



## How to Choose a Web Developer

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Whether you are redesigning your existing web site or building a new one, choosing the right web design firm can mean the difference between success and failure. Your business plan calls for a web site, you have a target launch date, and the money is budgeted. What is next? Who is actually going to build or redesign your site?

The first step is to choose a project manager. The project manager can be in-house or provided by the web design team. The project manager is the point person responsible for overseeing the entire project – setting and keeping a production schedule, communication to all decision makers and communication to the web design team. Choosing the right person to be the project manager is as important as choosing the right web design firm.

### **Do your homework**

The firm that you select to design your web site is critical to the success of the project. Sometimes we hear, "I've heard about FirstCrescent Designs and you guys do good work. We'd like you to build our web site." Even though you may ask for us specifically, we normally suggest that you get at least three bids for your web project. The process of listening to several presentations, comparing the fees, and seeing various designers' work will be very helpful when it comes to making the final decision. The more you learn about the web development cycle, the easier our job will be ultimately, rendering a better final product.

You may very likely have someone in-house who knows how to use Front Page or DreamWeaver and is familiar with building web sites. Often times that person is working in the IT department and has been taking web classes on the side. If you put out the word that you are going to be building or redesigning your website, your in-house web person may step forward.

Should you use this person? That is ultimately your decision. We suggest that this person submit a proposal and go through the process like everyone else. If they are not qualified or do not meet up to your expectations, you could assign this person to be the project manager. They may see this as an opportunity for growth. Assigning them as project manager is quite a positive testament to your company's investment and confidence in their professional development.

Referrals are common in the business world. A couple of phone calls can lead you to a few competent web design firms. Again we suggest that you still screen these referrals. Have each firm



submit a proposal and go through the bidding process along with everyone else. Even though a particular web design firm may have done wonders for your friend's company, you still need to verify that they will be a good fit for your company and your project.

In addition to referrals, the Yellow Pages, and newspapers, we suggest that you try searching the Internet. If you do a search for local web developers, as well as local web sites, you may find several professional firms that will meet your criteria. Craig's List ([www.craigslist.com](http://www.craigslist.com)) is also a legitimate source for web design firms and developers.

Larger companies seeking a web design firm will use a Request for Proposal or RFP for their web projects. The RFP is a substantial document prepared by your company that describes the scope of the desired web project as well as the specific requirements. The more time and work you put into this document, the better your returns will be. Not only will you better understand your company's goals and objectives for the project but you will be well-equipped to communicate your ideas and vision to the designers – giving them an opportunity to give you an accurate and thorough proposal. We strongly suggest that you put together an RFP, describing what you want to achieve with your web site. Ask yourself some basic questions like "Why do you want a web site?" "What is the goal of the web site?" "Who is the audience?" Put the answers to these questions on the RFP.

### **What to look for in a Web Developer**

When you meet your prospective web design firms, be very attentive to the presentation. Pay special attention to the details, the unsaid, and nuances. Are they prompt? Do they look professional? Are they good communicators? Keep in mind, building a website is really about digital communication. What type of value do they add to the project? If you look at two comparable web design firms side by side, which one would you pick?

Look for value added. The scales will be tipped to the firm that can offer more useful information and services to your specific industry. Look for the team that not only can identify the primary objective of your project, but also offers alternative solutions.

Rather than judging a portfolio by the number of produced sites, we suggest looking at the quality of the design. Consider the following questions:

- Do you like their work? Are they competent digital artists?
- Do their web sites present each message clearly?
- Are the websites varied and diverse, or have they created a design template and changed the copy to match the client?
- Have they done any ecommerce sites before?



- What about data-driven web projects?
- What back-end database projects have they done?
- Ask the web design firm to explain the uniqueness of each project.
- Ask the firm if you can contact some of their previous clients.
- Does the web design firm clearly state the scope of the project as they see it? Does it match your expectations?
- Would the web design firm be willing to "educate" and help you to understand the web development process (if needed)?
- Are they good teachers or do they make you feel foolish for asking questions?
- Are they good communicators?

A prospective web design firm should offer support, maintenance and trouble-shooting options up front. This is not a "what if" scenario as much as it is a "when". Inevitably problems arise. Plan on it. It could be something as simple as being unable to open an e-mail attachment of a prototype or as complex as the loss of functionality of a shopping cart. Does the web design team present support solutions and options?

Choosing a web design firm to develop your web site is a process that should not be taken lightly. The time that you spend researching web design teams will benefit your project in the long run. The partnership created between you and the design team will be the very foundation your project is built upon. Take the time to find a web design firm that is the best possible fit for your company and your project. Once a web design firm is selected, the next step is actually beginning the project.



## Questions to ask prospective web design firms?

In addition to your own list of questions, you may want to query your prospective web designers with questions such as:

- What is your experience in web development?
- How many members are there on your team?
- May I contact some of your former clients?
- Do you use a contract? Do you have a sample written contract?
- Will we be able to see the project as its being developed?
- Do you offer pricing options?
- What would a timeline for this project look like? Benchmarks?
- What is your definition of an extra and how are extras handled?
- How do you test the site?
- What is your server-side experience?
- Do you offer web hosting?
- What kind of support do you offer?
- Do you have any professional certifications or credentials?
- What experience do you have building eCommerce sites? Data-driven web sites, Content Management Systems?
- Do you have an office in town?
- How long has your company been in business?
- What is your workload like? How soon can you get started?
- How long will it take?
- What is your ballpark price estimate?
- Why should I work with you?