

## When to Hire a Web Designer

A few years ago, building a web site required HTML programming skills. But that's all changed. Today, free web authoring software programs enable people to build a professional-looking web site in just a few hours with no programming experience required. With the advent of these tools, should you do it yourself or hire a web designer?

### Building a Basic Web Site

You can build a professional-looking web site yourself in just a few hours using a free web authoring tool such as Yahoo! SiteBuilder. SiteBuilder allows you to start from scratch or customize one of over 300 business-specific templates. Drag-and-drop editing eliminates the need for custom programming skills. Many companies offer this type of template program.

If you choose hire a web designer, a basic site design will cost a few hundred dollars. At this level, you won't necessarily get a better looking site, but you'll save yourself the time. Once your site is built, you can either maintain it yourself, or pay the designer an ongoing maintenance fee, generally starting at \$100 a month.

### E-commerce and Advanced Functionality

As your needs expand to include e-commerce and other advanced functionality, there may be a strong benefit in hiring a web designer. While you can still build an e-commerce storefront yourself using Yahoo! Merchant Solutions or another store-building application, the complexity of these applications makes hiring a designer a wise choice.

### Find the Right Designer

One of the best ways to find a web site designer is to get recommendations from colleagues and other business owners. Look for people who have designed sites for similar businesses or sites that do what you want yours to do, and view their online portfolios. When reviewing examples of their work, check for:

- Uniqueness — Avoid designers who appear to use a cookie-cutter approach.
- Functionality — Is the site's organization intuitive? Do the pages load quickly? Do all of the links work?
- Style — Make sure the graphics and content are interesting and appear to convey the company's message.

Prepare a list of questions, and interview three to five designers. Some questions to begin with are:

- What are the steps in the design process?
- How long will it take?
- What will I need to provide?
- Will you be doing the work yourself?

- Will you host the site? How much will that cost?
- What kind of tech support do you offer?

Be sure to get an estimate, including both price and deliverable dates, in writing. Ask if you can contact their other clients. When you call or email references, ask if the designer was easy to work with and good about returning calls.

Once you have selected a web designer, develop a written contract that includes:

- A detailed description of the work to be done, including number of web pages and features and functionality.
- Timing – Including check-in points and a final completion date.
- Costs – Specify dates for payments. The final payment shouldn't be due until your web site is completed.
- Additional Terms – Such as who owns the site design and handling of updates/maintenance to the site.

Designing your web site is an important part in developing your business. If you don't feel comfortable doing it yourself, start looking for outside help. Take the time choosing a designer that is a good fit with your company -- doing the legwork during the selection process will pay off in the end.

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