

## Use Due Diligence, Common Sense When Selecting A Web Developer

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Picking a developer to build your Web site would be easier if there were hard-and-fast rules to follow. But there aren't. So, as with most business decisions, you'd be wise to do some due diligence and apply a solid dose of common sense to your decision.

Your first order of business is to decide whether you need a Web site at all. According to a recent Dun & Bradstreet report, only 36% of small businesses in the U.S. have a Web site, though the percentage rises to a little over 50% among companies that access the Web for business purposes. Given the fact you're reading this online, chances are you think the Web is a place you should be. That's fine, but be realistic. Don't build a Web site because you think it will be a panacea for your bottom line. Do it because it fits with your overall marketing, sales or promotional strategies.

If you decide that, yes, a Web site makes sense, consider what kind of site suits your business. Start by looking at the sites of companies similar to your own. Make note of what you like, and don't like, about what those competitors are doing online. Write down the URLs or print out pages that provide examples of both good and bad sites, and keep them handy for when you sit down with a developer to plan your own approach.

Next, consider how much you can afford to spend. For a simple marketing site, a good rule of thumb is to budget at least as much as you did for your last piece of printed collateral, including your print costs. In other words, if you recently spent \$5,000 on printed material, don't assume you can get a comparable Web site for \$500. And bear in mind that bigger, more technically complex sites will be costlier.

Once you've thought about your budget, you'll need to find the right developer to construct your site. When it comes to the Web, cheaper isn't always better, so consider several factors:

- Obviously, you want to put the best face on your business that you possibly can. Some Web developers are principally design firms that concentrate on the "look and feel" of a site. Others focus more on the programming and technical aspects of each project, and offer less dynamic design approaches.
- If you view your Web site as an extension of your marketing program, and not as an online store or product-support vehicle, a design-oriented firm may be your best choice. A good Web designer will be able to take the look and feel of your printed materials or logo and adapt them for online use. This is important, because you always want to present a consistent look across all of your marketing material.
- At the same time, be wary of proposals for bells and whistles that do more to satisfy the designer's artistic bent than communicate your message. If a designer seems to be over-reaching, ask him to explain how his suggested

- approach will help grow your business. If you don't believe the answer, look for another designer.
- If your business is more technically oriented, or if you see your Web site as a product support tool, you'll likely require programming and development that goes beyond simple HTML. In this case, look for a developer experienced with tools such as ColdFusion, Flash, and active servers. These are used to create data bases, animations and other dynamic Web features.
  - An e-commerce component won't necessarily drive costs into the stratosphere. There are numerous pre-packaged online store applications offering shopping carts and credit card processing available at moderate costs. Many companies, such as Yahoo!, APlus.Net and eBay, offer packages and assistance meant to streamline opening an online store. If you're not comfortable with the hands-on aspect of setting one up - and none of the products we've seen are as simple as they claim to be - many smaller developers can help you on an hourly basis.

Of course, there's always someone who will recommend hiring your teen-aged nephew, who seems to know a lot about the Internet. While many small businesses have picked this option, for a number of reasons it's the worst choice you could make.

Not to disparage teens - or denigrate the talent of anyone's niece or nephew - but familiarity with HTML programming and/or graphic design won't make up for the lack of experience most teens have with running a business. Consider this: Would you ask that young relative, however gifted, to develop your advertising, or write a brochure to be sent to customers? If the answer is no, then look for professional help with your Web site, too.

Regardless of which type of firm you use, do your homework before hiring them. Ask for a copy of their client list and the addresses for any Web sites they have prepared. Any reputable Web developer will be happy to provide you with references. Look over their work, and if possible talk to some of their clients. Ask whether the designer was receptive to requests for changes, answered questions clearly and generally was readily accessible. And don't be afraid to comparison shop. It's smart to get more than one quote for a Web development job.

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