

BIT CONCEPTS

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Selecting a Good Website Designer By Dennis McDonough

The personal computer has been a part of our lives for more than twenty years. But like any other technological tool, the PC and all its other accessories (digital cameras, CD-ROM burners, music editing software, etc.) has created a horde of amateurs who think that just because they have a computer, some software, an Internet connection, and all of the other neat toys, they can instantly become web site designers. Their sites are often low-quality, look amateurish, and do not work for their customers.

Put bluntly, you do not want a website designed by an amateur. You want a site design team who has experience (and a variety of sites to prove it) and who can: work effectively with you in developing a web site, understand your needs and goals, optimize site search capabilities, and make your site stand out *all while working within your budget*.

What to Look For in a Good Design Team

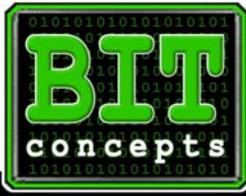
Experience – We all probably know someone whose son’s friend knows someone down the street who is studying web design at night, and who would love to pick up a few extra dollars doing a web site for you. But he or she may not have the demonstrated experience necessary to create an effective web site. You want to use a web design team that has a range of experience, from basic text-and-picture sites to e-commerce applications.

Creativity – There are several site designers who use “canned” web sites where they simply dump information into pre-formatted templates so that every site they create looks vaguely similar. A good web design team knows that in order to be effective and work for you, your site must be like no other. That doesn’t mean they come up with bizarre designs just to catch a visitor’s attention. It means they can work with you to develop a site that is distinctly yours. It also means they have the design tools available to immediately execute any changes you have and help you expand your site as your needs change.

Efficiency – You want to find a web design team that can work efficiently for you, help you set a budget, and work to make your web site cost-effective. You do not want to work with a design team that takes a “kitchen sink” approach to site design, overcharging you for filling your site with animations, pictures strewn all about the site in inappropriate places, and tons of unnecessary downloads. You *do* want to work with a team that discusses your needs in advance and builds a site that reflects them. In short, you want to work with a team that will not waste your money on an overblown web site.

What to Ask Design Team Candidates

Once you begin to shop around for a design team using the guidelines above, ask the following questions to those who want your business:



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How do you develop a site? This is more than a nuts-and-bolts question. What you are looking for is a design team that will first discuss needs with you, then come up with a design documents and sample web pages that will demonstrate how your site will appear and show how the information will flow (e.g., what the menu items will be, what links will be available, what pictures will be used, etc.). Some design teams or individuals are good at seat-of-the-pants design that works, but they are a rarity. The design team select should be good at planning your site before they start building it.

How can you optimize my website to make it searchable? If someone is looking for your business on the Internet, they will use a search engine such as Google, Alta Vista, or Ask Jeeves among others. Your web design team should have every page on your site set so that your company comes up in a high position on a search engine's results page. If they cannot explain how they can do that, you probably will not want to use them. If they can explain, get them to show you how by using some of their own work as an example.

What has been your biggest site design challenge? Rarely does a site design process run smoothly, and there are problems encountered every step of the way. By asking this you want to see how the design firm solves problems. Who knows? Designing a site for your business may be the most challenging task they ever encounter. If so, and you have a satisfactory answer to this question, then you will have confidence that they will meet the challenges and develop a fine site for you.

Other questions you might ask: How many people work for you? Does each member of your team complete a task for the site, or does one person do everything for a site? What awards have your sites won? What brought you into this business in the first place? What keeps you in it?

Once you have selected a web site design team, you must keep in touch with them throughout the site development process. If someone on the team calls with a question or wants you to see something they have done, return the call as soon as possible. Keep the feedback channels open and work with the development team to get the web site you want. And once the site is ready and working for you, keep in touch with the design team so you can both anticipate changes and discuss enhancements.

Follow these guidelines to create and maintain a happy relationship with your design team, so you can get a professionally-designed web site that works for you.

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