain name) purchased?
- Do you need a hosting service for your website?
- What pages do you need to include in your website to meet the goals listed above? (About, Location, Rates, Menu, Services, Products, Customer service, Press Releases, Articles, Sign Up pages, Photo Gallery, Events Calendar, Archives)
- Do you need interactive features? (database connection, order tracking, log-in, calculator, or any feature where visitors would interact with your site)
- Do you have a content writer or do you need to have that service provided?
- Do you need to have photos taken or stock photos purchased?

Your website can be as simple or complex as your imagination and budget. Having your “wishlist” will help the designer develop an accurate quote, schedule and resource list.

Step 2: Gain an Understanding

Understanding how a website is created is important. If you’re not educated in the basics, you leave yourself vulnerable, risking a poor vendor choice and unexpected problems.

Website design and development is a two-fold process that involves three parts. It consists of design (front end), what your website looks like (including images and text). Graphic designers concentrate on the front end, choosing appropriate images, fonts, and layout. A good designer has an understanding of what works visually on screen, how a visitor scans a page, and what technical limitations exist for web development. Your designer will rely on you to provide the content – written and visual, or help you find a writer and secure photos as well. The second part of the process is web development (back end), programming needed to make your site functional. A good web developer will know several programming languages, most importantly HTML (Hypertext Markup Language). This code allows browsers to display images and text. Other code terms you may hear are:

- Javascript – for simple client side interactivity, pop ups, and some animation.
- DHTML – for interactive menu navigation
- ASP and PHP – for customization and interactivity (database connectivity, account information).
- CSS – control the look from a central file.
- Flash – creates interactive menus, tools and animated messages.

The third part to consider is future growth and updates. Most websites should be updated at least three or four times a year. Retail stores may want to change featured items weekly, and Ecommerce sites may need daily updates.

There are three ways to handle ongoing maintenance:

- Your design team makes updates. Typically you’d pay a set monthly fee, or by the hour.
- You make updates. Upgrading to include a content management system would allow edits of text and some images without programming skills. Cost depends on complexity.
- Your staff makes updates. If you have the staff in place or have the budget for an additional person, this option may be cost effective and give you more control.

You may find a combination of these solutions fits your needs. For example, your Ecommerce website allows you to add, change and edit products, but other parts of your site need the attention of a designer.

Step 3: Compare Options

Some firms can provide all the services needed to fulfill your wishlist. These types of companies may have a staff of designers, developers, and technical support, or they may outsource portions of the job to another company, or to freelancers. Having your website designed under one roof provides these advantages:

- One point of contact and project management
- Better communication and integration of job elements and phases
- Big picture performance rather than simply completing daily tasks

Many larger companies offer other marketing services, such as email campaigns, search engine marketing, and other programs to help drive visitors to your website. Be sure to ask what additional services are available, whether you think you may need them or not.

Narrow down your choices for design companies – you need to select a group that will complete your project on time and within budget. Start by looking at the designer’s portfolio. Established design companies have a comprehensive portfolio of work on their website. Thoroughly review the portfolio for samples that have the same features you’re interested in (design style is important, but a good designer should be able to create a variety of looks). Features are super important because a company that designs a gorgeous static website may not have the programming capabilities to create a database driven Ecommerce site for you.

Here are **10 Clues** that point to a successfully completed design project:

Clue #1: If you’re looking to hire a designer and they don’t have a website... RUN! These days there is NO excuse not to have an online presence for your advertising and marketing company.

Clue #2: If all or most of the samples on a web designers site say “Coming Soon” or “Page not found”... RUN! Obviously they’re probably a company that doesn’t finish projects.

Clue #3: If their portfolio has many samples, but they’re all for the same campaign or company (and one you’ve never heard of)... RUN!! Most likely these are samples done for design school, not real world business.

Clue #4: If their website or work samples have typos, broken links and outdated information... RUN! If they’ve done it before, they’ll do it again.

Clue #5: If you’re interviewing a designer and they don’t ask the three key questions... RUN! Your designer has to have these questions answered: what does the client do, what does the client want done, and what is the project deadline.

Clue #6: If you have trouble getting the design company on the phone, or they’re not answering your emails in a timely and efficient manner... RUN! This is just a foreshadowing of what’s to come when the real work begins.

Linda Lullie is co-owner of Inspired 2 Design, LLC, a full-service Advertising and Creative Services agency located near Atlanta. With over 20 years in the field, I2D puts their experience to work for small businesses across the U.S. Visit their website at www.inspired2designllc.com.

Clue #7: If you don't get a price quote (and or printing estimate) in writing... RUN! Verbal estimates are amateur, indicating that that designer is as well.

Clue #8: If the price sounds too good to be true... RUN! It probably is too good to be true. You'll either never get the final project completed, or you'll get what you pay for. Get several quotes to see what the ballpark figures should be if you're new at this. And don't rely on internet companies as many are in foreign countries making communication impossible, and again... you'll get what you pay for.

Clue #9: If you aren't asked to sign a contract... RUN! Do you know what the payment terms are, who owns the copyright, are there royalties or usage limits, and so on. Don't hire any contractor without some agreement in writing.

Clue #10: If you aren't asked for money up front... RUN! Think of it as a retainer, and typically, an assurance that your job is taken as a serious priority. If you've gotten to this point with your research, a deposit of 30 or 50% shouldn't scare you.

After looking at samples, check references. Get a minimum of three and ask these questions:

- Were deadlines met?
- Was the company flexible?
- Did they make suggestions?
- What were their strengths?
- What were their weaknesses?
- Would you hire them again?

There are tons of reputable, talented, and yes, affordable creative service companies around. The care you take at the beginning should pay big when you receive a finished project that's what you expected (or better), that's within budget, that's on time, and most importantly, that's effective at meeting your marketing goals.

Step 4: Getting Started

Your selected website design team will interview you to understand your business, your goals for the site and your budget. They should prepare a project plan with pricing which lays out each step of the project, who is responsible for what, deadlines, included features, pricing, and extras with their costs. A contract is a must! Make sure your contract lists who owns what, the terms, the deadlines, and the method of approving additional charges.

Armed with good information, a well-thought out plan and scope, and answers to some questions up front, your website development should be smooth and painless from start-to-finish.

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