

# How to Select a Web Designer

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Recently, I was asked by a small business owner how he should go about choosing a website designer. Since I was not bidding on his project, I was able to offer him the following unbiased advice.

## **Develop an RFQ**

First, as the owner of your business, you need to have a clear idea in your mind of what you're looking for from your website. Perhaps you just want an internet presence for your business, or maybe you want something more dynamic. If you're not sure what you want, then take the time to do some research. Take a look at what other similar businesses are doing and write down what you like (and what you don't like!). Start to make a list of what features you feel your site must have (request form, forum, etc.). You should also start to list out the individual pages you want to see developed (about us, services, etc.). You are now creating an official RFQ (request for quote) document that you can present to a potential web designer for review. Once you've developed an outline for your site, you should also make some notes about your preferences when it comes to the site design and layout. If you want a flash intro or background music or some other design element, you need to note that. Put all your notes into a Word document and save it for later.

Next, you'll need to solicit bids from interested web designers. Include a brief description of what you want your site to be, and invite interested designers to contact you with their information.

At this point, you should not expect full-blown estimates or proposals. No professional is going to be prepared to give you a quote on a project without having talked to you or seen your RFQ. Instead, you should concentrate on weeding out the designers who don't meet your expectations.

*So, what should you expect?*

## **Good Communication**

Right off the bat, any communication from a potential designer should be professional, clear, and friendly. It's extremely important that the designer you choose is a good communicator. First, you have to work with this individual and if they can't communicate well with you, the project will prove more difficult to complete. Second, you will be depending on him or her to independently create certain aspects of your website. You cannot write everything for them. If they aren't able to communicate well, it will be reflected in their work and therefore make your site, and you, look unprofessional.

## **Previous Work**

Next, your interested designer should be able to present some examples of their work, preferably in the form of a portfolio page within their own website. Assuming they have their own website, look at that first. Do you like it? Does it look professional? Would you consider them based solely on their website? A website should be a reflection of that business. If a web designer's own website is poor, then they do not understand the purpose of a business website and you can move on.

Assuming their own website is up to snuff, then you should check out their portfolio. Take a look at the sites they've done for other businesses, particularly if there are some sites similar to your own model, and see what you think. If, on the whole, you're not impressed with their work, move on to a different designer.

## **Personality & Knowledge**

If you're comfortable with the quality of work from a particular designer, it's time to talk to them on the phone. They should be comfortable talking about themselves and what they can do for you, and pleasant to deal with. Remember, this is someone that's going to become an integral part of your business, at least for a while. You need to feel confident that they can do the job and that you'll be able to work with them.

## **Price**

Once you've articulated exactly what you're looking for, the designer should be able to give you a quote on the project. Certainly, the price needs to be an important consideration, but don't let it make your decision for you. If someone gives you a particularly high price on a project, you need to consider the quality of their work and decide if it is marginally better than everyone else, and if they're worth it. Similarly, if someone gives you a particularly low price, you need to consider their motivation as well. Do they simply produce cheap work, or are they trying to establish themselves and therefore charging below market rates. If you're lucky enough to find someone in that situation who meets your other requirements, hire them immediately!

### **Local vs. Remote**

Because of the nature of websites, most projects can be easily completed without ever having any face-to-face meetings between designer and client. Business owners should not feel any hesitation in hiring a remote designer, at least one within the U.S.

Certainly, there are specific projects which may require face time, but in general, those clients that insist on dealing with local designers are only limiting themselves to local talent and rates.

### **Business Experience**

In your emails and conversations with your designer, you should also gauge their business experience. You're going to be depending on him or her to give you suggestions on how to build your site to better your business. If, for instance, the designer has no sales experience, how can they ensure your website fits into your sales process? Additionally, a good designer will question every aspect of the site from a good business perspective and offer you advice to that end. For instance, the flash intro you wanted for your site may look outstanding, but a good designer might suggest that, while attractive, it does not actually benefit your business, and could potentially do more harm than good by deterring visitors who cannot view flash, or preventing search engines from searching your website. If your designer gives you a suggestion to improve your site, but one that will end up reducing their fees, then you know that this designer truly has your best interests at heart.

### **Search Engine Understanding**

Finally, your new designer must understand how to build a site so that it is search engine friendly. This is typically where inexperienced designers fall short, so don't skip this step! Ask them how they plan to make your site optimized for search engines. Going back to their ability to communicate; they should be able to explain what they're going to do in a way that you can understand without any previous knowledge of SEO.

Hopefully I've given you some ideas on how to approach this task. Feel free to email me your questions or comments at [michael@stadiastudio.com](mailto:michael@stadiastudio.com). Good luck!

### **About the Author**

Michael is the lead web designer and owner at Stadia Studio (<http://www.StadiaStudio.com>), a web design firm in St. Louis, and has been helping businesses get online since the 1990's.

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