

The Trends Trap

An article on a difference between “Web Designer” and “Web Developer” in the fabulous [Website Magazine](#) today got me thinking about the many ways this industry scams the public. Wanna know how to avoid the pitfall of getting charged double for fancy words?

Every industry depends on pushing new trends and creating hypes in order to keep the money flowing and the Internet development is not exempt. A couple of the more recent ones in my field are simply relabeling of what any web designer worth your money should know from day one.

- “**Responsive**”? Yeah, way back in 1998 we considered it a cornerstone of good web design. It simply means that your website should function and be nice looking on all platforms and screen sizes, from desktop to mobile and tablet. *Any* web designer who IS a web designer should know how to do this, though it’s not easy. That’s why you pay a professional.
- “**Ajax**”? It’s simply Javascript talking to whatever the backend language you use (often PHP). Both have been around since the ’90s, and the only new element is an emphasis on dynamic interaction between the two.

WEB DESIGNER VS. WEB DEVELOPER – IS THERE A REAL DIFFERENCE?

In one sense, yes. While many programmers (this is what we used to call them, you know) are not necessarily versed in design, being a *good* web designer by necessity includes aspects of programming, SEO, UI development etc. Creating a pretty site without any knowledge of how design elements and structure effect search engine optimization, including loading speed and “freshness”, what a website can technically *do*, or the viewer interaction with the site gets you a nice web postcard and nothing else. That’s how you end up with an unusable site.

A **web designer** doesn’t have to be master of it all (though it certainly helps), but knowing what’s out there and what is possible certainly helps. I’ve been designing/developing websites for about 18 years, and while my degrees are in Graphic Design & Photography, I had to learn a whole lot of other things in order to call myself a web designer. On top of HTML & CSS (*every* designer must know those), I now have great SEO skills, and can find my way around Javascript, PHP, Mysql etc as needed, as well as knowing some marketing-focused psychology and having an understanding of user interaction. I wouldn’t consider myself a Web Designer without those skills, even though I can create a fabulous looking website layout.

I graduated as an Applied Artist, from a college of Applied Arts. The first thing

that was drummed up into our heads was the difference between Applied and Fine Art: for Fine Art, it's enough that it just sits there. Applied Art must *DO* things. *A website is a *dynamic* entity and a networked entity as opposed to a piece of paper with an ad on it. If all you know is to create a layout, you're NOT a web designer.*

About half the time I get hired to do SEO, for example, I end up having to redesign the basic website functionality and layout too, because someone hired a designer who was capable of designing a website pretty enough to get your money, but with elements that spell search engine disaster. A "real" web designer will know enough not to sabotage your findability.

TIP:

If you're shopping for a web designer, be wary of people who are using a lot of buzzwords, and always ask a prospective designer what their experience and knowledge is in both creative/artistic field AND in SEO, user interface development and website functionality development. While large companies often have these roles split, you can still find a single person versed in all of the above, even a reasonably priced one. They don't have to be a Renaissance Jack-of-all-trades, but do need to know enough to be able to predict your needs in each of these fields, and coordinate with any specialists you might hire down the line.

6 questions to ask your future Web Designer



Over the many years we've been in this business, we've heard many horror stories

from people who didn't use care choosing their web design provider. Never finished websites, deadlines extending into months, sites that can't be updated without professional help and major expense, "invisible" sites on page 236 of Google search results, and sometimes plain robbery – "web designers" who vanish after they take your money.

About 20% of our customers come to us to fix or finish someone else's work. Yikes! Here are the 6 questions you should have on your checklist.

How to avoid having a bad web design experience:

1. **Always ask to see a portfolio.** Every professional web design company has one. This will also give you an idea about whether the designer's style matches your vision.
2. **Ask for references.** A designer should be able to get you in touch with at least one satisfied customer.
3. **Ask for search engine results.** A designer should be able to show you at least a couple of examples of websites that place on first or second page of Google – you'd get a couple of search terms (keywords) a site is "primed" for, and find the given site in the results yourself. Please note that the exact placement changes over time, as Google changes its search engine parameters constantly. Still, a well SEO'd site should show up high and stay there.
4. **Always ask for a written legal contract.** Contract should specify the project's price, deadlines, and scope of work, as well as procedure in case of extra work needed, or the breach of contract. It doesn't matter if you're getting a tiny personal website or a huge online mall – always, always get a contract. A designer who doesn't want to provide one, or doesn't have a standard contract ready is *not* a professional.
5. **Ask how the website will be updated.** You should be able to add or change the basic content yourself – write new articles, change in-page photos and such. Don't expect to be able to change the basic look of the site – if you could do this, you wouldn't be needing a professional designer to begin with :-). A cheap website that only a pro can update will very soon become either out of date, or very expensive.
6. **Payment** should not be 100% down, except maybe in case of a very small sum. For example, we require 1/2 down for smaller projects, 1/3 down, then 1/3 on the first approved draft for medium size ones, and arrange for a similarly reasonable payment schedule for large projects. The final payment is always made upon delivery – once the website is up, and you've seen it work. Some designers will not like that – we often have to spend months trying to wrestle that last payment from a customer; so please be professional too. After all, your web designer is someone you'll likely need in the future (and they have full access to your new site!).

You have a website. Now what?

Once your web site is “live”, you need to let people know about it. There are millions of web sites out there – you need to announce yours.

We build sites that place well in the search engines. In addition to this free advertising, consider adding a links section, in which the sites of the same kind as yours can exchange links with you. We can install a linking script that will handle the entire process automatically – you don’t have to lift a finger. Link exchange will also improve your web site’s search engine placement.

Think of your web site as one piece in your complete business promotion effort. Include your new web site address everywhere – your business cards, mailers, commercials.

Consider spending some time and/or money on developing a strong Internet advertising campaign. This can include paid advertising in search engines (such as Google AdWords), online classifieds such as Craigslist.org and Backpage.com, and social networking on Myspace, Facebook or Twitter (social networking is free, but expect to spend a lot of time maintaining and building your online persona, offering real, valuable information in your field). Hire a designer to set up your Facebook page or Twitter account with custom backgrounds, sections and images, and find the first dozen or more “friends” and follow exchanges. Add the social buttons on your site too – Likes and Tweets are hard advertising currency for modern Internet marketing. Consider creating a discount you can give away on Facebook in exchange for a Like.

Building a strong Internet advertising and/or branding campaign does cost money, but it’s still much cheaper than a print, radio or television campaign of comparable advertising value.

You can still use print advertising (newspapers, Yellow Pages). Ultimately, your advertising costs will go down, as you can now publish all the details in your web site and leave the newspaper ad for the bare basics.

Still, don’t expect a million visitors the day your web site goes up. Search engines take anywhere between a couple of weeks and a couple of months to list all of your pages. Building your visitor numbers is an ongoing effort.

Don’t trust web designers that promise you a million in a week, whether it’s dollars or visitors – web business is just like any other business; there is no free lunch. We will make sure to let you know what to expect, and to have a realistic flight plan for your site’s success. Our web design contract includes a cost estimate and a deadline we stick to. We deliver what we promise.

Updates and maintenance

After your web site is built, expect periodic updates. Sites that offer useful and interesting content and/or services that are often updated are the most successful ones. Think about this – how can you entice your site visitor to come back? Search engines such as Google also like useful content and text pages, and will rank you higher for it.

We can build you a web site you can update yourself with a minimal computer knowledge, or you can pay someone (or us) to update your pages. Having a “News” or “Blog” section is almost a must these days. Adding a discussion forum or reviews if appropriate is a good way to get “free” site content – your visitors will chat about your products and/or services and update your web site for you :-).

This is one of the many reasons we recommend a WordPress based website – if you can update your site in your sleep (or at least, your slippers), it’s more likely that you’ll be doing it on a regular basis.

Updates are what makes a difference between a live site and a “dead” one!

Domain name & hosting

We can help you find a domain name that “sticks”. It should be related to your business, or showcase your name. Ideally, it would also contain the most important keyword related to your business for purposes of search engine optimization – however, this is not worth having a long domain people will have trouble spelling out right. The biggest, most popular sites out there all have a short and simple domain (think Amazon or Twitter).

The easiest way to get one is to let us register it with the same company that will be hosting your web site. A domain name needs to be occasionally renewed – pay your domain fee on time (you’ll be notified)! If you are late, you’ll lose it – this is a disaster for a popular, established web site.

A host is a company that keeps your web site on their computers and makes it available on the Internet. Expect to pay a small monthly hosting fee (about \$8/month). We can help you find an excellent host with a good reputation, low cost & lots of value-added extras.*

Free or super-low cost hosts are NOT recommended. Unfortunately, you get what you pay for, and a great looking web site that is often off line, or that gets hacked is of no value to you.

***Please, please, MAKE SURE YOU PAY YOUR HOSTING BILL!** Over 70% of our design customers (some with web sites that had cost up to \$8,000 to build) lose their web sites simply because they forgot to pay their hosting company. We WILL NOT have a backup of your web site two or five years after we built it unless you're under the current maintenance contract – especially if you have a dynamic site you've been adding content to yourself.

Hosting bill is like your rent – you'll have to pay it on a regular, ongoing basis. If you don't pay, you can't come back a year later and expect the landlord (hosting company) to have saved all your furniture (your web site pages).

If you're not sure you'd be able to keep on top of all the bills and other maintenance, we'll be happy to do it for you for a small fee, but we'll need to know so in advance.

What is the purpose of your web site? (Site planning)

This question may sound funny, but many people don't have a clear idea of what exactly their web site is supposed to do. Remember, a fun and great looking site with many "bells and whistles" that is slow to load and very difficult to find your way around will make people leave and never come back. The main purpose of any web site is its usability and content.

Is it a commercial web site? Plan for it to be straightforward, clear and easy to get around. Find your competition and learn from them – what is it that you like about their web sites, and what doesn't work. Bring some samples of the sites you like.

What makes you stand out? Think about your business strengths, and plan to showcase them. Include a mission statement and information about your business ("About us" page), to build customer trust and confidence.

Determine what pages/sections you need, and how important each is.