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How To Choose a Web Design & Development Company

by Ivy Hastings

Every successful company knows that a web site is an essential marketing tool. Whether you're in the business of selling widgets, soliciting volunteers, or building your brand awareness, a carefully executed [Internet Marketing](#) plan can reap a tremendous return on your time and investment.

You know your business needs a site, but how do you go about getting one if you don't know the first thing about [web design](#) or [web development](#)?

What about HTML, CSS, PHP, .NET, the "Backend," the "Frontend," and all the other lingo web people use?

With a multitude of web designers and developers out there, from freelancers, to agencies, to online templates, how do you know what the right fit is for your company, and more importantly, for your goals and objectives?

The list of questions and tips below should get you started by asking the right questions. And, the best part is, you won't have to learn what all those crazy acronyms mean.

The *first* thing you need to do is determine your own unique goals and objectives:

- Who is your target audience?
- How will your target audience find your website?
- Will you employ a [search engine optimization \(SEO\)](#) strategy?
- What do you want them to do once they're there?
- How will updates be made to the site?
- What is your timeline?
- What kind of return on investment (ROI) do you expect and how will you measure it?

When searching for a company, here are a few key questions to consider:

- Does the company's portfolio reflect the kind of aesthetic that you are looking for?
- Do they show a range of work from playful to conservative?
- Are the sites within their portfolio easy to use?
- Are there any broken links, bugs, or design issues?
- Does the company work with clients in your industry?
- Have they previously created a site similar to what you want in scope and function?
- For example, if you need an easy [content management system \(CMS\)](#) to update your site with new products, have they implemented something similar for another client?

Once you have narrowed down your list to a couple of companies that seem to be a good fit, contact them with these things in mind:

- Were they responsive to your query, or did it take them four days to return your call?
- Were they friendly and helpful and take time to find out about your company and your needs?
- Beware of companies who lead the discussion with just design considerations.
- How are users going to find your site to begin with and how will the site generate leads or sales?
- Did they speak over your head using lots of jargon in an attempt to upsell you on their products?
- What kinds of guarantees do they offer for their products?
- What kind of support is available?
- Do they have a thorough testing process?
- What are the terms of the contract and who owns the final design, source code, and intellectual property?

Now that you've found a couple of different companies, and have a couple of proposals in hand, you'll want to take some time to compare them carefully and check references. Call several of the company's clients and ask the following questions:

- Did the company meet your goals and objectives?
- Did they follow up after the launch, or disappear once the check was cashed?
- Does the site function properly?
- Does it provide a [user-friendly](#) experience?
- Are you happy with the design?
- What does your target audience think of the design and functionality?
- Did you get the return on investment that you were expecting?

By taking the time to ask the right questions and checking references, you should end up with a company who not only meets your goals, but exceeds them, and becomes a trusted marketing consultant.

Ivy Hastings is a Project Manager at [Fusionbox, a Denver web design and development firm](#). A graduate of UC Berkeley, Ivy has published many articles about Internet Marketing. She currently sits on the Board of Directors for Arts Street, a local non-profit that teaches at-risk youth the craft and business of the Arts.