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## Web Design Buyer's Guide: Tips to Improve Your Website

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### The Web Design Process

#### Step 1: Dreaming

Before you contact any Web Designers, you first need to put together your own thoughts on what you want your site to do and how you want it to look. This doesn't need to be a formal process; that's why I call it Dreaming. Instead, I recommend making a list of features (e.g. catalog, shopping cart, updateable content, portfolio of work, articles, contact us form, tell-a-friend form, etc.) and a list of content (e.g. news, Blogs, product/service descriptions, about us, legal disclaimers, etc.). Then brainstorm a few words that characterize the site you want built (e.g. professional, catchy, trendy, fun, colorful, elegant, etc.).

You should also make a list of domain names in this step, if you don't already have one. If your Web site is for an existing business, the domain name should be as close to your business name as possible. If you're creating a new Web-based business, the domain name should be easy to remember and easy to type. Do a domain name search to find a name. There's only one limitation on choosing your name: someone else can't own it. This is a big limitation and can result in a lot of effort and frustration.

Once you have your lists of features, content and adjectives, you're ready to consult a professional. It's important to do your dreaming first before speaking with a Web Designer. By having your own thoughts written down, you will have a handy reference that you can use to jog your memory during the design phase. This can save you time and money, while ensuring that your dreams end up on your Web site.



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## Step 2: Quoting

You may be thinking, “I have Front Page. I can do this myself.” Or, “My nephew built our family site. I’ll get him to build mine.” I strongly urge against succumbing to these thoughts of finding the cheapest alternative for building your Web site. Unless your nephew is gifted (or a professional Web Designer), you risk having a site that looks unprofessional and amateur. This is certainly not the image you want conveyed to your potential customers or users. In fact, many believe that having a poor Web site is worse than not having a Web site at all. Sending no message has no chance of tarnishing your image; however, sending the wrong message can have a horrible effect on your business.

The prices you receive for the quotes may vary considerably. Remember the old adage, “You get what you pay for.” Keep this in mind when reviewing the quotes. The cheapest quote may not be the best choice. While reviewing the quotes and selecting your vendor, here are some important questions to ask yourself:

- Do I like the sample sites in this vendor’s portfolio?
- Can this vendor demonstrate the features that I’m asking for?
- Can this vendor provide references?
- Was the vendor’s response(s) timely and accurate?
- Do I like interacting with them?
- Are they familiar with my industry?
- Even with only a handful of qualified vendors, the selection process can still be challenging. If you would like to learn more about this process, read our article on [“Choosing a Web Designer.”](#)

## Step 3: Designing

Once you have selected your new Web Design firm, you’re ready to work with them to create the design of your new site. The first step is to clearly define what features and functions your site will contain, including the pages and navigation. It’s important to clearly define this upfront so the developers spend less time, and therefore less of your money, making changes down the road.

The second step in the process is to develop the graphics for your site, which also entails choosing a color palate. Your Web Design firm can help you pick colors and images that are compatible with popular browsers. The important thing to remember here is that this is your site. You have the first and last say on how it looks. You may need to compromise a bit to work within browser limitations, but the end product should be something that reflects you and the purpose of your Web site.

## Step 4: Building

Now that the design is complete, you’re ready to start building! This can be the most anxious part of the project.



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You've written the check for the down payment, spent hours on design and now you've sent a developer or developers off into the abyss to create your masterpiece. The wait can be excruciating. Many firms now have much of their software in reusable formats, allowing them to easily and quickly snap together the features your site requires. This greatly reduces the development cycle and brings your site to the Web much faster. Once the site is built, you're ready to launch.



## Step 5: Launching

Launching a Web site is much more than just copying the files to the Internet. While that is the first step, the remaining ones will take much longer and require due diligence on your part. You should begin by ensuring that all the pages and functionality that you paid for has been built. If the developers missed anything, now is the time to get it fixed. Many sites are updateable or content managed via a browser. If this is the case with your site, you may need to add content. For e-Commerce sites, you will need to have a

Merchant Account and a Payment Processor Account. Your Web Design firm can help you with both of these. Once your online payments are working, you should run several test transactions and at least one live transaction before allowing customers to use the site. A live transaction will require you to use a valid credit card. You can then follow the money, so to speak, all the way to your bank account. This is the most important step when launching an e-Commerce site. If the money doesn't flow, the site doesn't go...

After all the content has been added and the Web site has been tested to ensure proper functionality, you're ready to go live. If you're building a new Web site, your domain is probably already functioning. In other words, when you type your domain name in a browser, your Web site is displayed. However, if you're re-building a site that is live, you will need to re-point the DNS's (Domain Name Servers) before users will see your new site.



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Once again, your Web Design firm can help you with this.

### **Step 6: Advertising**

You wouldn't launch a new business in the real world without advertising; the same is true for the virtual world. While organic positioning in search engines is a great way to get free advertising and visitors to your Web site, this takes time. Organic positioning refers to your placement in search results on sites such as Google, Yahoo!

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and MSN. Good organic positioning occurs when your Web site appears on the first page of search results. This can take months or even years to accomplish. Until time passes and your placement improves, you'll need to pay for advertising if you want visitors to find your Web site.

The two most common forms of Internet advertising are Pay-Per-Click and Banner Ads. Pay-Per-Click advertising allows you to purchase ad space for your Web site that is placed throughout the Internet. Think of these ads as moving billboards that are displayed when the relevance is most appropriate. For instance, if a user is searching Google for "fine jewelry", you can pay to have ads for your fine jewelry store appear on the page of search results. This is an extremely effective and moderately inexpensive way of getting traffic to a new Web site.

Banner Ads on popular sites can also be an effective way of driving traffic to your site. Your Web Design firm can most likely create banner ads for you, which you can then pay to have placed on sites that are relevant to your site. For instance, you may contact About.com to place ads for your printing Web site in sections pertaining to business services or even printing services. This method can be costly, however, since sites with a lot of daily visitors charge a premium for ad space.

It's also important to mention traditional advertising here. While Internet advertising probably offers the most bang for your buck, traditional print and broadcast advertising can also be very effective. By providing your Web site domain on printed media and in radio or television ads, you can drive a large volume of traffic to your Web site. You may not have the budget for television, billboards or even postcards now, but you should at least keep these forms of advertising in mind. Using both online and offline advertising can be the ticket to a successful Web site.

Now that you know what to expect and how to build your Web site, it's time to get started! You should first spend some time dreaming and making notes. Then once you've finished writing down your ideas, you're ready to request quotes.

## **II. 5 Steps For Writing For The Web**



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The web is a terrific way to reach your audience. But it's important to remember that this new medium requires a specific style. Unlike a brochure, magazine, flyer or newspaper, the audience has a different expectation.

Below we offer some easy to steps to ensure your website is communicating with both clarity and creativity.

### **First step: Realize the importance of being brief.**

Be brief. Reading text on a monitor strains your eyes and can be unpleasant. The user tires easily. This is why we can't treat web copy like other mediums. For example, on the web, the user knows with a quick click they can find what they're looking for on another website. By quickly stating your point and providing convenient links to more detailed information, your user stays with you.

**Lesson:** When your point is buried, no one bothers to dig. Be brief and provide easy-to-find links for more information.

### **Second step: Realize your audience.**

Speak in the same vocabulary as your target audience. If you're a financial site targeting private investors, do not use words, terms, acronyms that only an economic expert would understand.

**Lesson:** Talk to your audience in a way that does not insult them with simplicity or offend them with complexity.

### **Third step: Realize the difference between the messenger and the message.**

When a prospective customer views your web site, they're bombarded with information. A web site's messenger can be advertising or banner ads. The web site itself includes graphics and Flash animation. The web copy, the format, the punctuation, the content, the style, the words are your messages. Sometimes with all those messengers, the messages get lost. Well-written, poorly placed words are ineffective. But so is graphically enhanced copy with grammatical errors.

**Lesson:** Make sure the message rings through. Both the messenger and the message are



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important.

**Fourth Step: Realize the role of format.**

The way we arrange the words is vital to their effectiveness. Good tactics: Subheads, bullets, headlines, clear icons, definitions, lists, graphs, two sentence paragraphs, semi-colons, colons, bold, italics. Each of these creates chunks of information and allows the user to locate their target quickly and easily.

**Lesson:** Use the right format to make your message readable and understandable.

**Fifth Step: Realize how to be exciting and brief.**

The web is not a passive medium, but an active one. In fact, it's an interactive one. As a website, we're looking for both a reaction and a reply from our user. To engage them, web writing requires a direct device.

Converse with the user. Rather than "I sell pens," try "Can you imagine life without pens?" This direct device also demonstrates the benefit of pens, rather than simply stating you have some for sale.

**Lesson:** Use a direct, conversational writing style to begin and maintain a connection with your user. Offer the benefit, not just the product.

*Source: "Effective Web Writing" by Crawford Kilian. Also special thanks to Andrea Enright for editing and compiling.*



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### III. Creating Links And Copy For Your Website

Thinking outside the box can help your website blossom, creating a certain “uniqueness” to your website. To be safe and traditional, follow the instructions below to a tee and you will have a “classic” website setup just like most other people. At the same time, a little ingenuity and [creative thought will boost your site](#). Most companies that excel on the internet are not afraid to use a little ingenuity, simplicity and to be creative.

#### **Welcome Page/Home Page**

This page should have a nice design to grab the customer setup also simple starting navigation for the website (main links) Here are a few issues to consider:

1. How will the website help the customer?
2. Will this opening page save time or make things more complex?
3. Keep the main categories of the site simple, make an overhead.
4. Define purposes of other pages on the website, this helps in making the main link definitions.
5. If the opening page will be changing looks on a regular basis try and make it as simple as possible.

Maximum text length: 4 to 6 paragraphs.



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## About Us

This page should define who you are and the purpose of the website . This page can also be used to define key personnel within the company. The “About Us” page is often over estimated for some companies and is made a primary link instead of a secondary link. (example - If you are buying a new shirt, does the salesperson really have to tell you the history of the store?)

1. You can have pictures and text about key employees.
2. This page allows you to go into detail about the company, what do does the company owner deem necessary on this page.
3. This can also be used to explain to the customer the purpose of the site. Why did you make the website and what are the key components of the site.
4. Remember one thing, a lot of fraud and other dubious business goes around the internet, reassuring people that this is a real company may sometime be a good thing. If people know that there are workers and a company behind a site that will help them later on if any problems arise is often a big trust helper.

Minimum text length: 2 paragraphs. Maximum text length : 8 paragraphs.

## Testimonials

This page on your website is used to win over the users trust and confidence. This can be extremely effective when a potential customer is making a final decision between your company and a competitor. To be effective:

1. If your company does not have a testimonial or references, we recommend that you contact some regular or “good” customers. Ask if they would mind providing a statement about your product or services. Be sure to tell them what it is to be used for..
2. The testimonial is more effective if the person writes their name, status and name of company they works for. It is not likely that someone will contact them for verification of the testimonial. People generally assume they are valid testimonials if they are posted on a website. If not possible to add contact information about the person giving the testimonial, it is not a big issue It is better to have a nameless testimonial than none.

Minimum text length: 1 paragraph or 3 testimonials. Maximum text length: 2 paragraphs or 5 testimonials.

## F.A.Q. (Frequently Asked Questions)

This page on your website provides answers to the Most commonly asked questions your customers ask, or a chance to provide information in a question and answer form. Consider



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the following when preparing your list:

1. Ask your employees to write down the most common questions they get asked.
  2. Use information available to provide general information in a question and answer format.
  3. List questions and answers in order of importance, listing most frequently asked first.
- Minimum text length: As needed. Maximum text length: As needed

### Resources or Recommended Sites

This website page can be used to direct your customer to other sites of interest. Be careful not to refer viewers to a site that then refers them to a competitor. We do not recommend this for a lot of companies, but institutions or other similar sites may have use of a page like this.

1. Find other websites that support your company and website, without being a potential competitor. This can be additional services compatible with your product. (example: if you sell plumbing equipment you may want to link to a website of a contractor using your equipment)
2. The advantage of this type of web page is its ability to increase your SEO (Search Engine Optimization) ranking. The more links you have to your website, as well as the number of websites linked to your page, the higher your ranking with various search engines. Minimum links: 2

### Products, Services, Shop Page

This page provides information relating to what products or services the website is promoting, selling or introducing to the user visiting the website.. Make it simple, start with a large category and then move down. Most modules will assist you in this process. Items to keep in mind are:

1. Use pictures or photos when possible. Pictures sell products; they give life to the website. The modules will help in displaying the products in a professional manner. We recommend you consult a professional website designer to ensure your website attracts the most visits.

Author: Gudmundur Sigurdarson <http://www.designeuropa.com>

## IV. Choosing A Web Designer.

Choosing a Web Design firm is, in a way, like choosing a business partner. You will be spending hours conversing, planning, designing, training, etc., especially during the construction phase, but also over time as you maintain and add functionality to the site.



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You are signing on to a long-term relationship, so make sure you get along and that the Web Design firm is worthy of your commitment.

### **Are they qualified?**

The most important part of the selection process is determining if the firm is qualified to do the work you need done. When making this determination, you need to understand the difference between Design and Building. The design is the look and feel of the site, such as the colors, graphics, layout, etc. Building the site, on the other hand, can range from basic HTML to a high-end database driven application.

If the firm or [graphic designer](#) only specializes in the design aspect, and they employ the services of a

development firm to write the backend code, you will need to review and evaluate the development firm as well. It's important that you approve both the design firm and the development firm since you will be working with both of them.

### **What additional services do they offer?**

Many Web Design firms now offer [Web Hosting](#) as part of the Web site package. If this is the case, you should also interview the Web host to ensure they meet your qualification criteria as well.

If the firm offers maintenance packages, it might be a good investment for you. Many maintenance packages allow you to purchase a fixed number of hours at a reduced rate. Often, clients with maintenance packages are bumped up in the priority queue as well. Many firms also offer marketing services. These services usually include optimizing your Web site's content for search engine placement, submitting your site to [search engines](#), setting up and maintaining [Pay-Per-Click advertising](#), etc. If you want your site to receive traffic, you should consider employing these services. If the design firm you choose does not provide marketing services, they will often be able to refer you to companies that specialize in it.

### **What technologies do they use?**

Some popular Web development technologies are [.Net, Java, ColdFusion, PHP, ASP, JSP, etc.](#) The platform of choice for a Web Design firm is really dependent upon the level of familiarity. Every firm will have a pitch about why the platform they use is better than the rest, but the fact is that it really doesn't matter.

### **Do you like the Web sites in their portfolio?**

The Web sites a design firm has built are a good gauge of the work that they do. If you don't like the sites in their portfolio, chances are you won't like the site they build for you. If they don't have a portfolio, or at least a list of work that you can review, I suggest



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moving on to the next candidate.

When reviewing their portfolio, here are some important questions to keep in mind:

1. Do you like the sites in their portfolio?
2. Do you like the graphics?
3. Do the pages load quickly?
4. Are the sites easy to navigate?
5. Do they have sites in your industry?

### Calling References

Now that you've narrowed down your choices, it's time to ask for references and to make the calls. Each firm should provide at least 3 references for clients they have done work for during the past 6 months. You should first review their Web sites before calling them so you will have a good idea of their business and the things you like and dislike about their sites.

Here are some questions to ask during your conversation:

1. How would you characterize the level of service?
2. What is the overall reliability of site?
3. How long did it take to deliver the site once the design was complete?
4. Do you feel like you got a good value for the cost?
5. What specifically did you like about the Web Design firm?
6. What didn't you like?
7. Would you recommend them?

It's also important to weigh the type of quote you receive. There are 2 basic types of quotes: Time and Materials and Fixed Price. Time and Materials quotes will provide you with hourly rates for design and development and usually include a range of expected costs. Some even include a not-to-exceed price. The downside of this type of quote is that you don't know upfront exactly how much you will be paying.

This is where the value of Fixed Price quotes becomes apparent. In a Fixed Price quote, you agree to pay a fixed amount for the project. If you don't change your mind or alter the development after it begins, you are guaranteed not to pay more than the quoted amount. If you do make changes to the project during development, most companies will provide a separate Fixed Price quote for the additional work. The Fixed Price quote will usually be a bit higher than the ballpark estimate provided on Time and Materials quotes; however, it is a safe bet that the Fixed Price quote is more accurate. Companies that offer Time and Materials quotes often undercut the ballpark estimate to get the business. Once they have your down payment, you're at their mercy.

It's common for Web Design firms to require 30% to 50% for a down payment. This is to ensure that you are serious about the project and have the money to pay for it. Before you



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write the check, though, make sure you have both agreed on what will be delivered and the date you expect it to be finished.

If you are cash flow challenged, you may want to ask about payment plans. Many firms will allow you to pay a monthly percentage of the project cost, sometimes for an additional fee.



## **V. Top 10 Web Design Mistakes**

As a webmaster, you want to keep your visitors content so they'll come back again. Below you will find ten common mistakes made by webmasters that may deter people from returning.

### **1) Poor Color Choice**

There's one important thing to keep in mind when designing your web site, and that is always keep it simple. More is not necessarily better. Your web site should contain no more than three colors. Also remember that your body text should be a contrasting color from your background. There's nothing worse than trying to read yellow text on a pink background. It may look cool to you, but cause your visitors to go cross-eyed.



## **2) Confusing Navigation**

If your visitors cannot find their way around your web site, they'll leave...plain and simple. Your navigation should be logical and consistent on every page. Studies have also shown that web surfers prefer the standard left or right side navigation over other layouts.

## **3) Inconsistent Font Face and Size**

Just like your navigation, you'll want your font style and size to be consistent. If your home page text is in Arial font, size 10, make sure the rest of your pages adhere to the same font style and size. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, and you may need to use a smaller font for disclaimers, terms and conditions, etc. However, in most cases, you should use the same style on every page.

## **4) Long Paragraphs**

This is a common mistake made by many webmasters.

To make your web pages easy to read, remember to break up your paragraphs often and use subtitles. Most people will skim when trying to find what they're looking for so when your paragraphs are small and separated by logical headings, it will make it much easier on your visitor's eyes.

## **5) Misplaced or Lack of Contact Info**

Don't make people search for contact information...especially if you're selling goods and services. Always have your contact information visible on every page of your web site. Hidden contact information looks fishy and makes people leery of doing business with you.

## **6) Long Page Loads**

If your web site does not fully load within 10 seconds, your HTML files are too large. Check your graphics. Are you using too many? Do they need to be resized? Make sure your multi-color graphics (photos) are saved in JPEG format and use GIF files for solid colors and poster art. Also remember to use table height and width tags in your HTML code because your text will load before the images. Animated graphics also slow the page loading time tremendously.

## **7) No Meta Tag Info**

Meta tags are HTML code invisible to the human eye but read by many of the search engines. While these don't have as much of an impact as they used to, many search engines still rely on this information when displaying your site in the search results.



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## 8) Use of Frames

Frames can become somewhat of a burden. Many search engines do not list pages with frames, they don't allow visitors to bookmark certain pages, and they can cause printing problems.

## 9) Scrolling Text

The marquee tag is a cool feature, but many overuse it. Although the idea of scrolling text may seem appealing, remember that not everyone will find this idea entertaining. If you do decide to use it, make sure you clearly evaluate whether or not it is adding value or enhancing your page. There are some instances where this feature works, but there are many where it doesn't. Use it very sparingly.

If you have a sentence or two that you feel is very important to your readers, don't make them wait eons for the message to scroll across your screen -- just use plain text and save the scrolling text for the less significant messages or perhaps sub-titles.

## 10) Wrong Resolution

The average web surfer surfs with their PC screen set to an 800 x 600 resolution. If you create your web pages to fit a 1024 x 768 resolution or higher, keep in mind many people will have to scroll left and right to see your entire page. I don't know about you, but I find that quite annoying.

If you want your web page to be displayed correctly in all resolutions, create your web pages with tables and use percentages to define your table widths instead of actual pixel values. For example, if the table width is set to 100% instead of "800" then it will take up 100% of the screen no matter what the PC resolution is set to.

## About The Author

*Lisa Irby is the author of 2 Create a Web Site -- a site that encourages you to plan accordingly and GET THE FACTS before diving into the web site creation process.*

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