

10 Questions to Ask a Web Design Company Before You Sign.

1) What budgets do you typically work with?

Many small to medium sized businesses do not like to give away their budgets. This is understandable. However to make the guessing game a bit easier for everyone, why not reverse the process and instead ask the web company what budgets they typically work with. This information will quickly tell you two things: (1) If you can afford them and (2) if you fall within their typical budget scope. If you are nowhere near their budget range, then chances are they won't be dedicating very much time to you.

2) Are the websites you develop cross-browser compatible?

(They should say Yes.)

Cross-browser compatibility refers to the ability for your website to display correctly on all browsers including both Mac and PC. Your website should look and function the same across multiple browsers such as Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Apple's Safari, Opera, and Google's Chrome.

You can verify this yourself by opening some of the companies previously designed websites in different computers and browsers. Make sure the layout of the site is not broken and looks similar in each browser.

3) Are the websites you develop using W3C validated standard-compliant code?

(They should say Yes.)

This is another very important question that will separate the men from the boys. Long ago the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) created a standards-based guideline for coding web sites in order to get web development on track. Complying with web standards gives your web pages greater loading speed, greater visibility in web searches (Google), increased accessibility to visually impaired individuals, and guaranteed long-term stability and compatibility with future web technologies. It is very important to ask any web company whether their web sites are W3C Validated.

If you want to test this out yourself, grab one of their latest websites and run it through the following online test: <http://validator.w3.org/>. The code should validate for some form of XHTML or HTML5.

Every now and then you may stumble upon a site with a few errors, this is sometimes excusable if the site is cross-browser compatible anyway or if a web developer is trying out new technologies. Anything more than a few though and you are asking for trouble.

4) Do your websites use table-based layouts?

(They should definitely say No and say that they code with XHTML/CSS instead.)

The quickest way to tell if the web developer you are speaking to is using outdated code is to ask them if they use “tables”. Tables are a very outdated way of creating websites. They are slow loading, hard to modify, do not validate with the W3C, and prove troublesome for blind users using screen readers.

If you want to check for tables, view the source code on their website. If you see a bunch of <td>, <table>, or <tr> tags all over the code, then that means your web developer has not evolved in the past 5 years.

5) Are your websites hand-coded or do you use WYSIWIG* editors? (*Pronounced “whiz-ee-whig”- stands for “What You See Is What You Get”)

(They should say they code from scratch and do not use WYSIWIG editors.)

It is important that a developer writes his own code in order to maximize the speed and visibility of the website. If a web developer is relying on WYSIWIG Editors, then they are not as experienced as you may think. Using a WYSIWIG editor means that the web company is not coding themselves and is instead relying on 3rd party programs to do it for them. This is bad for many reasons: (1) It produces bloated code that is outdated and slows down your website; (2) Every time modifications are made the code gets even more bloated; (3) By using WISYWIG, the developer is limited in how much of the design can be altered because they have to work within the constraints of the program. These companies generally cannot code and rely on the ‘WYSIWIG mode’ of programs such as Dreamweaver. Dreamweaver is not bad at all in itself, but using it the ‘WYSIWYG mode’ is a sure way to develop a poor website.

6) Will you be using pre-made templates on my website?

(They should say No or at least notify you if they are.)

You'd be surprised to find out how many web companies use pre-made templates without telling their clients. This saves them time and money by conforming your business's unique needs into a pre-packaged cookie cutter layout. There are online stores (such as Themeforest.com) where web companies can purchase premade templates for \$25 only to slightly modify them and resell them to you for thousands of dollars. This is completely unethical if not notified upfront about it. There are even instances where website companies are using templates on their own website. Why would you want your custom website developed by someone who didn't even develop theirs?

That's not to say all templates are bad. If you are on a very limited budget, they can be a great way to get something up quickly. Just remember that by going with a template, your business's goals may not be properly marketed and worst of all, your site may end up looking just like someone else's.

7) Do you conduct usability testing on your websites?

(They should probably say Yes, but it's okay if they don't.)

While usability testing is not a requirement and often adds to a project's budget, it is important that a web development company be familiar with it. The testing methods can vary but generally they will involve having a target user sit down at a computer while being recorded as they navigate the web site. Recordings will include the individual's video and audio, as well as the entire screen and mouse clicks. During the sessions, the individual will be asked a series of questions about what they are thinking in regards to the website's purpose and value. The user will also be given tasks to see if they can complete them. These studies and videos save time and money by highlighting any problems visitors may be having early in the development cycle.

8) Will you be using Flash on my website?

(They should probably say No, but there are exceptions.)

Flash is a web technology that allows developers to create interactive websites with sound and animation. While these websites are fun to play with, they are generally not the best solution for business looking to be found on the web. Search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing cannot properly index Flash content as well as HTML content. They also take time to load. Making your users wait for content to load is a sure way to frustrate them. They also generally cost more, take longer to develop, and cannot be as easily updated as an HTML website. And finally because many mobile devices do not support Flash, your website will not be viewable on the iPad, iPhone, iPod Touch or Android phones.

The good news is that other technologies have advanced in terms of animation; web developers are now able to include basic animations without having to rely on Flash.

9) Which Content Management System do you use and can I try it out?

(They may have their own system that was developed in house or a 3rd party system such as 'WordPress, 'Expression Engine, 'Joomla,' or 'Drupal'.)

A content management system is a back-end administrative system that attaches to your website so you can easily add, edit, or delete any of your content or images.

There are many 3rd party CMS systems available that are used for websites. Each has strengths and weakness. Some can be very straight forward, but others can be very confusing with too many options. There are also in-house developed systems that can vary greatly in terms of quality. Some can be amazing and incredibly easy to use while others can be an outdated disaster. This will be dependent on the quality of the developer.

The important thing to remember is to find out which CMS the company uses and whether you can test it for yourself. Most companies should have a demo online that you can access. This will give you a good idea of how easy or difficult it will be to update your future website.

10) Can I see some of your latest website designs?

Only after all of the above questions have been appropriately addressed can you move on to critiquing a company's design portfolio. If they have failed miserably on answering the above questions, then you probably shouldn't even be looking at their designs.

With that said, it is very important to make a decision based on the company's previous work. After all, these are the people who will be designing your company's image on the web. If the company's past five websites are ugly, there's a good chance yours will be too. It is up to you to decide which company will best market your businesses' objectives and unique personality.