

Important Questions to Ask a Prospective Web Designer

By Debbie Campbell

Hiring a web designer can be an intimidating process for many small business owners. If you don't know the language, how do you know what to ask?

In this article I present some of the most important questions and some guidelines for good answers. If your prospective designer answers these to your satisfaction, that's a good sign that he or she is at least a conscientious professional with a style that matches your own ideas, and that's a very good place to start.

1. In what browsers will my website work?

Different browsers will present your website differently. At a minimum, a designer should test your site in Internet Explorer (6 and 7), Firefox, and Safari (for those Mac users). Opera and Netscape are also fairly common browsers.

2. Where can I see other sites you've built?

The designer should have a portfolio available for viewing online. Review it carefully and make sure that the style matches your desires. Check out the sites themselves – do you see any obvious errors? Do they work properly and are they easy to navigate? Do you like their work? If you don't, they're less likely to come up with something that will please you in the future.

3. How will my site be updated after launch?

The designer should tell you about the ways a site can be built – straight code, content-managed, or somewhere in between. A site built for easy content management will allow you to make edits and add pages without knowing anything about code. The designer should show you some examples of how this works and training should be included in any quote.

4. How will you make my site more accessible to disabled visitors?

The designer should be able to describe what he or she will do to make a site accessible and should have basic knowledge of Section 508 accessibility standards.

5. How will you make my site search engine-friendly?

A good web designer is knowledgeable about SEO and can tell you what he or she will do to improve your site's chances of getting found. They should be able to give you examples of sites they've built that perform well in results.

6. Who owns the rights to the site when you're finished building it?

You should own the rights to the site. And you should be able to pick up and move to another designer with little difficulty and no legal issues.

7. Will you give me all of the site files after launch?

You should get a copy of all files created or used in the development of your site, as well as backups of any databases the designer created.

8. Do you have references I can contact?

This is a must! Find out if the other clients were pleased with the work and the relationship.

9. Do you write clean, valid, table-less code?

If they say yes, this means that they use modern web design techniques and are familiar with the current best practices in the industry. Valid code means code that's been checked for errors. Table-less refers to the use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), which help separate the content of your site from its appearance. Sites that are designed this way are much less expensive and time-intensive to update or change in the future.

10. Will you register domain names for me?

The answer to this should be 'no.' A good designer will tell you how to register your own domain name. There are many horror stories about companies who had someone register names for them, then had to fight a legal battle to get them back.

11. Are you experienced in designing _____ websites?

Does the designer have experience in your industry or in a similar industry? If they don't, it's not necessarily a bad thing because to some extent websites are websites; a good designer will learn about your industry as they work with you. But if they do, you'll want to see those examples in more detail.

12. Will I be working directly with you?

Find out if the designer will pass off your site to another developer or even outsource some or all of the work. If you want a personal working relationship with someone you've met, this could be an issue.

13. Will I be able to see my site while you're building it?

It's easy for the designer to put up a site on a production server so that you can view the work in progress.

14. How much will it cost?

After a full consultation, the designer should be able to provide you with a thorough quote explaining the tasks involved, what the client must provide, and itemized costs.

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