

# 20 Critical Questions to Ask a Web Site Designer

...before you hire one

The Internet is far too competitive to take chances with a designer that doesn't have a proven track record. Simply put, these steps will help you to avoid lost sales and wasted time and money.

## Introduction

*"My 14 year old will design my web site for me."*

*"Just copy someone else's layout"*

*"Can't you just scan my brochure and use that as my web site?"*

The list of design-related shortcuts that my clients have attempted (or wanted me to attempt for them) could easily fill this page.

Web site design is always the first place where company owners want to cut costs and save money. Why is this so? Probably because the science of web site design is the most misunderstood component of the Internet.

*"Anyone can make a web site in 10 minutes"*

*"Design your own web site without any programming knowledge"*

*"FREE web site templates"*

These are all headlines I've seen on probably thousands of web sites out there. Have you ever visited the web site for Boeing or Comcast? When you visit their sites, what's the first thing that comes into your mind? Your answer is likely, "Great, I'm there. Where's the information that I'm looking for?"

Conversely, when you visit a site that has been produced with obvious shortcuts, what comes into the minds of most people? "Is this a real company? Should I trust them?"

See the difference?

A talented web site designer can quickly get your visitors over the hurdle of wondering if your company is real or not.

**Having a successful Website on the Internet has everything to do with trust.** You've got to be perceived as real first, that you have a proven track record second, and that you can provide something that helps to fix your visitors' problems. If your site visitor does not believe in you right off the bat, you're likely to lose that visitor forever. A skilled web site designer will make that happen for you and you'll make a solid return on your investment as a result.

## Questions to Ask Your Potential Web Site Designer:

There are so called web site designers on every street corner. Be extremely cautious before you make your final selection. Ask the following questions to help you make your choice:

### 1. Do you actually do the design work?

I chose to put this question first because people get really hung up on this one. Yes or no is not what's important as long as you will be in contact with the actual designer eventually.

### 2. What is your average turnaround time per project?

The graphic components of most web sites should not require more than two weeks once the content is supplied. It is often the client that is slow in providing content and making decisions resulting in delayed launches. If you know what you want and have the content prepared, the designer can work much faster for you.

### 3. Do you design from scratch or use premade templates?

Many people are against using pre-made templates. Others don't understand why you'd use anything else. A template can be purchased for usually under \$50 and then customized for another \$200 or \$300. Also, I believe that a custom site will pay for itself faster than a template site. This is because a custom site is really the only way to truly and accurately feature the uniqueness of the company or service you're trying to provide.

#### **4. Will you supply the original graphics files?**

If you don't acquire your original graphics files, you will not be in control of your site. If your designer gets hit by a bus (or goes out of business), make sure you have the original files so that you can provide them to another designer down the road. Ask for any files produced with PhotoShop, Illustrator, Fireworks, Flash, or any other graphics program.

#### **5. Are your designs tested for multi-browser and cross-platform compatibility?**

A designer should at least create their web sites so that the content and layout looks relatively the same on both Internet Explorer 6.X and Firefox. Your site should also be at least legible on MAC computers as well as PC's. Simply ask your designer if and how tests will be made to assure this consistency.

#### **6. Can design changes be added later?**

A web site should never be considered "done." They're always evolving. If you're open to comments from friends and colleagues, you will routinely want to test, edit and change your website content. Make sure to hire a designer that knows this simple element for success.

#### **7. What do I need to supply you to get started?**

Some designers will respond to this question in this way: *"Just send any pictures you want and a logo if you have one and they'll take it from there."*

That approach is scary to me!

The appropriate response should be something like this: *"I have an extensive questionnaire to go over with you which will help us to create a powerful Internet presentation strategy that will optimize your return on investment."*

#### **8. Do you have sales or marketing experience?**

Think of your designer as one of your sales people. Would you hire a salesperson that doesn't know how to create a need? Would you pay a marketing director that doesn't have a proven track record? The best designers are creative people who are able to \*sell\* things with their design concepts. Make sure you hire a sales and marketing expert to be your designer.

#### **9. Is this your full-time job?**

Many would debate me on this issue; but I believe you're either an Internet professional or you're just a wanna-be. I've found that part-timers in this business have other commitments that demand their time--at the worst possible times! Always work with full-time Internet professionals because they will be accessible when you need them.

#### **10. Do you offer only web site design?**

By the time you have your web site live to the world, you might have one company creating your design, another company offering programming services, and still another providing the web site hosting. There's nothing wrong with this and should be expected these days.

#### **11. Do you offer any Internet marketing services?**

Some people are "programming-people," some are "marketing-people," and some are "design-people." A web site and Internet strategy should have one main purpose and that is to achieve business growth in one way or another. If your designer offers to optimize your site for search engines and go through the submission process for you, make sure they're willing to spend some time on the marketing end of your web site.

#### **12. Will I talk to my designer directly or a project manager?**

You will likely find advantages to being able to talk directly to the person that will design your site. Consider this example: Your "first draft" has been completed. The designer calls you on the phone and says, "Go to [www.yourcompany.com/draft.html](http://www.yourcompany.com/draft.html) to view your design." Your response might be, "Looks great but can you change the name of the second button to say Resources instead of Links?" The designer would likely reply, "Just a moment, I'll fix it now." Going through a project manager could take a week to get even a basic change made to a design.

#### **13. Will you create a logo for my site too?**

Most web site designers will offer logo creation as an additional service. Logos are becoming increasingly important on web sites as a branding issue. If you have a brick-and-mortar store, you could get by with a neon sign with plain red letters. On a web site, however, the logo needs to have a graphic appeal that matches your message. It's common to

have a designer include logo creation as part of your initial project quote.

### **15. Will you find/supply photos for my site?**

Have you ever noticed that some web sites give the initial impression of "new company" whereas others give the impression "one person in a basement?" Often, what sets the two apart are photos. Designers are more commonly using photos to convey messages of what the purpose of the site is. And, this makes sense because people can relate to pictures. If your designer will be using photos, it's important that you know where the pictures will be coming from. An experienced designer will have a large stock of public domain photos so that there is no chance of copyright infringement.

### **16. Who owns the site design when it's done?**

You should always own your web site design and be able to change or add content whenever you want to. Be aware that designers are legally able to claim their designs as their own copyrighted work. Negotiate these terms in advance and make sure that YOU will own all original artwork. If something should happen to your designer, you always want to have the originals.

### **17. What HTML editing software do you use to assemble the graphics?**

The trend is returning for designers to assemble their web site pages by hand-coding the entire site. This is fine as long as YOU have the ability to make changes to your site's content using some type of HTML editor software such as Dreamweaver or GoLive or Contribute. Possibly, your designer will design your site so that you can make edits directly to the web site without any use of software. That's great too. The important thing is to make sure exactly HOW you will have access to make changes BEFORE you choose your designer for the project so that you are comfortable with what the process will be.

### **18. Do you offer maintenance training?**

If you are not familiar with the HTML editor used by your designer, or making changes to content through a live CMS system, ask if custom training can be provided. Normally, you can learn the basics in a few hours or less.

### **19. Do you charge by the hour or by the project?**

This is something very important to understand about design work. Whether a site costs you \$100 or \$100,000 to create is really not as important as what you might think. The critical question is whether your site will make that money back for you in three months or less. If you're not sure if you have a product that has a high enough value or quality, and you'd like to be conservative, then test the waters with a discount design. But, if you are confident in your product and are planning on serious and aggressive marketing, don't skimp on the design. Get it quoted as a complete project and know exactly what that includes. Hourly rates, when it comes to design, can be expected as you want design alterations in the future.

### **20. Do your clients realize a return on their investment?**

This is really a test question to see if your potential designer genuinely cares about his or her clients and stays in contact with them over time. If your designer wants you to succeed, you'll have a better and more results-producing site created for you.

## **In Summary...**

Notice that I did not have a question in this list related to seeing a portfolio of sites produced by your prospective designer. That's because you should look at sample sites BEFORE you even spend the time conversing with a potential designer.

Ask to see some additional sites for review. THEN make more formal contact with the design company and ask some of these questions.

*Follow these steps and you will be on your way to building a successful relationship with a talented design company!*