

How to Choose a Web Services Company

by Mark H. Cohen

© 2006 Painlessweb.com

This article may be reprinted in part or in whole as long as the author name, copyright information, and this statement accompany it.

The good news is that almost any business or professional practice can significantly leverage its marketing and customer service efforts with a well made web site. The bad news is that making effective web sites is much more complex than many would-be web designers realize. This article should to help you separate the wheat from the chaff.

What follows is a list of questions to ask of any prospective web services provider. I've been building and refining this list since 2002. Most of these items come from well known consultants and usability testing groups. (See the bibliography at the end.)

Attention web designers; You are invited to comment on this document. If you are new to web design, consider this an invitation to inventory your skills.

To start with, you can learn a lot just by looking at a web company's own web site:

Do they specialize in web services?

Sure, anybody can operate a copier, but for quality printing, you have to go to a printer. Same with web sites, folks. Anybody can learn how to use Front Page or DreamWeaver to turn out pretty sites, but that's only a small part of building sites that deliver. The bottom line is, if you need an ad agency, hire one. If you need a web site, hire a web specialist.

Does their site have elements that blink, flash, rotate, etc.?

They might look kinda' cool, but according to many, many studies, most people just find them annoying. You don't want to annoy the majority of your site visitors, do you? Usually, the only time a moving element is appropriate is for demonstrating a product or service feature that is not obvious.

Do they feature "the latest technologies," such as java applets, streaming video, flash animation, etc.?

First, most of them violate the rule above. Second, adding these gee-gaws to your site increases the time a visitor has to wait for your page to load. Third, they increases the likelihood that something will go wrong when the page is displayed. Fourth, not all web browsers have the plugins necessary to run the gee-gaws, requiring your visitor to go get it before they can see your site.

"But don't people expect sophisticated technology?"

No. They don't. Really. In most cases, visitors are not going to your site to be entertained, or wowed by code tricks. The ONLY reason they are there is to get information. Yes, your site should look professionally made. However, your site "technology" should be focused on ONE thing: connecting visitors with information as quickly and easily as possible.

Can they spell?

What does it tell you about your prospective web guy if he has typos on his own site? (Actually, no

matter who does your site, you should have your entire staff proofread it, and any subsequent changes.)

Although you may want to write some or all of your site's text, you will want an experienced web designer to at least re-format it for the web.

The next three questions will help you determine how savvy they are in this area.

Do sentences sound like they were written by Yoda?

Despite what in school heard you may have, grammar is somewhat subjective. That said, if your prospective vendor's site is easy for you to understand, then your site will probably be easy for your visitors to read, too.

Are there big blocks of text, or a lack of headings and sub-headings?

Most people read differently online. Text must be formatted to support this reading style. Also bear in mind that the average American adult reads on a third grade level, (although your client demographic may vary considerably).

Does their writing sound like ad hype, or information?

This is a larger subject, but the bottom line is that by the time a person gets to your web site, he or she is looking for information, not creative use of adjectives. Business web pages should talk *to* you, not *at* you.

This next section is a list of questions to ask them directly.

Do they offer traffic development?

That is, do they offer to get visitors to your site? First determine if this is an issue for you. Online marketing is a complex, expensive undertaking that's primarily valuable for web-only, and nationwide businesses. If you service an area smaller than a time zone, your marketing efforts will most likely be better spent elsewhere than on the internet advertising game.

If this is important, ask what methods they will use to target the traffic. If they're competent, they won't answer that question, but instead start quizzing you about your operation, services, products, marketing goals, etc. Otherwise, how can they "target" traffic for you? The fact is that anybody can get you 1000's of generic visitors a day, but wouldn't your rather have 100 visitors specifically interested in your offerings?

Do they guarantee to get your web site in the "top 10 results" at search engines?

Short answer: Skip anybody who makes such guarantee. Long answer: First, what are they talking about? If they're guaranteeing to get your domain name in the top 10, that's easy. Worthless, but easy. Anybody who knows your domain name doesn't need a search engine to find you, right? What you really want is to rate highly for search terms related to your business.

For example, if you're a pediatric dentist, then what you really want is to rank high in search engine results when folks search with the term "pediatric dentist." If you were guaranteed a top 10 slot for this search term, that would certainly be worth a lot, wouldn't it? But wait a minute... What happens to this guy's guarantee when he gets his 11th pediatric dentist? You see the problem. And did you know that there are dozens – perhaps hundreds – of outfits offering such a guarantee? Can they all get everybody a "top-10 slot" for a common search term? Can I interest you in a nice bridge in Brooklyn?

What will your site work cost?

Red flags: Do you have to meet with them to get any info? Do they seem to keep “remembering” items when you press for a grand total? Do they seem to have no idea what it could run? Do you have to ask for a written, itemized estimate?

Do their sites depend on Javascript or Flash for navigation?

You don't need to know what those are, but you do need to know if your site will depend on either of them for getting visitors around the site. Here's why: An amazing number of developers build sites that don't work without them. That is, the site visitor must have a web browser with certain capabilities to get around these sites.

Consequently, these sites cannot be navigated by up to 20% of all visitors. In some cases, the site doesn't appear at all! You don't want to lose one out of five visitors, or worse: have them think you've gone out of business.

Do they ask you what pages or features you want?

This is the sign of a rank amateur. To be polite, a good web firm might ask if you had some ideas about your site, but then they will quiz you about your business goals and needs, then suggest appropriate pages to support these.

How will your site be updated?

If they will be doing it, do they have a specific procedure? Also, some outfits have minimum charges for any work. That is, you could get hit with a \$100 tab for a 5 minute update job. So ask how much to add a paragraph, change the phone numbers in the site, or add a new picture. If you'd like to do minor updates yourself, do they support that? Ask exactly how this will work.

Is your site built of static pages, or database-generated pages?

Database-generated pages are easy to spot; they usually have long, complicated URL's with .asp, .jsp, or .cfm in them. While they are necessary for certain applications like catalogs, they are bad otherwise. For instance, you may be depending on the company to stay in business for your database pages to stay online. Static (non-database) pages are good because they can be easily copied to any server system, and managed by any marginally competent webmaster. They also tend to download more quickly. Also note that static pages can be bookmarked, while many database pages cannot.

Will there be links or graphics on the site that have nothing to do with your business?

Part A: Would you let your business card printer put their logo and phone number on your business cards? Of course not! But it's amazing how many web designers think it's ok to brand every page on your site with their company information. No, No, No!

Part B: In most cases, there should be nothing on your site to take people away from it, like links to search engine, weather, or news sites. An exception might be if your site or a section of it is just for customer service. Then it may make sense to sell other products, or offer links to related web sites. For example if you sell pools, but don't maintain them, your customer service section might have a link to a pool maintenance website, or a related book at Amazon.com. "Link pages" are seldom appropriate on a marketing site.

Part C: This is a bit grayer. You don't want pictures or graphics that have nothing to do with your business. My favorite example was a chiropractor who had pictures of his antique Ferrari sprinkled around his site. I mean, what's his message? Please use my services, so I can support my expensive toy? On the other hand, it's

ok to have art that sets the tone and provides a framework for your site. You should also have pictures of yourself, key staff, and facility if you have them. These will make you far more real to prospective clients than anything your site can say in words.

Hosting

Where will your site be hosted? That is, where is the computer that will make your site available to the internet? Did you know that you can host your web site right on your computer at home? Really! Of course, your web site disappears when you turn off your computer, and it will be really slow, and much more than five visitors at a time will crash your computer, and extensive security precautions are required to avoid leaving your "server" open to hackers.

The point is that any geek with a pc can "host" web sites, but it takes a lot more to ensure that your site will be quickly available most of the time.

Most web design companies will offer hosting as well. Many will also be able to take care of hosting related chores for you, such as making sure your domain name is paid for, adding and removing email addresses, etc. That doesn't mean, however, that they actually know much about hosting, and there are, unfortunately, a LOT of bad hosting firms out there.

These are the questions you need to ask about hosting. Do not be surprised if your web designer doesn't know the answer to them off the top of his/her head, or is not even too sure what you're talking about. You don't need to understand them either, but that said, make sure you get the answers before you invest; changing hosting companies can be painful.

The correct answer to the first 5 questions is "yes."

1. Is the server a computer custom made for web serving?
2. Is it in a building built for the purpose of housing servers?
3. Does the server system have multiple, direct connections to two or more backbone providers with dynamic failover?
4. Are software processes dynamically throttled to prevent CPU overload?
5. Is bandwidth dynamically throttled by domain (not by server)?
6. Is your website backed up to different physical location daily? What costs are there, if any, to recover defaced (hacked) or accidentally damaged site files? Has it ever been tested it? Note that practically all hosting firms say they backup, but many don't. Hopefully, your web company also keeps up-to-date backups of your site. This is only marginally useful, however, if you have dynamic information online, such as automated mailing lists. If that's the case, then you definitely want to see a sample backup retrieval from the host.
7. If you will be using domain based email (joe@yourdomain.com), who will add and remove email accounts? Is webmail available? If you want to use a local email program (Outlook, Eudora, Thunderbird, etc.), will they help you configure it? (Unless you are already comfortable configuring email programs, don't plan on doing it yourself. It's not that it's terribly hard, but if you're only doing it a few times a year, you'll waste a lot of time "re-figuring" it out. You also run a small risk of inadvertently wiping out all your saved email and addresses.)

Bibliography

There are an ever increasing number of books that deal with all aspects of web development; Design, architecture, content, coding and standards,

marketing, etc. A unifying theme to all of these aspects is the concept of usability. I think Steve Krug has the best one-sentence definition of usability: "Don't make the user think." His book is a good place to start, and I've listed the others in order of depth. I've picked them out as being useful for those who own or manage a web site, but will not be responsible for technical issues.

What's not here:

Coding and related. If you're considering doing commercial web work, then you will need to understand what's under the hood. Just knowing a web design program isn't enough. That said, there are lots of good courses and books that take different approaches. To start, your best bet is to hit a book store, and just cruise the titles until you find one that speaks to you. Online, there are boatloads of tutorial and reference sites, covering the basics in a variety of ways.

Web marketing. Web marketing needs vary so widely that I've yet to see a book that adequately addresses a decent range of them. Also, this arena changes so fast, nothing printed is current for more than six months. Caveat emptor: There are an inordinate amount of bogus marketing advice/schemes/programs online. Do not buy into one until you've checked it out with a knowledgeable web services company.

Large site issues. Works addressing issues that primarily affect large sites. For example, content management, data base connection, private email systems, and small-screen device presentation (PDA's, phones).

What is here:-]

Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability
by Steve Krug
ISBN: 0789723107

Homepage Usability: 50 Websites Deconstructed
by Jakob Nielsen, Marie Tahir
ISBN: 073571102X

This is a wonderful intro to usability, but you can stop on page 65. That's where they start critiquing individual sites, and although these pages sometimes illustrate the points in their guidelines list, they as often seem ill-considered.

Designing Web Usability : The Practice of Simplicity

by Jakob Nielsen
ISBN: 156205810X

Dr. Nielsen is generally considered one of the top usability experts in the world.

The Design of Sites: Patterns, Principles, and Processes for Crafting a Customer-Centered Web Experience

by Douglas K. van Duyne, James A. Landay,
Jason I. Hong
ISBN: 020172149X

If you own or ,manage a large web site, this book is great because it shows you usability principles applied to the entire development process.