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How to hire a great website design firm

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You want a website for your business or organization. But where do you begin. How can you tell who's good and who's not? (Hint: Santa's not talking!) We'll, we're here to help!

By using this article as a guideline for selecting a web design firm, you're well on your way to finding a reputable firm that has the technical, design and business know-how to help you get your dream website onto the Internet.

Knowledge and experience

Website design and development is more than just dropping some text and a few photos into a web page editor and calling it a day. A real website development shop will have a broad range of experiences and techniques for building a website that meets your exact specifications. How do you tell if a firm has this knowledge? Look at their portfolio, and then ask questions.

Portfolio review:

- Do they even HAVE a portfolio? If you cannot find a portfolio on their website, something is being hidden from you. (Usually really bad or derivative work!)
- Do the links on their portfolio work? Are the websites listed in production? If there are broken links, it means the developer is not even keeping their own website up to date!
- When you visit a linked website, does the website have a 'designed by' credit that is different from the design firm you are considering? This usually means the website in question is not their work, but someone else! (Call the website owner for a reference)
- Speaking of someone else's work, is the portfolio a collection of work done while the developer was with a much larger organization? In this age of corporate downsizing, a lot of freelancers are taking credit for work done with a large team of developers and designers. Can the freelancer provide all the services that the old team provided?
- Does their portfolio show a breadth of experience, or are they specialized in a particular industry or style. (Great if you are in that industry or like that style, not so great otherwise)
- Do you like their own website? If their own website is not appealing, what chance will work they do for a client be any better?



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Questions to ask:

- How long are they in business / how many years of experience do they have in website design and development?
- Do they know HTML (the language of web pages) or do they let their software do all the work? (If they only create web pages with an editor – like Microsoft Frontpage – they are not a true web development firm, but rather a pre-fab shop. The work will most probably be amateurish and unappealing. They'll also be unable to do anything complex that required hand coding, so they are limited by their own software.)
- Can they make a website that talks to a database? Sometimes, you want a website that pulls data from different sources dynamically (like an ecommerce website, or a product display website). Can they do that?
- Who does the actual design work? Is it in-house, or outsourced? What about the coding? Sometimes a firm will specialize in front end / design work, and leave the coding to another subcontractor. (or vice versa). That's OK, but you should know who all the players are, just to be clear about who's delivering what (and how many fingers will be pointing when something goes wrong!)

Client/Designer Interaction?

- When the website developer and you talk, do you walk away with a headache?
- Are they using all sorts of special jargon and code words, or do they explain everything in easy-to-understand terms, preferably in English!
- Can they break down a complex subject into simpler concepts that non-web designers can follow along?
- Are they in the United States? Do they speak English fluently?
- Can you get hold of them via phone? Fax? Email? How quickly do they respond to support calls?
- Are they watching the clock every minute, or do they give of their advice generously?
- Do you talk to the same person or team each time, or are you bounced among customer service representatives?
- Does sales answer the phone faster than tech support?



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Photoshop Fluff

Print designers can do some really wonderful things with 4-color printing and Photoshop effects. But they usually fall down when it comes time to design a well-balanced, easy to navigate, functional website.

Oh sure, they can make something that looks amazingly beautiful, even win some awards. Now try downloading that beautiful, full-color, photo montage over a dial-up connection... not in under 5 minutes a page!

Print designers usually fail to understand the nature of web content delivery. When they design something, and put ink to paper, it's already delivered .

When you put up a website, you force each visitor to deliver the design to their own computer, usually over a slow modem connection. A true website designer understands the limitations of bandwidth and delivery, and works around them to create a visually appealing, yet quick to download website.

Some other items that print designers fail to consider include navigation (getting folks around your website efficiently), and search engine optimization. Those full-color sites that look so pretty can be really hard on the search engines as they try to find the content inside the fluff.

Lastly, most print designers know little about programming, so if you want to do anything on your website involving fill-in-the-blank forms, links to other sites, databases, e-Commerce, or anything more complex than "welcome to our website - isn't it pretty?", you're going to need a true website developer, not just another pretty face.

Customer Service and Responsiveness

Everyone says that they are '100% committed and focused on the customer.' Well, the proof is in the tasting of the pudding. Best way to find out who walks the walk is to call their customers (you did see their portfolio, right?) and chat with the folks that already work with your prospective designer. They'll give you an earful: the good, the bad and the ugly!

Some questions to ask a designer's clients:

- How easy was the designer to work with?
- How quickly did they respond to phone calls and emails?
- How quickly were requested changes made?



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- How did the designer add value to the process? Were they a partner in your project, or just an order taker?
- How's the support and response time now that your website is up?
- If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?
- Would you hire this design firm again?

Another consideration regarding availability to think about: is this a full time job for your prospective designer? Are they committed to the business, or just moonlighting part-time until they find a 'real job.' What does that mean for your website? Will you get the support in a timely fashion you require if someone is no longer interested or unavailable most of the time?

That high school kid down the block may be talented, but will he or she be around to maintain a very important part of your business?

Services Provided:

What other services can this web design firm provide? Aside from website design and development, some firms will also offer complimentary or supplementary services, such as:

- Website hosting (providing a place for your website to live on the internet)
- Domain name registration (obtaining for you the www.somesuch.com that you need)
- Maintenance – after the website is launched, content will need to be updated on a regular basis. Can they do this for you? Can you do it yourself? What are the associated (and potentially hidden) costs of either option?
- Search engine submission – how do you get your website listed in the search engines? How much does it cost? Can you guarantee a top-10 position? (Hint: if they claim they can, run for the hills – they're lying!)
- Corporate identity – can they create a logo and other corporate identity pieces (letterhead, business cards, brochures, etc.) or are they strictly website only.

Do you need your web designer to do all these things? Not really, but if they do, and do them well, it can save you effort, time and money by keeping all the related tasks under one roof.



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Cost

Ah, it always comes down to money. How much will all this cost?

There's no simple formula to determine the cost of a website, and estimates for the same work will vary wildly. You can find someone to do a 10 page website for \$250. Someone else will charge you \$5,000 for the same project.

Why such a spread? No specific reason, but there are several factors you should consider:

The relative experience (or usually, inexperience) of the design firm. Some newer firms price really low to get the client, not realizing that they'll not be in business too long with those prices. They disappear, and you're left with nothing!

The geographical region they're based in. Let's face it – New York is more expensive than Des Moines, so \$70 an hour for work here in NYC is reasonable, but elsewhere might be considered very expensive.

The tools the firm is using. If they are using pre-defined cookie cutter sites, also known as templates (and FrontPage is famous for ugly templates – beware!), then there is less expense to your for original design. Other development shops make each website from scratch, and the time and expertise needed to conceive, design, develop and deploy such sites is correspondingly longer, and therefore more expensive.

What should you expect to pay? Anywhere between \$2,000 and \$3,000 for a starter website, which is about 10 pages. Anything less dollar wise, and that web design firm won't be around very long. Anything smaller, page wise, and you're not using your website to its full potential.

Watch out!

Another note of caution: anyone who charges **ONLY 'by the page'** is not thinking about your entire website, and how it all flows together. They are piece-mealing your project and the website will suffer.

Or, they offer a flat-fee for your entire website (\$499 for a complete website!) without ever talking to you. This usually means they don't know how to cost out a project, and expect to spend a minimum of time with yours. And you can bet they're using existing designs (templates). If you request more than they want to deliver, you may never see your website. Or **corners will be cut by the firm**, to keep profit margins up.

A professional firm will include a design fee for the entire website, and a per-page fee for layout and optimization efforts on each individual page. After all, the cost of a house included the blueprints and



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design for the entire house, as well as the effort and materials for the number of rooms. Without a master design, the house is just a collection of rooms.

This cost is usually one line item in a menu of costs, which will also include hosting, maintenance, domain name registration and search engine submissions. If the design firm is offering a special, perhaps some of these items are folded into the estimated price. Ask for a pricing break down.

Watch out for the 'nickel and dime' effect - so much to scan a photo, so much for a link to another website, another price for text over a certain limit. This a-la-carte method adds up fast, and is a real pain to account for!

Write it Down!

You did get an estimate in writing, right? And that estimate should explain, in clear terms, the project deliverables, as well as the payment plan. Usually, a quality firm will split payments into 3 parts: 1/3 at the beginning of the project, 1/3 when a visual design is approved by the client, and the final third when the project is delivered but before it's put into production.

As for other costs, there are some projects that don't lend themselves to a flat fee, but instead are priced at an hourly rate. Complex programming, database development, Flash animation – these projects are usually done on a time spent basis. What should you expect to pay for these services? Again, there is no hard and fast number, and each firm prices themselves according to their market.

Instead of focusing on a dollar amount, you should instead focus on the quality of the portfolio and what the references had to say about the work and service provided by the web design firm. Someone with rock-bottom prices could be extremely talented and fast, or clueless and slow. They might take 3 times as long as a more 'expensive' firm – so the cost savings are an illusion! Then again, someone with extremely high pricing could also be very bad, and simply survives on the backs of the market they fleece.

Conclusion

In the end, bad design costs you much more than good design, regardless of the final price tag. Check out previous work, talk to previous clients, and ask a lot of questions. If you don't get the answers you need, move on.

There are a lot of firms out there, and even some good ones (!), so do your homework as you would with hiring any other service professional (accountant, lawyer, doctor, contractor, designer), and if you follow the guidelines above, a successful website project and final product will be within reach!