

7 Key Facts You Need to Know

BEFORE CHOOSING YOUR WEB PROVIDER

Choosing a web developer is as important as choosing your other professional service providers.

For years, new business owners heard, “**The three most important people to your business are your lawyer, your banker, and your accountant. Find good professionals to know and trust.**”

We think in the current business world the list should include your web developer. A good web developer can help you craft a sales, marketing and customer service engine that will drive the success of your business for years to come. This guide is designed to help you select the right web developer for your needs - the first time.

What You Need to Know:

1 Every web developer will have a unique design style.

Successful web design is a fine balance of form and function. Each development company and individual developer has a unique style. When selecting your developer it's important that their style match your business's image and project the right message to your potential customers. Major styles available in the marketplace are flashy, clean/simple, elegant, professional, template and homemade. Some of the styles are a fairly obvious poor choice - unless your website is not expected to do much, a template or homemade site is not recommended. After disqualifying the low-quality providers you should look closely at each provider's portfolio, looking especially for businesses with similar customer demographics as your own.

If you feel the design style is a good match for your business the next step is to evaluate the skills and experience of the developers on your list. Day to day we are presented with a surprising number of projects that are never finished or were finished improperly by other firms.

Evaluating a company's qualifications and skills will help ensure you get successful results and a quality product. Ask for long-term customer references. If the companies you are evaluating don't have many long-term customers, you should proceed with caution.

2 Low cost does not mean high value.

Like many other professional services, you shouldn't make decisions based solely on price. Choosing a web developer is not like finding the cheapest place to purchase your new TV. Custom web development is unique to each provider and the quality of your final product will vary greatly.

We often have clients come back to us after choosing a cheaper provider whose services didn't work out and ask if we can fix what they have. Unfortunately the most common answer is no. The product they have developed doesn't meet our design or coding standards and normally has to be thrown out to get a superior final product. So the question is - for the money they spent, what kind of value was achieved? The initial cost may have been less but the product was useless so no value was achieved.

3 Website code ownership varies from provider to provider.

Be careful when you sign a contract with your web developer. Copyright laws provide a lot of rights to your developer and you may not own the site you are paying for when development is finished. Content management systems, e-commerce and other program licenses are often tied to the development company, meaning if you want to leave you might be leaving without part of your site. In many cases there are valid reasons for specific elements of a development contract, so be sure you understand it and make sure to read all of the language as if you plan to move your site to another provider. Changing developers is common and this is where the contract may become important.

4 Customer support and developing a good relationship with your provider is critical for long-term success.

Once you've built your new site and start generating results, that won't be the last time you change your site. As the results come in you will need to continue to make improvements to maintain a competitive edge. It becomes critical to have a strong line of communication with your developer to ensure the items you need to improve will get implemented in a timely manner.

As web development companies grow, good service is more difficult to come by. If you can find a larger company that has maintained superior customer service through their own growth you've probably found a winner.

5 Multiple vendors usually complicate development, cloud direction and increase costs.

You've seen it in countless situations – when something goes wrong or takes too long, everyone involved points fingers and nobody wants to take the blame. Without knowledgeable oversight, working with multiple web vendors is prone to similar problems. If you can find a provider willing to take responsibility for an end-to-end solution, they might be a good choice. A “one stop shop” will often save you time and money if the quality of the provider is high. Review your providers' references carefully.

Note: Your prospective provider should be large enough to have specialists in the major areas of design, programming, hosting and marketing. There is too much knowledge out there for one person to be a jack of all trades.

6 Great technical support and a top-notch hosting infrastructure are essential components for day to day website and email reliability.

All hosting providers are not created equally. Many companies that profess to offer hosting services do not actually have any direct responsibility for the services they provide. For a few hundred dollars a provider can pick up a server located in another state or country and begin offering hosting services. As long as everything is running smoothly, everything will usually work out okay; however if you begin to experience problems your

provider probably doesn't know much more about the problem than you do. Before signing on for hosting ask some basic questions about their hosting infrastructure:

1. Where are your servers located?
2. How many sites do you host?
3. What kind of backups do you make?
4. Do you host email and websites on one server?
5. What kind of power and Internet redundancy do you have in place?
6. In a bare-metal failure situation how quickly could you put critical services back online?
7. Is technical support for your servers contracted out?

7 Website quality is often overlooked.

Evaluating quality in a finished website is not as simple as judging a book by its cover. A site that looks good can easily be a total mess under the hood. Areas of concern are HTML/CSS source code, server-side source code, data structure, and image and Flash source files. Many of the source files will not be critical if you never plan to change your website but they factor heavily into long-term maintainability. For example, proper HTML/CSS code will continue to look consistent as new browser versions are released. Poor or “hacked together” code will often display differently across different platforms and browsers and can be nearly impossible to fix permanently without starting over.

As your website grows scalability can become a major issue. Well thought out server-side source code and data structure is like a good foundation for your house. As your site grows, an insufficient foundation will cause you significant scalability problems and you may need to tear down and rebuild in the middle of your success.

There is a trade-off between quality and cost. A good development partner can help balance planning for the future and short-term costs.

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