How to spot a good web design agency from a phony one

Your Guide to help choose the right company for the job

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Your company website is probably the most powerful of marketing tools you can ever have at your disposal. Yet we still find so many businesses make the mistake of leaping without first taking a good look at how this industry works. Often the end result doesn't quite fit with the objectives you have in mind for your website. Worst is if all the work that goes into developing your site costs you a fortune but leaves you feeling unsatisfied.

If you're buying a website development package for the first time, and are not sure what questions to ask, this can mean you could be easily led down a path that only reveals itself as inappropriate once it's too late. You don't have surplus funds in your budget to mess around with trial and error decisions when building a website for your business. As this is not something you do every day, you want your decisions to reflect the same clarity of vision you already possess when you open up shop each morning.

To help you cut through the mysteries and probably save a ton of money we've compiled the most pertinent questions you should ask. These will certainly make you sound a whole lot smarter than some web design companies might give you credit for. Ultimately you will be guided to only the best well informed decisions before spending a dime on your business website.

Professionalism is the sum of experience and an established track record

Even if you're a small business or an entrepreneur looking to make waves in the deep waters of the world wide web - do not as a rule hand your website creation to an amateur. If you're a growing business it's important to always check up on the experience of the web design agency you want to work with.

Firstly consider the number of years the agency has behind them. This is always reflective of success since web design companies who have a line of dissatisfied customers in their wake don't last very long anyway. Poorly designed websites can do untold damage a company, so what do you think it does to the reputation of a design agency responsible for the mess? So don't be shy to ask how long they have been in operation. A solid web design company is one you're going to feel confident to partner with for years to come.

Then you also want to know if the web design company has worked with many different types of businesses. It's important because you want to establish if the design team have what it takes to handle any kind of design challenge. Proven web design competence is based on working knowledge of all the broader aspects of design and programming in the field. Do these guys know how to build a website for a business as unique as yours?

Another good guideline to follow is looking at the portfolio the web design company holds under their belt. Experience certainly has a way of showing itself. Remember when looking at the past work of a web design agency the goal is not to shop around for a design you might like for your own project. There's still time to look at mockups and design templates for this. The idea is to read between the lines and see if the web design team pays attention to detail.

You also have every right to talk to business owners who actually have to run the websites on a daily basis. Sometimes you're just shown an image of a pretty website as part of an impressive portfolio. Does the site actually exist? Can you see a valid URL and visit the site to see it action for yourself?

A common mistake is to let your budget be your sole deciding factor. When it comes to web design there is a clear and obvious difference between the work of a freelancer and the real deal. Someone who has been snapping websites together only recently cannot possibly relied upon when your site breaks or stops functioning. So although you thought it wise to save as much as you can, you'll end up spending more money down the line on repair and maintenance. Most times you would have no choice but to start over building a new website in order to replace the sad excuse for one you had before.

Remember that a website which showcases your business should be regarded as a continual work in progress. Your best bet is therefore to establish an ongoing relationship with a team you can count on. Sincere advice, real life web design experience, and ongoing support, are just a few of the essentials you're going to always need moving forward.

How much can you reasonably afford versus what you should be paying?

There are no hard and fast rules with website pricing, and design companies do not have to comply to any industry determined standard. You could get started with next to nothing or end up paying tens of thousands. This does not include your usual running costs like monthly hosting fees. What is funny though is that you will always seem to get vastly different quotations when enquiring from more than one web design company. Bear in mind we're could be dealing with the exact same project specifications as you require.

What you should be very wary of is that many web design firms depend heavily on providing solutions based on fixed templates. So most of the time they just have a selection from which they choose a design they feel will best suit your business. The problem with ready-made designs like this is they offer you little to no customizability. You may pay less for such solutions but they are obviously not the best way to go for most businesses.

Try to think of a website like you would about your company premises. It's a valuable piece of real estate and one of the greatest assets in your possession. And just like land and property your website increases in worth as time goes on. When your business expands you may need to renovate your property to include a new wing for increased production. In the same manner your website should allow you the same kind of freedom to drive your business in any direction you like.

That's why it's critical to invest in functionality which is flexible enough to be changed when you see fit. Your initial costs of producing the website will most likely be driven by certain functions you need the site to perform. But later on your also want to be able to make upgrades or create add-ons depending on your business needs at the time.

Therefore it makes sense to keep an open about the money that's going into your website. At the same time do not get caught up by trying to make things perfect from day one. And you do not have to try to fit every possible feature into your website. That's the way to

approach web design - keep a realistic perspective on your costs but be sure to get your money's worth. The best design team is the one that will see things in the same way. They will on one hand advise you about the best options available that money can buy. And on the other hand they will be considerate of your budget and your specific website requirements. They will not swindle you out of last buck insisting you take the "full blown with kitchen sink included" option when you don't really need it.

How much of actual control will you have over your website?

This is a valid question and one which you should know the answer way ahead of talking about design even. When your site is up and running you need to be able to make critical updates whenever you need to. This is especially true if you would like your company website to grow over time by the agency of content blogging. This is usually achieved with the aid of software we refer to as a content management system.

As far as your content production goes you basically have two choices: either write it all yourself, or hire someone to do it for you. Whichever you go, you still need to make sure you are using a decent content management system. It not only streamlines the process of uploading new content, it will also afford you the control of editing existing content you already have in place.

It's also the number one reason why more businesses choose to start with a CMS from the very beginning. If your current website is not based on a CMS you will most likely incur heavy costs down the line anyway. So it's really a plus if this your first time venturing into the getting your business online. Something many website design agencies may not tell you is the importance of prioritizing on a CMS that is established and conforms to industry standards.

Don't underestimate the need for a system that is very easy to use as well. Whoever is going to be running your site on the long term should not have to fiddle around in order to get business done the way you want it. So if the CMS you choose is something new to you or your dedicated webmaster, make sure there is ample training and information supplied as part of the deal.

Don't cut corners by skimping on the need of ready support

Remember the right web design company is like your partner in all of this, or at least they should be. Real support you can count on makes all the difference when stepping out online, even for small businesses. Yet you will still find many first time buyers compromise by taking the absolute money saving approach. No doubt support does add up to a continued expense, but it's not impossible to agree on a cost effective solution with the right guys.

You always going to need a helping hand with the diverse functions that are the lifeblood of your website. Several key areas of operation will need constant monitoring and backup to ensure they run reliably. And we're not even talking about what needs doing if things go wrong and your site starts misbehaving.

It's realistic to assume you will need assistance every now and then with your ecommerce system, managing emails, updating your domain name subscriptions, and overseeing your hosting requirements. You may also have to train new site management staff who you bring in at a later stage. It's good to ask these questions when dealing with any web design agency.

Don't ever think support is something you can do without. Going it alone could end up being a nightmare of unforeseen costs when things go bust. A grave misconception is to treat your site like the perfect machine and not allowing for mishaps. If you have the attitude of: "we'll cross the bridges as they come," you may find yourself in a stickier mess than you initially prepared for.

And why should you have to spend a fortune later on when the problem could have been well avoided in the first place? See, the whole point of support is to ensure continued sound maintenance - the primary goal of which is to prevent serious damage to your website without spending additional money.

A frequent problem we encounter is when clients entrust their website to an inexperienced designer who offered very little or nothing in terms of support. What happens is these frustrated folks have to go through the rigmarole of spending an arm and a leg to either fix their website, or pay to get it rebuilt all of over again.

What you must know about hidden costs and ongoing expenses

When you're out window shopping and gathering quotations from web design companies, do not believe everything you see on paper. There is the unfortunate prevalence of companies quoting you only on the basic web design project, but conveniently leaving out information that will directly affect your budget after the site is up.

Also make it a point to fully understand any quotations you read, by clarifying if there are any unmentioned restrictions on your purchase of the website. These could include items you might have assumed but are not really part of the project.

As far as recurring costs go, like support as mentioned earlier, find out if a commitment is required from the very beginning or if you will have to add this on as a separate service. There are also other charges which can quickly catch you unawares like when you forget something and remember you still want the feature built into your site.

Whether you have any larger development ideas planned or not, this will still need to be ironed out before you get the ball rolling. Does the company understand that this can happen, and do they accommodate you with flexibility? Go ahead and ask all the 'what if?' questions that come to mind.

The most important aspect we want to highlight for you is this: Be in control of the project scope start to finish, in between and moving forward. If the delivery of your project matches your expectations consistently, it will also most likely agree to a budget you are satisfied with.