

What to ask your prospective web designers/ developers

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by Port 80 Inc.

the Web Industry Association of Western Australia.

www.port80.asn.au

An information booklet designed to improve your understanding of Website
Design and Development.

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With your help, clients entering into contracts with members of the web industry will have a much clearer and fairer system of 'rating potential suppliers'.

Credits

Thanks to the following folk who helped make this document you see before you.

This document was written by:

Megyn Carpenter (megyn@ozemail.com.au)

Miles Burke (miles@bam.com.au)

Kay Smoljak (kay@perthweb.com.au)

Contributions to this document by:

Myles Eftos (myles@madpilotproductions.com)

Alexandra Graham (alexandra@cadmium.com.au)

Drew Turney (drew@psipublishinganddesign.com)

This document was designed by:

Sean Steffanoni (sean@eggdesign.com.au)

For more information, we suggest you visit the following websites:

port80

<http://www.port80.asn.au>

web standards group

<http://www.webstandardsgroup.org>

w3c

<http://www.w3.org>

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Introduction

The web industry runs an entire gamut of micro-industries: freelance designers, freelance developers and web companies with different amounts of skill sets and niche or target client bases. How do you sort through the proposals and slick presentations to make a good decision on who you should use for your next web project?

We have no easy answer, however asking the following set of questions should make you clearer on where the particular person or firm has its strengths and weaknesses.

This document is always evolving - to ensure you have the latest version, please check the Port 80 website at <http://www.port80.asn.au> - Port 80 is the incorporated association representing the Western Australian web industry.

Company Questions

1. What experience does your company have in designing/developing websites?
How many years have you been involved in website construction?

Generally, companies that have been developing websites for longer than others should know more, and have skills more advanced than those who have been around for less. This is not always true however, so you shouldn't make decisions purely based on the answer to this question.

2. Are you a member of any associations or business networks?
If so, which ones?

If they're a member of different business or industry groups, this shows that they have an inherent understanding of their industry, and often you'll find they have particular passions in what they do if they are keen enough to join associations or groups on the subject.

3. How many staff do you have? What are their roles?

Some firms will have one designer and one developer, and many sales people, whilst others may have the reverse. It really is a judgement call for you on who has the better skill set and personality mix.

4. Do you have any other clients I can talk to about your work? Do you have other websites in your portfolio I could view?

You'll get an idea of the style and quality of the company's work by viewing other websites they've designed.

5. What other services do you offer?

Other services could include search engine optimisation, content writing, printing, marketing and promotion.

Agreement Questions

6. Do I need to sign a contract or just agree to the proposal?

There is no correct answer for this question, however many people feel much safer having a contract between client and supplier which states clearly what the terms and results will be prior to starting work on the project.

7. Do you require an up-front deposit? What are your payment terms?

There is no correct answer for this question, and is only included so you ensure this is covered in your discussion.

8. What is your company's policy on non-disclosure and privacy of my information?

Ideally, if your content and/or processes or other business intelligence is sensitive, you should require your supplier to sign a Non Disclosure Agreement (NDA). Many suppliers will already have sample NDA's to use.

Project Management Questions

9. How much information do you need to provide a Proposal/Quote?
10. What information do you need from me to define my website Project Scope?
11. What are your average timelines for similar sized projects to this one?
Are you able to provide me with a project timeline, showing deliverables and their dates?
What are the various phases of website development?

This should give you a fairly clear idea if the designer/developer has time tracking and project management systems in place.

12. Who will I contact about my website project? Will you allocate a project manager for my website development or will I be talking directly to the designer and developer?

A Project Manager should be assigned to medium to large web projects. If you are dealing with a small web company, the Project Manager may also be the Designer and/or Developer.

13. Do you outsource components of the project to third parties, and if so, which components?

Outsourcing is a valid business decision and by outsourcing, a company can keep its overheads lower. It is wise however to be cautious of a company who takes your Project Scope, out-sources the whole job to someone else, and takes a large cut.

Content Questions

14. Can you help with content writing? Do you have photos or images I can use in my website? How much do you charge?

Content is an important aspect of your website. Most companies will provide help with content but be aware of the costs up front.

15. At what stage do you need my final content?

Content writing is time-consuming. Web companies need to have access to your content before completing your website.

Design Questions

16. What qualifications and experience do your designers and developers have?

This will give you a general idea about the skill set at the web company. Having a tertiary qualification is good. Having a lot of experience is better, combining experience with a tertiary education is best.

17. Do your staff have specialist roles, or will the same person be designing and coding my site?

Sometimes a team may be dedicated to your project, sometimes a single staff member – both are suitable options, this just helps you understand how the project will be handled at the web company.

18. In what format do you require my logo, artwork or images?

By providing the best quality artwork, your website will look its best.

19. Will you provide draft designs to choose from and approve a design?

A Web Designer may provide one or more design drafts of your Home Page and other pages. This will depend on your requirements and if you have a good indication of design or are looking for ideas.

20. What are our website maintenance options? Can we update it ourselves?

If you have frequent or large updates to your website, you could consider a Content Management System. A CMS is only really useful in the event of regular changes and if a staff member has good training in it. If neither are the case, it may just be cheaper to get the supplier to manage small updates.

Development Questions

21. Do your developers comment your source code?

Commenting code is part of good website development. If code is commented well, it means should the unthinkable happen and you have to find another supplier either part way through this project or its maintenance, you are not going to be spending a lot of time and money for the second supplier to learn the code written by the first.

22. Which web browsers do you develop for?

You want your website to be accessible to a wide audience, no matter which web browser they are using. The browser industry is one of constant change, but most major and current browsers should nonetheless be catered for, as some websites are not easily viewable in older web browsers.

23. What programming languages and operating systems do you work with?

Ideally, your web development company should program for more than a single major language and operating system. If they speak of preferences, that's fine - just ensure they prefer a language or environment supported by many others in the industry, to give you more flexibility and ensure maximum people have access to your website.

24. What is your preference - open source or proprietary hosting platforms?
Do you encourage your clients to decide for themselves?

Some developers will say one or the other, and others will say many. This is a concern if you have a particular need which they can't fill, however if your web project is fairly open, then typically as long as their suggestion is industry supported, then you'll be fine.

Development Questions (continued)

25. Do you build websites to standards? If so, what standards do you develop to?

Standards compliance, such as W3C (www.w3c.org) and Web Standards Group (www.webstandardsgroup.org) is worthwhile. There are a multitude of reasons, but the best ones tend to be about how visitors to your website are viewing your site - do they allow for Mac with Safari, PC with Firefox, etc? You can't just assume everybody is using a similar setup to you or your developers.

26. What are your thoughts on usability and accessibility and would you incorporate techniques to improve my website's usability and accessibility? Are you aware of any legislation or proposed legislation in the areas I am targeting with my website on accessibility or other similar issues?

Usability is the art and science of ensuring a client knows where they are, and are able to find where they want to be fairly easily, through use of given assumptions that people learn to expect from websites (such as navigation menu naming, sitemap, etc). Accessibility is for those who are impaired in some way - sight, motor control, etc – are they a part of your websites audience (most likely they will be, even if you don't think so), and if so, will your website be developed to cater for their needs so they can easily access the information on your website?

Website Testing Questions

27. What is covered in your testing/quality checking phase?

This will give you a clearer idea what is and isn't covered in this area. Basic testing requirements should be browser testing, general spell checking, checking for broken links and general usability tests to ensure the website is easy for website visitors to use and interact with.

Launching Questions

28. Do you offer search engine optimisation services?

Search engine optimisation is achieved by a number of techniques including rewording your content. It is important to ensure your website is found higher in the search engine rankings.

29. Am I able to see the website while it is still in development?

By seeing a development version, you will be able to check the website before the launch date and make any adjustments.

30. Do you allow clients to host their websites with any host?

Sometimes – for the sake of functionality or other good reasons, a web company may ask that you host your website with them, but this is not always the case. You may have existing commercial relationships with an ISP or web hosting company that you would prefer to use.

31. Do you provide any documentation when the website is launched?

If your website project includes customised systems or software, some form of documentation which allows a third party to understand the code base makes good sense.

32. What do you suggest we do to be listed on search engines? Is this included in your quote, or is there extra charges?

Search Engine optimisation is a science in itself; getting different perspectives of what others suggest will help determine what you feel is important to do in this area.

Maintenance Questions

33. How do you charge for website updates after the initial website is completed?

Be aware of the charging structure for updates to your website. Consider how often you will require updates to your website.

34. What if I find a problem or code bug after the site is finished? Do you have any kind of code warranty or guarantee?

Often web companies will make the change if it is small for no additional costs, however be aware that if it is a change and not a bugfix, you may be required to pay extra.

Website Ownership Questions

- 35.** Does the website in its entirety become mine once I have paid, and does Copyright get assigned to me when the project is complete? What about images in the website?

Copyright law is a tangled one. Ideally, you should own the copyright on all of the work developed which you paid for when building this project. It is advisable to check with the supplier first however.

- 36.** Will you provide me with details of any licenses for software or hardware that are purchased as part of my project? Am I the licensee in these agreements?

If commercial software or hardware was purchased to help run your website, it is advisable to ensure that the license is in your name, and not the web companies. If it is not, explore the reasons behind it, and ensure the reasons are valid and justified in your mind.

Glossary

Accessibility

Addresses the issue of creating websites that are accessible to all users, regardless of physical ability or the way in which they are using the internet.

Bugfix

A change to a program or system intended to permanently cure a code bug.

Code Bug

An error in a program or system.

Content Management System (CMS)

A browser based system that allows somebody with little or no knowledge of developing websites to update content in real-time.

Firefox

A type of web browser for accessing web pages.

ISP

Internet Service Provider; A company that provides access to the internet.

Mac

Type of computer, often referred to as Apple Mac.

Navigation menu

The means with which people move around a website, often made up of buttons or a list.

Open Source

Software where the source code is available for anyone to extend or modify.

PC

Personal computer, the most common platform used to access the internet.

Safari

A web browser for the Mac platform.

Search engine optimisation

A general term used to describe specific techniques that can be used on websites in order to rank favorably with a search engine.

Glossary

Sitemap

A textual or graphical representation of the structure of a website.

Standards compliance

Technologies which have been carefully designed to deliver the greatest benefits to the greatest number of web users while ensuring the long-term viability of any document published on the Web.

Usability

The capability of a web site to be used by everyone.

W3C

World Wide Web Consortium. The World Wide Web Consortium was created in October 1994 to lead the World Wide Web to its full potential by developing common protocols that promote its evolution and ensure its interoperability.

Web browser

A piece of software used to access the internet, e.g. Internet Explorer, Mozilla, Firefox, Opera or Safari.

Web host

A company that provides server space to store website files.

Web Standards Group

A group of web designers and developers who are interested in web standards and best practices.