



Finding the Perfect Web Designer

With advances in software and the growth of Internet Service Providers (ISP), launching a website is easier than ever. But before you go Cyberspace and get your name out to 30+ million Internet surfers, there are some things to consider.

Because the Web is relatively new (the first browser was developed in 1993), new web development companies are springing up all the time. While some offer design services on-site, they may farm out the marketing or graphic design functions to other companies. Some are staffed by people with technical backgrounds, others are full-service ad agencies.

Prices are equally diverse. Some firms charge less for a basic cookie cutter, one size fits most page. But watch for other charges, such as monthly service fees based on the number of times people visit your page. High-end companies take the opposite approach, offering you lots of bells and whistles up front that many browsers can't access because their software doesn't support the enhanced markup languages. And the fees for such enhancements could run into thousands of dollars.

None of this is good or bad. It's just the current state of the market. But remember: websites aren't magical and they aren't that hard to produce.

And, no matter what anyone says, a well-crafted site still needs to be designed and managed by someone who understands basic communication, advertising, marketing and video techniques and principles.

Following is a checklist to help guide you in your search for the perfect website designer.

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What business or marketing objectives would you like your Web site to accomplish? (check all that apply)

- Establish a Web presence, increase business traffic, marketing and public awareness in the process.
- Generate business leads or increase sales.
- Increase international presence of the organization.
- Support existing advertising, promotional efforts.
- Offer customer service.
- Provide latest information regarding new products/services, sales, special promotions, events.
- Survey customers/prospects.
- Recruit new employees/post job opportunities.
- Other

Is there information you would like to obtain from visitors? (check all that apply)

- Company products owned.
- Competitor products owned.
- Timing of next purchase.
- Referrals.
- Demographic information.
- Media preferences.
- Feedback

What other information do you want to gain from your Web site? (check all that apply)

- How many people are visiting your website.
- Which products or pages are most popular.
- Name and comments (guestbook).
- E-mail address.
- Mailing address.
- Telephone/Fax number.

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Browser Compatibility

There are two basic philosophies regarding the ability of visitors to view your pages.

- I want to reach as many people as possible.
- I want my site to be as breathtaking as possible, even though some people may not be able to view it.

Which of the following is true regarding your ability to supply content?

- All art and copy will be furnished.
- I want the design company to do the Web design and artwork.
- I want the design company to do everything, including copy.
- Digital scanning of art/photos can be furnished.
- Scanning is necessary.

Researching A Web Design Firm

Now that you've got an idea of what you want for a page, it's time to start shopping. Since prices and services vary widely, it's recommended that you call three to five firms to discuss your site.

Some of those will be Internet Service Providers that offer Web design in addition to their technical services and others will be design firms that deal strictly with the design and programming aspects of web page design, and NOT connectivity issues, although the design firms should have knowledge of the process.

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- Does the design firm understand your organization's objectives and goals regarding a web presence?
 - What other types of communication or marketing projects do they work on regularly?
 - Do they understand basic communication, marketing, and advertising techniques and principles?
 - Will the design firm assign a representative specifically to you to answer technical questions?
 - Are they willing to give you a firm estimate before proceeding with the design process?
 - What is the initial setup fee for a web server site?
 - Do they perform the actual web design in house?
 - Does the firm design pages from scratch, or cookie cutter pages?
- Be sure to visit their home page and any clients they have.
- Can the design firm work in HTML3.0 (the current markup language) as well as with browser enhancements?
 - Is the design firm willing to make your page accessible to all browser software, even if it means the page won't have all the bells and whistles available on the major browsers? Can they do alternate text files? Other languages?
 - Can they support basic design services such as forms and e-mail hyperlinking?
 - Do they perform related services in house as well, such as graphic design for the pages (buttons, textures, maps, etc.), writing services and marketing, or do they contract this out?



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- What do they charge for digitizing photos and artwork? Are these costs included in the estimate?
- Can they handle the registration of your domain name, (<http://www.yourname.com>). The present NIC fee is \$100 for the first two years and is a separate fee. How much does the design firm charge to put your name on the name server? Is there an additional monthly charge for having your own domain name?
- Are there any hidden costs in the design and setup of your page, such as additional site storage fees on a server, monthly charges per meg, logging your site onto major search engines on the Web, sending press releases out to key media, charges per hit on your page (referred to as throughput)?
- How often can you update your page and what is the cost?
- Does the firm post your page on major search engines or do you have to do it yourself? Do they hyperlink your site with their own home page?
- Can you use your own ISP to house your site? Is the design firm willing to work with other providers?
- Are they willing to integrate your Web site into your other marketing/communication materials?
- Can they explain the limitations of the current technologies, such as load time and the challenges involved with imbedding sound and video into your page?
- Can they offer you marketing and public relations counseling and support?



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Answering these questions should assist you in selecting a web design company that meets your own unique needs. It's very important to find a company that can work with your own staff to develop a compelling, interesting and affordable website; one that will promote repeat visits and meet your own organization's goals and objectives.

Just a few thoughts to mull over before you take action.

If you take too much time to build a fancy fabulous web page, your competition might get online faster. Put up a site too hastily and your public may be disappointed.

- Make sure you say something important, interesting and valuable.
- Be sure you've clearly thought out your goals and requirements.
- To gain attention on the Web, be sure to let your customers know you're online by including your website on all new marketing material.
- To maximize your marketing dollars, consider using portions of existing brochures or other material in your page.

If you're going to do it, do it right!

If you want it done right, consider firecat.com. We've got the creative and technical expertise to make your company's website a valuable part of your integrated marketing communications program.