How To Choose A Web Developer

Choosing the right web developer is one of the hardest decisions a small business can make. There are many factors to take into account, and not every designer is as straight shooting as they claim to be. Make sure you know what you want your site to achieve before you start looking for someone to build it for you.

Establish your goals

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"Be clear about how you want your website to work with your business," says Lisa Taliana, owner of Taliana Design. "Is it going to be a selling tool? Is it going to inform? Have a clear idea of what you want to achieve." She suggests business owners should conduct research by visiting websites they like, establishing what they like about them, and creating a 'wishlist' of features they'd like to see on their own site.

Bernard Harper, managing director of Netreturn Consulting, suggests that small businesses should adopt a long-term perspective, and establish where they want to be with their website in three to five years time.

"The most important thing to do is look at the business options and technical options that will align with the growth path of the company," he explains. "The solution they put in place today should be able to grow with them in the future. They don't want to have to throw it all away in a year or two's time and lose the value of the investment because the scale of the business has grown."

Research

Though a particular developer may come highly recommended by a friend or colleague, it's best not to pin all of your hopes on a single option without doing some research first.

Taliana suggests that one of the best ways to gauge the capabilities of a web designer is to have a look at their own site.

"That can give you an idea of what their style and what they're capable of. Some web developers are great at building the back end, but they're not that great at design and vice versa. You could find a really great designer, but they're not strong in the technical aspect," she says. "If you want someone to build you a shopping cart, and they don't specialise that, you should pick someone who has working models, so you can see that they're credible."

Netreturn's Harper advises that it's also wise to try and find a number of developers with design experience that's relevant to your particular industry. Once you've drawn up a shortlist, conduct interviews with each of them to determine what their approach is.

> "You'll start to know if you're on the right track if they ask you about your business plans, and business data as well as the core information and processes," says Harper. "If they start talking about how funky the website is going to look, you're probably on the wrong track."

According to Harper, it's common for businesses to sign off on a good-looking website, only to find that it presents barriers for growth two years down the track because of a lack of sound business analysis at the outset.

> "Any good development, whether it's a web development or any systems development, always starts with proper systems analysis and design, and that will then lead you onto the build and finally the design of the result."

Talk to past customers

Asking a developer for some customer references can be an effective way of finding out if they will be easy to work with.

> *"Go and speak to some of their customers," says Harper. "If they're reluctant to do that, then you should treat that as a red light. Because it's an abstract business, you need [testimonials] to be able to ascertain whether these people can actually deliver for you."*

It's important that any testimonials presented to you are very specific, or at least more elaborate than 'good job, very happy'. If particulars are lacking, ask questions. What was it that made the developer good to work with? Did they deliver on time? Did they come in under budget?

Beware the sales pitch

When you actually sit down with whoever it is that's designing your website, remember that they should be keeping your business's goals first and foremost. Netreturn's Harper says it's vital to establish the mindframe of a 'technology agnostic'.

> *"The business needs drive the technology and not the other way around." says Netreturn's Harper.*

> *"Often, web developers tend to get wedded to one particular technology or another. If they use Ruby on Rails, for example, that's a great technology for small to medium sized businesses, but it's not very scalable for an enterprise," he continues. "You should be able to get a flavour of how they understand your business, and how they're going to approach the technology options, from how they actually talk to you initially, and seek to understand what your true business need is."*

Business owners should also be wary of web developers that promise the world for very little money.

"You have to be careful; you end up paying for what you get," says Taliana. "If something is really too good to be true, then it usually is. You don't have to pay an arm and a leg for a website, either. You just have to be mindful of what they're offering, and whether they're going to be able to deliver."

Project management capabilities

The creation of a website is an incredibly complicated and convoluted process, that requires some considerable planning. Make sure you get a feel for their product management capabilities before putting pen to paper with any one web designer.

Netreturn's Harper encourages small businesses to enquire about the internal processes of the web developer. It's important that they can give you a clear idea of the processes that are going to lead from an initial meeting through to the live date of the site, as well as the methodologies associated with each process, from analysis and design through to building, testing and sending it live.

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