

SO YOU WANT A WEBSITE?

You want a website, but how do you go about getting one? You don't have the time to learn how to build a site yourself, so who can you hire to design it for you? With hundreds of web designers out there, ranging from individual freelancers to big web design agencies, how can you make sure that you get the right one for you?

Before we begin, there is one concession that you will have to be prepared to make – whether you are a chief executive, IT manager or just someone who has been handed the responsibility of getting your organisation's website built, you'll have to be prepared to learn some degree of technical information about website design in order to make an informed choice.

We're not talking about a computer science degree – but just as if you were buying a new car, you have to do some background reading to learn about the market and the packages on offer.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

The first step is to sit down and think about exactly what you want your website to do, not only when it goes live, but also for the foreseeable future too. Ask yourself the following questions.

- What kind of information should be on the website?
- Who are the website visitors likely to be? Is there a target audience?
- Will the information on the website change regularly?
- What specific features will the site include eg a webstore or forum.
- Do you a logo and images designed for the site?
- What is your budget?
- When does the website need to go live?

The answers to these questions are the basis for your Requirements Document, a list of the functions that your website needs to have which your web designer will require. You will refer to it regularly when you get down to the nitty-gritty of evaluating possible designers.

BEGINNING YOUR SEARCH

Armed with a good idea of what you want your website to be, you can begin your search for a web designer.

There are several ways that you can approach the search for a web designer.

1. Advertise your call for tender – this approach is more applicable to organisations whose web design budget runs to thousands of pounds rather

than hundreds, or where a funding body has requested a clear, documented selection process

2. Compile a list of potential designers yourself.

THE CALL FOR TENDER

The tender process is the more formal option. By advertising the tender in a newspaper you have the advantage of letting the web designer come to you, rather than having to do all the leg-work yourself.

Just as if you were placing a job advertisement, ensure that you have a closing date far enough in advance to give all the interested parties a chance to reply, while staying within the time frame that you have to work to – and make sure that the contact telephone number is staffed and ready to take the details of companies who call to enquire.

You should be prepared to communicate your needs to those companies that contact you – a short document, spelling out your answers to the questions in the “What do you want?” section above should give any web design company enough to go on to create a tender document. You should also ask them for their own web address, and a portfolio of websites that they have built – we’ll see why in a minute.

You should bear in mind that those companies replying to your tender might not be the best out there – they’re simply the ones that saw your advertisement.

FIND THE DESIGNER YOURSELF

The alternative is to find the web designers yourself. It is more work than the tender process, but the results can be more conclusive. Using referrals from organisations that you know which have had websites built, combined with your own internet and Yellow Pages searches, you can get a good idea of the web designers in your area. For instance, you could simply type “web design Northern Ireland” into your preferred search engine, and see the range of companies that it returns.

You should contact several of the designers that you’ve found, and ask them to submit a proposal for a website, in response to your Requirements Document. A list of five or six companies should give you a good basis to work from – make sure to include those that others have said have done a good job for them.

Regardless of which of the two methods you choose to use to find a designer, you should receive the following information from interested companies, preferably in a single document.

- An introduction to the company and the staff working on your project.
- Brief summary of their web solution (technology and functionality).
- Summary of their suggested web hosting solution.
- A breakdown of all costs, immediate and annual.
- Information on any training and technical support that they will deliver.
- Testimonials and a list of web addresses for sites they have designed.

EVALUATING THE COMPETITION

There are many things to consider when you're reviewing your list of potential web designers.

- Have a look at the web designer's own website, and the sites in their portfolio:
 - Do you like the websites?
 - Does the navigation system work?
 - Do you like the navigation system?
 - Can you find their contact information easily?
 - Is the text easy to read?
 - Do the webpages load quickly?
 - Do you have to scroll horizontally to read information? *(This makes the information harder to read and shows a lack of design skill)
 - Are the page titles appropriate and informative?
 - Do the colours on the website work well together?
 - Are there any accessibility accreditations visible on the homepage?
- Does the designer's portfolio include websites for voluntary and community sector organisations?
- Does the web designer build database-driven websites, or are they static pages that will have to be manually changed?
- Do their websites work equally well in different browsers? Try opening them in both Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox.
- Does the design company employ a graphic designer?
- Do they design websites which are individual and represent the client organisation?
- Are there additional charges for site changes or technical support included in the tender? If so, are they within your budget?
- Are the sites accessible in accordance with the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Access Initiative? (see Useful Links below)
- Do you have access to the website visitor statistics?
- In terms of hosting, does the web designer have their own web server, or will your website be hosted by a third party?
- What is the designer's primary business? If you are already doing business with a company who are not dedicated web designers, be wary of offers to also create a website for you – web design is a specialised discipline. For example, someone who has spent years learning to design websites won't necessarily have the knowledge and skill to be a competent printer, and vice versa.

Don't be afraid to contact organisations in the web designer's portfolio, especially if those organisations are in your sector. Ask them about the website that was designed for them: are they happy with it? Did they have a good working relationship with the web designer? are there any issues that you should be aware of?

If you have any questions, contact the web designer by telephone or email. Do they answer these questions to your satisfaction? How quickly do they respond?

CHOOSING THE WINNER

Picking the winning web designer can be a difficult and fraught process. Here's a short checklist that should help you narrow the field.

- *If you have a larger budget.* Unless your budget is limited to less than £2000, your web design package should include:
 - Database: Your web designer should be offering a website which runs on top of a database, which will store your web articles and deliver them to the website
 - Content Management System (CMS): The database should be complemented by a CMS – a user friendly, web based control panel that will allow you to easily add articles to the database. It will give you control over the content on your website.
- *If you have a limited budget.* It's probably unrealistic to hope for a database and CMS to manage your website if you have under £2000 to spend. In this instance, you should look for a package which includes software that allows you to edit the content of the website yourself, is installed on your computer for you by the designer, which includes training in the use of the software, and where the cost is included in the bottom line.
- *Accessibility.* It is a legal requirement for all websites to be built which are accessible to everyone, regardless of physical, visual, or aural impairment. Your designer has to guarantee that this is the case, and can prove that their websites pass at least Level 1 of the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Access Initiative.
- *Copyright.* The web designer should make it clear that you will own the instance of their code, but without the right to resell that code. As far as the content of the website goes, the designer should also make it clear that you own the content absolutely.
- *Content.* The web designer should provide assistance and guidance in understanding, evaluating, and placing the information on to the website that you already have in existing electronic and paper-based documents. This is important – if a designer mentions this sort of feature, he should rate highly in your evaluation.

- *Search Engines.* The web designer should mention that their websites are optimised for higher rankings in the well known search engines, making your websites easier to find.
- *User Training.* Look for any mention of user training in the designer's document, especially for training in support tools such as image optimisation for the web and using the CMS.
- *Costs.* Look for an initial bottom line, a detailed breakdown of each price listed and information on annual support costs.
- *Functionality.* Don't be swayed by the sales pitch – if the designer's tender includes features that you don't want and won't use, tell them this – and make sure that the bottom line cost is changed to reflect this.

Call your short listed companies in for a quick, informal chat. This will allow you to present any last queries you may have, and to meet the designers face to face. If, after evaluating all the concerns listed above, you find that there is still no obvious choice, take the fact that you can relate to the staff in an individual company into account – remember, you'll probably be working with these people for an extended period of time, so you should feel comfortable talking to and discussing issues with them.

IT'S WORTH THE WORK

There's no magic formula to guarantee your success, but if you follow these steps, you should increase your chances of finding and hiring a web designer that will match your needs.

The process may seem like a lot of work, but when you're spending a lot of money, building a business tool that will last for years and creating a shop front for your organisation, it pays to do your homework.

Good luck!

USEFUL LINKS

Accessibility

BECTA's guidelines on website accessibility.

www.becta.org.uk/industry/advice/advice.cfm?section=3&id=4360

Watchfire's validator for websites, checking a range of issues including the accessibility of your website.

<http://webxact.watchfire.com>

NetMechanic's excellent run down of accessibility issues.

www.netmechanic.com/news/vol7/accessibility_no8.htm

The World Wide Web Consortium Web Accessibility Initiative – heavy reading, but a full discussion of accessibility, and the standards that should be attained by the designer.

www.w3.org/WAI

Website Content Copyright

BECTA's discussion of website content copyright.

www.becta.org.uk/industry/advice/advice.cfm?section=3&id=3416

HTML Validation

W3C's validator for HTML – the validator checks the language that a website is written in for flaws and any deviation from accepted standards.

<http://validator.w3.org>

Search Engine

The Google search engine – useful for locating those web designers.

www.google.co.uk