WHITE PAPER

CHOOSING A WEBSITE DEVELOPER

YOUR WEBSITE DEVELOPER SHOULD BE TECHNICALLY SAVVY AND HAVE A SERVICE APPROACH YOU CAN LIVE WITH

By Todd Kasenberg
READY TO BUILD A WEBSITE?

You’ve done your homework, maybe even through WebResources.ca, and you’ve collected estimates for your web project. And – unbelievably - the variation in pricing looks more like the temperature range in April in Sudbury than the finishing times of horses in the Queen’s Plate!

How can that be? How can a few website vendors provide estimates for the creation of the “same” website and yet have such different pricing?

The possibilities are straightforward:

1. The specifications you provided were too vague to engage an accurate quotation;
2. The capabilities of the organizations/individuals bidding were markedly different;
3. Your low priced bidders are going to sting you with a lot of surprise bills and upcharges (i.e., they bid low to win your project);
4. Your high priced bidders are gouging you (probably because they don’t care for your business or they don’t want the job);
5. There is a legitimate difference in pricing related to the quality of the final deliverable.

The content that follows outlines how to improve your odds of avoiding being stung and getting the quality you need and the favourable relationship you crave.

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The Top 11 Tips for Choosing a Website Developer

1. Accurate specifications
2. Capabilities assessment
3. Relationship potential
4. Sector experience
5. Track record
6. Service ethic
7. Straight talk
8. Ownership
9. Spec work unrealistic
10. No surprise billings
11. Made in Canada
ACCURATE SPECIFICATIONS

Often plagued by the DK Squared phenomenon ("I don’t know what I don’t know"), it is certainly obvious that you should try to create specifications for your website that are detailed and bounding. Your brief should include an overview of your organization, goals for your website, functionalities you require (along with those that are optional), a brief skeleton of how your site will be organized (including the number of pages you expect), some indication of visual/theme preferences, clarification about whether or not you want a web content management system and whether or not you have already made hosting arrangements for your site.

Since the DK Squared phenomenon can affect even the most savvy website buyer, you often can be benefited by walking through your expectations with a website company expert. The downside, of course, is that in going to one company, you may create expectations that said organization has the inside track when in fact you intend to engage in a true selection process. However, reputable organizations will complete a “discovery” (may involve one or more meetings) with you and provide you with the results so that you will be able to develop a “Project Brief” for the purposes of bidding.

WHAT’S IN A GOOD WEBSITE PROJECT BRIEF?

1. Overview of Buyer
2. Overview of Website (including projected page count or site map)
3. Expected Project Outcomes
4. Website Visitor Experience / Website Functionality and Performance
5. Website Visitor Profile
6. Website Administration Profile
7. Website Administrative Functionality Profile
8. Website Visuals
9. Website Technology Requirements / Restrictions
10. Website Hosting
11. Project Timeline
12. Supplier Considerations
13. Desired Warranty
14. Training Expectations
15. Maintenance Requirements
16. Required Proposal Structure or Forms
17. Proposal Evaluation Scheme
CAPABILITIES ASSESSMENT

Capabilities include technical skills (things like what frameworks will be used to create your website, experience and ability with web content management systems and web programming, web media design, search engine marketing), and people skills (things like communication, adaptability/flexibility, listening, presentation).

Assess the experience of the team. How long have they been developing websites? How many have they developed? What range of tools can they use?

One common temptation is to go with a website developer who is a free agent, who works from home, or who is a recent graduate. We acknowledge that in many cases, pricing from these freelancers may look very appealing. However, if your website designer is jack of all trades (part-time gardener, part-time hairdresser, part-time web developer), can s/he be master of the web? Sadly, selection of these vendors can lead to the same look/different colour outcome – meaning that your website looks like every other site by this designer, with minor variations in colour. Functionally, these sites often do the bare minimum; and sadly, there are way too many sites on the web with broken links and tags, sitting out there doing nothing for their owners, that were created by these jacks of all trades. It is rare to find a single person capable of handling the combined visual and technical elements that make an effective Web presence. Additionally, by depending on an individual, your organization is at risk of losing its investment should anything occur to that one individual.
We further submit that the recent graduate does not have the necessary experience to best identify key selling tools and supporting graphics, and that design skills are only a relatively small consideration in website development. In fact, some of the most spectacular designs, because they are difficult to implement without extensive use of images, will be counterproductive because content will not be picked up by search engines. You wind up left with an appealing website and no traffic – usually the wrong mix for a website investment.

In some ways, picking your web developer is a bit like picking your dentist. You want to be sure that they have some experience (because most of us can’t afford a novice trying to find their way through a problem at our expense). You want seasoned people skills (“chairside manner”?). You want them to be confident enough in their network that any challenges get referred to the right experts. You don’t want a one size fits all strategy (“would you like that in blue, or in blue?”) – they need to listen and meet your needs, not their agenda. And you want them to be on the leading edge.

A rule of thumb – if a website vendor does not conduct a discovery interview, does not share with you how they will create your site (both process and tools used) after taking good notes on your needs, does not provide or direct you to valuable learning resources about how to build a better website and cannot tell you how your site will compete against others in your marketplace, then you should be very wary.
RELATIONSHIP POTENTIAL

While websites are often only renewed every 3 years (and so, for website developers, the “selling cycle” is quite lengthy), there are many other services that may be offered by a website developer that you may find valuable. These services may include visual design, search engine optimization, ongoing website maintenance, web analytic reporting, marketing consulting/integration, trends reporting, online reputation management, technical consulting, IT support and printing. In short, you may value more from a website vendor than a connection every 3 years for the explicit purposes of building a website. You may want a “website agency of record” relationship.

If, in fact, you view your selection of vendor as an appointment with ongoing interaction, as a venture, then you will want to determine whether this partner will comport themselves in a manner suited to your business. Will the website developer take ownership of communicating pro-actively if that is part of your requirements? Will they provide plans and reports in a way that meets your needs? Can you reach them easily? Are they responsive to requests? Are members of their team polite? Do you need a single point of contact? All of these factors, and many more, should be approached with a website developer should you need to derive more value than a one-off.

You will want to determine whether your website developer shares relationship values that are suited to your business.
SECTOR EXPERIENCE

Has a prospective website developer provided solutions to other companies in your sector of the economy? Have they dealt with challenges similar to those faced by your organization? Sometimes, working with a website developer familiar with your sector can help things get done more rapidly since there is less “translation” that needs to be done about your work and your goals.

Are they working actively with a competitor? If a prospective website vendor is an “agency of record” with a direct competitor, you may not get full attention or value, especially from services such as search engine optimization.

Don’t rule out a website developer that has yet to work in your sector; sometimes, all that is needed is the opportunity to shine. But be sure that vendors in these circumstances are capable of understanding your business during a first discovery session before engaging.

Be sure that the website developer your select is capable of understanding your business. Validate this through the first discovery session, which is usually free.
TRACK RECORD

It is obvious that for large website development projects, you should check references. But as we all know, companies will usually only put references forward that will speak positively to their experiences and outcomes, leaving a buyer wondering about the size and disposition of “the remaining” group that might not have the same glowing opinion. The only really good way to get beyond references and testimonials is to understand the web developer’s approach to a past project and to review their website portfolio. Through reviewing a portfolio, you can glean a number of insights:

- Do you like the design style provided by this web developer? Is it in synch with the look you’re trying to achieve? (Note: Be sure to actually visit the websites in question, and evaluate functionality and navigation sensibility in addition to the obvious “esthetics” check.)
- Are their websites fast loading?
- Are websites from this developer functional? Look for broken links or error messages.
- Are websites from this developer complete? A tell-tale sign that something did not go well is one or more pages showing as “Under Construction”, hinting that the developer did not complete the job as anticipated.
- Is the navigation paradigm sensible and common? Odd navigation schemes may reflect poor client direction or a maverick approach. These are things that you should assess before signing on with a website developer.

Hint: One way to find websites built by a designer is to use a backlinks checker to identify websites linking back to the designer’s website. Try this one: http://www.webtoolhub.com/tn561345-backlink-checker.aspx. Review the results of all inlinks to the designer; many of these are likely to be clients.
SERVICE ETHIC

These days, it’s not about selling you a website “product”, but it’s about selling you a website “solution”, which includes the product, services, support, training, integration with existing branding and tools, etc—about engaging you with an ecosystem. Many web developers provide a “set it and forget it” approach to providing you with a website; if this is what you would prefer, then opt for this. However, many website buyers place real value on the quality of post-launch support, including how easy it is to contact the vendor, conditions under which changes will be made to the website without additional investment, availability of a larger basket of services, and modularity or phased growth potential of the website.

Questions to ask include:

- How long does it take the prospective web vendor to respond to questions? Provide a proposal? Make meetings for follow-up questions?
- What is the server uptime of the developer? How soon (if at all) will the web development company provide you with a report about a server outage?
- How rapidly will the web developer respond to requests for changes, paid or otherwise? (Don’t just accept general information here; ask for specific timing, and for provision of track record results on this parameter.)

It is important to know when and who you can reach whenever you need something done, and how to escalate a service request that seems to be falling on deaf ears.

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STRAIGHT TALK

Many website developers are very busy and can rush proposals, providing you with a price but without a lot of detail – or a lot of thought. Website developers who take the effort to provide you with advice, either in their proposal or through their discovery encounters with you, are either showing themselves interested in being strategic partners with you in getting your website to work, or are trying to upsell you on things you won’t need. Discerning the former from the latter is usually an exercise in determining if the advice seems balanced and fair, with pros and cons spelled out; if every expensive option is what is right for you, you may wish to strongly consider the upsell motivation. In general, a thoughtful web development partner is going to provide better service than one who rushes you off an uninformative, unimaginative or template proposal.

OWNERSHIP RIGHTS

There are many models out there pertaining to the ownership of the intellectual property assets associated with a website. None is right or wrong if the terms are clear and explicit on entering into an agreement with a website vendor. But be certain you understand what is yours at the end of the engagement, and what remains the property of the website vendor; this knowledge arms you should service levels prove unsatisfactory in future.

The small print “taketh away”.
**SPEC WORK UNREALISTIC**

Sometimes, it may be tempting to ask bidders for your website contract to provide draft visual designs. Most web developers are quite fair in resisting this request, since visual designs should only be crafted after in-depth discussions with the client, appropriate sector research and concentrated creativity by the designer. Since companies may spend upwards of 20% of a job’s time on this function, it is unfair to request speculative designs for jobs under $25,000.

Designer time costs website developers money, and that with no promise of return. Consider if you had to give away 20% of a product or service before you could “compete” for the privilege of the sale, and you will understand why this is not an appropriate request. Feel confident in reviewing portfolios.

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Design of a website is a hard cost often amounting to 20% of a project’s budget – so don’t expect it for free before you choose a developer.
NO SURPRISE BILLINGS

The last thing you want is to select a supplier who has provided you a low price, then be held hostage as the project “realizations” roll in and the supplier comes back to you with requests for substantial upward budget revisions. And yet we know it happens, and it is awfully uncomfortable to discharge a web developer when they’ve already taken your money and are now making a run for the fence. First, if it seems to good to be true, it probably is! When one quote is well below others, leaping at it may just be asking for billing creep that could well exceed the estimates of those vendors you might not have selected. So before signing a contract, ask questions. Clarify expectations and capabilities. Make sure that the whole project has been correctly estimated by asking for budget breakdowns per functionality or task. And to avoid nasty surprises when a project is engaged, insist on all budget increases being personally authorized. One final note on this one – it is a sad reality that too many website projects are not completed on time or on budget. Why not ask a potential web developer for their track record on this parameter? Or a guarantee that functionality will be in place as specified in the contract by the go-live date or there is a performance financial penalty?

Web developers should be able to share their track records for on-time, on-budget performance.
MADE IN CANADA?

One of the most common causes for project delays and budget creep results from outsourcing projects overseas. Many web development companies have alliances with organizations outside of Canada; while quality is usually good, timely delivery or delivery on budget can pose problems. Ask whether work is being outsourced overseas; this can affect timeliness now and long-term support for fixes and/or upgrades. Consider the strength of a 100 mile website developer strategy; work with someone who is within 100 miles of your operation, and who keeps all work within their own shop. It’s good for your peace of mind and for the local economy!

IN CONCLUSION…

When you’ve undertaken these evaluations, you will often be better able to make direct comparisons between competing bids to develop your website. Don’t hesitate to ask a firm that presents a compelling portrait to consider revising their proposal in the face of a proposal with some recommendations or features that you find intriguing but did not explicitly ask for in your request for proposals; most companies will happily comply.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Todd Kasenberg is Director of Marketing and Chief Relationship Officer for Sandbox Software Solutions. He has a 20 year career in sales and marketing, and is paradoxically both charming and a geek. His expertise includes web marketing strategy and tactics, search engine optimization, online community development and client engagement tactics via the Internet.

Learn more about custom software at www.sandboxsoftware.ca