

## **How to Hire a Web Developer**

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Shopping for a Web site developer is not unlike looking for a new car. First, you see lots of terrific sites on the Internet and you become excited about the prospect of getting a new one for yourself. Then the chore of researching begins, and the whole thing becomes much less appealing. By the time you have listened to each of the sales pitches, and tried to sort out exactly what you are buying, you are ready to just keep your old site and spend your money elsewhere. Eventually, though, you get through it, and there is tremendous satisfaction showing off your new site – assuming, of course, that you chose a good developer who completed the project to your satisfaction.

The selection of the proper vendor to build your Web site is a critical element of the success of the project. Consider what you should expect from prospective candidates – experience, professionalism, knowledge of your business, etc. The process can be made easier by following the steps outlined below.

### ***Part I: Getting Ready***

There are some activities that you should complete before embarking on your Web developer search. First, establish a set of goals for your Web site. You should go beyond the obvious, “Increase Revenue,” “Reduce Costs,” and “Improve Customer Satisfaction.” These may well be high-level goals that drive your company, but they’re only the starting point for making sure that your Web site strategy is integrated with your overall business strategy, and that your target audience finds the site useful. Consider the Web site goals from many perspectives – customer, supplier, employee, accidental visitor, etc. What would each of these targeted groups of users want to see from your site. If you can, ask them.

Next, establish one or more success metrics for each of your goals. While your Web site logs can provide you with the number of hits on each page, and an idea of what times of the day or days of the week are most popular, look beyond your logs for metrics. Since you’re tying these measurements back to your site goals (which should in turn be tied back to your company goals) consider metrics associated with customer service, customer retention, support call reduction, better-qualified leads, etc. Each goal should have one or more measurable metrics associated with it.

So why not let your Web developer do this with you, or even for you? Although they bring experience with similar clients to the table, no one understands your business like you do. You

have the best viewpoint from which to create your site's goals. By establishing your own strategy prior to finding a Web developer you will have accomplished an important thing: the direction that you have established is *your* direction, not theirs. Too many Web sites have been built in the eyes of the developer, and those sites miss their target audiences by a mile.

## **Part II: Where To Look**

With your strategy in hand, your next task is to find good candidates for your vendor partner. It's hard to be too specific here in terms of how to identify the best candidates. So much depends on the complexity of the site you are planning, your budget, and where you are located. But that said here are some ideas about where to look for candidates.

**Referrals.** Leverage your personal and professional networks to find out which vendors your contacts would recommend.

**Sites You Like.** Find out which firms built other sites you like. You can e-mail the site webmaster (usually there is a link in the contact area of the site), or call the company and ask to speak with the person responsible for the site.

**Trade Publications.** You may find vendors who specialize in developing sites for your industry advertised in various trade publications. Many of these offer a fixed feature set solution, with some ability to integrate your own graphic design.

**Area Business Journals.** In many locations, there are business news publications that cover the companies in that area. Look for advertisements or articles about local developers.

**Yellow Pages.** Don't ignore the obvious. You can probably find Web design and development firms under some flavor of "Internet Services," "Internet Web Sites," "Internet Development," etc.

**Search Engines and Directories.** Search engines can help you generate a quick list of developers in your area, or with a specific skill. Use geographic search terms ("Web design Rochester NY"), technology terms ("Java developer"), or various combinations. Just be prepared to sift through some of the meaningless results to get to the good ones.

## **Part III: Evaluation Criteria**

Throughout the remainder of the decision process, you want to keep a set of criteria handy. These criteria will help you interview the vendor candidates during the initial part of the sales engagement, and will later help you score and rank the candidates as part of your decision-making process.

There are six high-level categories for the criteria that can be considered as part of the evaluation process. Each of the categories can include one or more criteria. You should think through the list and add criteria that you feel are important to your project, or remove the ones that aren't.

**Capabilities.** The skills and resources that a vendor brings to your project are obvious criteria choices. For a Web site project, both graphic design (creative) and technical (programming of dynamic Web pages and databases) are key capabilities. Marketing and hosting capabilities may be important to you, too, depending on your particular project.

**Delivery and Support Processes.** Web projects are no different than other types of software development projects – most fail to be completed on time, or on budget, or with the originally specified functionality. Good planning and repeatable processes are both key to having a successful engagement. You want your vendor to have a consistent process in place that they use to manage their projects. Have them describe it to you and provide example documentation from it (specifications, plans, etc.).

**Business Operations.** How does your prospective vendor run their company? You will likely experience fewer problems with a company that has been in business for a few years than you would with a start-up just due to the stability of the company. Ask questions about the company's financial condition – both directly and to your contacts in the local community if the vendor is in your area. Ask about employee turnover. What is the likelihood that the developer working on your site will leave – possibly delaying your project?

**Professionalism.** There are no Web developer-specific criteria here. Expect the same level of professionalism that you would from any prospective vendor, and the same level that your company uses when selling its own products and services.

**Terms and Conditions.** Generally, Web sites are developed with the combination of new work (e.g., graphic design created just for you as a client) and existing work (e.g., programming for the “Contact Us” form that appears on every site the developer has done). Most often, the Web site developer will retain the title to the work. Some form of license is then granted to the client that allows unlimited or limited forms of use. The terms and conditions may also include limited liability clauses that protect the Web developer from being responsible for lost profits or other damages related to the Web site. There should also be some provision that the site will perform to an agreed-upon set of criteria for a given warranty period. Providing at least a 30-day warranty that the site meets those criteria is the minimum you would want to see. Consult your own attorney for expert guidance in this area.

**Price.** Certainly one of the most important criteria will be this one. Pricing should include not only the cost of the developer's labor, but also identify fees for the following (if applicable):

- \* Software licensing (e.g., databases, e-commerce software, etc.)
- \* Graphics and image licensing
- \* Security certificates
- \* Search engine submission
- \* Hosting and/or hardware acquisition
- \* Support
- \* Credit card processing services

Labor pricing might be structured as time and materials or fixed-price. Fixed-price is more desirable from the client's perspective since it caps the risk. But even fixed-price contracts have provisions for change requests and other events that will modify the pricing. Time and materials contracts will include an estimate (range) of the labor hours and rates for the project.

Price is important, but you will burn a lot of unplanned hours and dollars if you choose the wrong vendor.

#### ***Part IV: The Decision***

One key activity to complete before making your final vendor choice is to check out each vendor's references. Make sure that they are provided to you, at least three per vendor. If there is a delay in getting them to you, or any hesitation on the part of the vendor, it's definitely a red flag. Also make sure that the references you are given are for companies whose sites are of similar scope and price to yours. If the reference client built is the company's biggest client, it is likely that they get a different level of attention than you might. Make the calls and ask lots of questions. Use the criteria you've established as a guide for developing a question list.

With reference checks completed, how you decide to rank the prospective vendors can vary. Creating a scorecard is not a bad idea. Give a weighting to each of the criteria first, making them higher for the criteria that are most critical to your project. Then rank what you believe the vendors' ability is to satisfy each of the criteria. When complete, you will have a quick view highlighting what each candidate's strengths and weaknesses are. The result will provide you with a thorough and structured evaluation from which you can make your decision.

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