

10 Key Things to Look for in a Good Web Designer

By Gary K. 2008

The pace of business today is positively supersonic. There doesn't seem to be enough time for anything anymore, and businesses of all sizes are working harder and faster all the time.

It's important to work smarter, too. And that means when you have to choose an important vendor for an essential service, you need to slow down and make a deliberate, careful decision. This is particularly important when you are getting ready to put your company's face on the World Wide Web in a new or newly-refurbished web site.

Before listing the ten key things to look for in a good web designer, let's define a few terms. Even though you may encounter variants on the name – like web developer, web artist, webmaster and so forth - we're talking about an individual who, alone or with some assistance, is going to "get you up and running." This means more than simple design.

You may need someone who can help you conceive and write copy. You may need someone who can plan smart site structure. You may need help getting a domain registered, files uploaded, e-mail accounts set up, and other technical details. You will definitely need someone who can do just about anything or quickly find out how, or have an associate who can at the ready.

With these caveats and serious encouragement to shop around for price and professionalism, here are the ten things to look for, in rough order of importance:

1) Experience

You will need someone with all the techniques, tools and tricks that will help you prepare your web site and accomplish your online goals. You should confirm that the candidate knows the entire alphabet soup of protocols, web markup languages and coding utilities: HTML, XML, CSS, PHP and so on. Ask all prospects for a portfolio, ask if they can "hand code," find out how many years of experience each has, etc.

When you interview designers, on the phone and/or in person, you will get these answers swiftly enough. But take due time to get more important insights as to the individual's character, level of expertise - and how well your personalities mesh. You will be working closely together, after all.

2) Customer Service Orientation

As important as experience is a mindset and attitude of making customer service a priority. If a designer/developer is too busy to answer e-mails or phone calls, will they be able to keep the production schedule? Ask for references, and make a point of actually calling them. Ask the prospect's previous clients if the web developer was responsive, on time and effective.

3) Original copy and Graphics

Creating professional and 100% original web graphics separates the adults from the kids every time. Most anyone can do some "quick and dirty" copy writing and slap it on a page with some pictures and hyperlinks. On the other hand, a talented and veteran designer will demonstrate knowledge of page layout, have a way with color and know how to place elements on a page for best appearance and web site performance. Take a good look at a number of the sites each prospect has built, and make sure no one is using "templates" or "starter pages" that come with some software programs or are available (even free) on the Internet.

4) Creativity

You need to decide right away (before you even start talking to designers) just how much the designer you find will be involved in the conceptual process. Your designer may need to help you with some of the "big picture" questions, such as marketing, web copy writing (for search engines) and how to generate traffic. You want someone creative, but not a "diva" who won't follow instructions or work with your ideas to bring them to fruition.

5) Marketing Experience

The easiest way to find out if your prospective web designers are good at marketing web sites is to view their site and their portfolio. That you are considering selecting them to design your site is a good first indicator that their designs convert. You'll further want to ensure that you can find what you're looking for on their site quickly and easily and that you can do the same on some of the sites in their portfolio.

6) Cost

Pricing for a professional web site of 10-15 pages with the standard features runs all the way from \$500 to \$5000. It may be that your idea is so complicated that you might have to pay for an estimate. For a full picture of all the costs involved in the project, ask for all the costs to be broken out individually - domain name and hosting, graphic design work, marketing fees and web development matters.

You may need to place a deposit if the job is large enough, and you should have all payment terms worked out before work starts. You can work out an hourly rate, a flat fee or some combination of the two. Leave nothing unstated or assumed: Get every detail in writing, including deadlines and how many revisions are included.

7) Job Timeline

After you ask the developers how long the process will take, make a point of asking references if the project was, in fact, completed on time. A basic web site may take as little as a week, while more involved and technically challenging sites could take a month or more. You need to know what the real-world turnaround time is for the specific people you are considering.

8) Communication Skills

Don't hire anyone who insists on speaking to you in "computer-ese" or won't explain unknown terminology. You have to communicate with this person about things that are important to your very survival, so you need to be clear at all times. If you cannot establish a good working relationship, it won't matter if you have Leonardo Da Vinci working on your code, it just won't work out.

9) Full Service

There may be one or two things that your designer/developer cannot do, but for the most part you should be able to find a reasonably-priced professional who can handle just about everything. If the designer needs help installing a particularly complicated shopping cart, or your site requires some heavy database programming, it is reasonable to expect that your designer might need some assistance. All of this should be spelled out in the pricing, of course (see #6, above), and you shouldn't be surprised by anything your designer is telling you. If you are, you overlooked something in this list!

10) Availability

Are these prospects full-time web professionals? Or are they moonlighting from some other job, even a completely unrelated one? It may be that a part-time web designer who's working at a fast food joint really can do a great job for you, but will he/she be available to meet with you during normal business hours? No matter what decision you make - full-time pro, part-timer or student - you must be able to get hold of your designer.

Finally, do your homework before speaking with anyone. You don't need to be an expert - after all, you're hiring help, because you're not - but you need to know enough to know what you're hearing. If you are uncertain of your ability to keep on top of what's going on, get a friend with at least basic web knowledge to help you locate, interview and assess candidates.

Use all of this "head" knowledge to narrow down your list of candidates, but don't be afraid to use your intuition ("heart" knowledge) to get a feel for each person's honesty, integrity and character. Using this mix of study, inquiry, discussion, and feel, you will start to develop judgments about the candidates. Following this procedure thoroughly should result in your finding a good match for your Internet needs.