10 Topics to Discuss <u>Before</u> You Hire a Web Design Company

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Introduction

Today, nearly 2 billion people worldwide use the Internet and that number is expected to increase exponentially in the coming years. With more and more people turning to the Internet for everything from finding a telephone number to shopping, it is more important than ever to have an online presence.

Why? Well, think of it like this…no matter where your physical storefront is located – it could be sitting in between two giant merchants like Wal-Mart and Target or just outside of town, away from the busy business district – the point is that if your business is not getting the exposure it needs, you are losing money. When you create an online presence, not only will people in your local area be able to find your business, you've made it available to the entire world!

When you look at the Internet from this perspective, you soon realize that even the smallest local business can reap the benefits of having a website – but you cannot simply put up a website and assume that it will bring in hordes of business. Unfortunately, it's not that easy to make your website valuable for both your business and your visitors. That's where your web designer comes in.

A great web design company should be similar to an amazing insurance company. Sure, there are several insurance companies that are able to meet your business' needs for minimum coverage, but if you can't depend on them to be there for you as your company grows, you'll likely find yourself spending more time to try to find a company that offers a broader range of services and coverage. Your web design company should be thought of in a similar way. Why should you have to deal with four or five different companies to achieve the success you want for your website?

This is why it is important to know what to ask any web design company that you are interested in hiring. Locating a great web designer is always a good thing, but how much time would it save you if you could find a company that offers web design, search engine optimization and website content? How much would you save – or make – in the long run?

The following report will provide you with a list of questions to ask before you decide to hire a web design company. I hope this information provides you with concrete ideas to use as you create an online presence for your business.

Chapter 1
Website Usability

One of the top complaints of websites is lack of functionality. Think about how many websites you've been to that were difficult to navigate. Maybe the buttons didn't work correctly, the links took you to pages that no longer existed or, worse, the site didn't even work in your Internet browser. You've probably left those sites pretty quickly, right? Well, that's exactly why you need to discuss website usability with anyone that you might consider hiring to handle your website design.

Website usability refers to how well your users are able to navigate your website, but it's more than just navigability. Users want a seamless experience, a site that fluidly connects them to what they want to find without any hassle whatsoever. This falls in line with the "2 Click Rule," which more or less states that first time site users should be able to find whatever they are looking for on your site in two clicks or less. Your web designer can make that happen and you need to ensure that they do.

You also want to make sure your web designer puts the focus above the fold. If you're not familiar with this term, think of it as the portion of your site that users see when they first arrive. This is where you want extreme perfection and fluidity because this is the first thing that visitors to your site are going to see. Make sure it is eye catching, provides the tabs or buttons to the information that first time visitors will want to see and that you have a search feature present here.

A sitemap is a must for every site. Why? Well, when in doubt, users turn to it because it's an easy to use navigation source. From a sitemap, users can review all of your site links, providing them with quick access to more specific pages. Never knock the search feature. Lots of visitors use search functions to quickly figure out whether or not a site offers certain products or information of interest to them.

Your web designer can even install click heat maps or visualizers that will allow you to see where each of your visitors is clicking. These tools are extremely useful, as they can essentially show you where additional optimization or better navigability is needed. When you can see what needs to be changed, it not only allows you to better understand your users, but implementing the necessary changes will keep your website at its best for your users.

Finally, you want to ensure that you discuss your website's scanner friendliness. Will your website be capable of displaying bullet points, lists and clever subheadings without making the content look truncated? Will your site be capable of displaying such content in a reader friendly way? Will the search engines be able to crawl the content as well? These are all serious concerns that you should address with your web designer.

Chapter 2
Content Management System

Whether your site focuses on content or not, it is important to realize that your visitors will. The old adage, "Content is King," is still true. In fact, no one sees that changing anytime soon. This is just one of the reasons why your content management system, which I'll likely later refer to as CMS, is so very important to your website. Without a CMS in place, you will find that your website is not only difficult to manage, but expensive as well.

Your content management system is going to play a major role in your website's overall success, as well as your peace of mind. In most cases, the CMS is the heartbeat of the site because that is where your content lives. It's where it all happens. That said, it is important to discuss your CMS with your web designer.

Your CMS is going to be the content control panel for your site. It will allow you to add content or edit existing content without software and with little to no expertise. When you have a CMS in place, there's no need to contact your web designer and pay them to add updates or important information to your site. You can do it yourself quite easily.

What type of CMS do you prefer? WordPress, Drupal, Joomla and several other content management systems exist. If you have a CMS that you are already familiar and comfortable with, you can instruct the web designer to install that specific system for your site.

Most web designers are happy to work with your CMS of choice. However, if you have never used a content management system before, you can always have your web designer recommend one. It may take you a few hours to get the hang of how the system works, but because these systems are designed with ease of use in mind, most users have very few issues familiarizing themselves with the system.

You should also check with the web designer you are considering hiring to ensure that he or she will provide you with regular updates for your CMS, as well as any necessary patches for security issues and other vulnerabilities. Having a content management system is not only about being able to add and edit content at will; it is about having a safe, secure and easy to use method to bring information to your visitors.

Chapter 3
Website Analytics

Before the Internet – and long before Google – business owners used to sit around and think of ways to get the information they needed from their customers. Many businesses used face-to-face customer polls, focus groups, product reviewers, mail-in surveys and telephone surveys. Many of these time tested methods used long ago are still used today, just not as frequently.

Today, we have website analytics, which makes getting statistics a breeze. In just a few clicks of the mouse, you can find out how many unique visitors viewed your site, what pages they viewed, how long they stayed on each page, what country they live in, what web browser they use, if they used specific keywords to find your site and how they arrived at your site. You may not have a clue how to use these little tidbits of information right now, but they are valuable.

One of the most popular website analytics services available today is Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics), which is fairly easy to use and offers great tutorials to help beginners better understand what the information they are seeing is and how they can use it. Several other sites exist, like Clicky (www.getclicky.com), Reinvigorate (www.reinvigorate.net) and Piwik (www.piwik.org), among others. Nearly all of the analytics sites offer tutorials for the beginner, which can make it a lot easier to learn at your leisure, but some sites offer more information than others.

Aside from the free analytics sites mentioned above, there are also several paid sites that you can subscribe to, as well as software that you can purchase, that will provide you with the insight you need to keep your website competitive. Many opt for the free sites because, although they don't cost you a dime, they still provide you with pertinent information you need.

If you are having your site revamped, you should definitely ask your web designer whether or not they will analyze your data to improve upon what is currently there. Although not all web design companies offer to assist you in analyzing the data for your site, many do. Why? Well, by analyzing your data, your web designer may be able to see where your previous site was lacking and recommend ways to fix it, whether it is with search engine optimization or with different coding. If the web design company you select provides this service and you commit to it, the result should be an improved site with more traffic than you had previously – along with a sleek new look.

Chapter 4
Website Content

It is important that your website content appeals to your site visitors. In fact, it should be one of any website owner's top priorities. Your website content is the way that you communicate who you are or what your business is to every visitor that views it. It is essentially an extension of yourself or your business and should be written as such.

Many consider their site and the functionality that it provides visitors to be the equivalent of a fancy suit. You see, a fancy suit can dress up any idiot, but it certainly won't lend him an ounce of additional intelligence. Likewise, your site can be sleek and stylish, and have all of the functionality you could possibly ask for, but it won't mean a thing unless your content is top notch.

This is why website content is something that you should discuss with your website designer. You should ask your web designer whether or not they can provide you with specialized content for your site. You should also discuss search engine optimization of your content to ensure that any content present is always working double time for you and your business. I'll touch on this more later. For now, let's focus on the content in general.

In case you were not aware, it is *extremely* important – and I stress "extremely" for good reason – that you ensure that all content present on your site is unique. Any content that has been scraped or borrowed from other sites can be considered duplicate content in the eyes of the search engines.

So what happens if you use duplicate content? Well, aside from not being recognized – or worse, punished - by the search engines, you may also face legal issues and a penalty from using someone else's content.

Unique, high quality content that properly explains and sells your product or services is what you should always strive for. Very few website designers can provide content development themselves, but some do. What's more is that even those who cannot provide website content are often able to refer you to a spectacular copywriter that they have worked with in the past.

Of course, if you are a stellar writer, you may wish to handle the creation of your website content yourself. Just be sure to focus on the facts, eliminate the fluff and always keep search engine optimization in mind.

Chapter 5
Hosting Reliable

Website hosting should be a major concern of anyone interested in having a website. If a potential customer finds your site listed in the search engine results and clicks, but your site doesn't come up, chances are that you just lost a customer.

Believe it or not, website hosting is one of the biggest challenges that many website owners face. There are countless hosts available, and all promise great service – many at ridiculously cheap rates. This often influences first time site owners to choose a host based on the rates offered instead of the host's true capabilities…the result is often utter disappointment. However, there are ways to prevent you from locking yourself into a year or more of poor hosting. Most of that starts with good research.

One option is to discuss web hosting with your designer, as several do offer hosting services. Your web designer might even offer you a special rate for your service simply because you will be combining services. If your web designer does offer hosting services, you should definitely inquire about website uptime and use a third party to verify that uptime claim.

For those unfamiliar with the term, uptime is the period that your website is available to visitors through the hosting server. Your goal should be to find a reliable hosting service that has an uptime exceeding 99%. Obviously, when referring to uptime, the higher the percentage the better. You don't want your visitors showing up to a site that they cannot access.

Of course, not all web designers offer hosting, but this does not mean that your web designer cannot refer you to a reliable hosting service. In fact, getting a recommendation from your web designer is often a great way to locate a hosting service that you may choose to remain with for the life of your site.

Why? Well, web designers are in the industry. They can often tell you which hosts offer the highest uptime, the best customer service, the most support options, the most disk space, the highest bandwidth, a good variety of programming options and more.

Price and other services like being able to purchase domains or content creation should factor in as well, but the prior factors mentioned should take the front seat in your decision-making process. Price might be a major factor for you, but if choosing a cheap host means that you are losing customers, you are going to lose more than you gain in the long run.

Chapter 6
Customer Service

So, you finally have your website up and running. The web designer did an amazing job, but you've located one major glitch. When visitors click the about us page, it shows a 404 error code. You've tried to contact your web designer, but it's been two days and you've gotten no response. Now you're frustrated because your site isn't working as promised and you have no idea when it will.

Believe it or not, lots of site owners have had issues similar to this – no response or a severe lack in response time. When you have a website for yourself or your business, it is your link to the online population. It is important for your site to be available and in working order when your visitors arrive, which is why choosing a web designer that offers superior customer service is imperative.

For this reason, you should discuss customer service with your web designer prior to making a hiring decision. What is your web designer's customer service policy? Is it available to review onsite or is it discussed in the contract? If a policy regarding customer service is in place, it should be available for you to review, not just be told about.

When discussing customer service, you should determine how many hours your web designer will be available to you each month for questions or website updates and whether that availability comes at a cost. You should also discuss turnaround time and inquire as to whether or not your web designer will offer a training tutorial to help you learn to use and manage your new website. For those new to website management, training is invaluable. Of course, even those who have other websites may not be familiar with the platform used for their new site, so tutorials are always a welcome addition.

After you've discussed all of these factors, do your research. Your website designer can promise you the sun, moon and stars, but if they have done the same to others and failed to come through, chances are that you'll be able to find out with a few quick web searches. You can also ask for references from previous clients whom you can call to inquire about customer service responsiveness – and do call. The web designer you've chosen may have evaded most online negativity, but when you get someone on the phone, you often get the whole story and then some!

Chapter 7
Mobile Compatibility

When you are sitting in the break room all by yourself, what is the first thing you do to occupy your time? Most people pull out their cell phones, tablets or notebooks and browse the Internet. In fact, in the U.S., nearly 10% of all web browsing is now performed from mobile or tablet devices – and here's a statistic that might surprise you – over 25% of U.S. mobile Internet users ONLY access the web via their mobile device.

What's more is that there are currently more than 5.3 billion people subscribed to mobile services worldwide. In 2009 alone, there were more than 500 million mobile Internet users. That's a huge number and one that has already increased exponentially, but it is estimated that it will double throughout the next five years.

So, is your site mobile friendly?

If it's not, can it be?

With the growth that the mobile arena continues to see, it is more important than ever for your site to be accessible by mobile devices. No business wants to lose a potential customer, but you could be doing just that if you don't ensure that your site is accessible to everyone in your potential client base. Take a moment to test your site. How does it look on your Internet capable phone or tablet? Is it even accessible?

Your website's mobile capability should be discussed with your web designer. You want to make sure that your web designer is not using Flash and other technologies that are not mobile friendly. There is much to gain by ensuring that your site is mobile friendly, so ensure that you are not essentially writing those customers off before they even have a chance to access your site.

You may also wish to integrate useful or fun mobile applications for your site. This is not only a great way for your users to enjoy your site more on their mobile devices, but a way that you can ensure that they remember your website the next time they need your product or service. You can discuss these things with your web designer as well – you may even find out that your web designer can get you a great deal on a custom mobile application!

Chapter 8
Search Engine Optimization

I briefly touched on search engine optimization (SEO) earlier in this report. I can't stress enough how important it is for your website and its overall ranking and millions of others agree with me. Search engine optimization is imperative if you want your site to be seen by millions of potential customers.

Search engine optimization is achieved by carefully determining your keywords and integrating them strategically into your content. In addition, you need to ensure that your site's Meta tags and descriptions, title tags, images and video Alt tags are optimized as well.

Unfortunately, not a lot of people realize that there can be negative effects associated with poor SEO techniques. In fact, several people start websites every day and cram as many keywords as they possibly can into the content of their pages in an effort to be recognized by the search engines. The result is often a spot at the very end of the search engine results.

SEO is an art. You can't just cram keywords into the content of your pages without thought or purpose. The search engines are a lot smarter than that and there are harsh penalties associated with keyword stuffing and other "black hat" techniques.

For this reason, discussing search engine optimization with your web designer is important. Any aspect of your site that your designer handles that can be optimized, should be optimized. If your web designer will also be handling the creation of your website content, then you need to stress search engine optimization and discuss the keywords that you would like integrated.

You need to ensure that your site's SEO meets the criteria to be picked up by the major search engines like Google, Bing and Yahoo. If your web designer regularly performs SEO, then he or she should be aware of the favorable and unfavorable actions that these search engines focus on so that your site has the best chances to succeed possible.

Many will tell you that on page optimization is the key to a successful site, and that is true; however, more specifically, it is unique onsite optimization that the search engines love. In addition, links going to your site (which can be achieved in a variety of ways) will also help to increase your overall ranking.

Chapter 9
Social Media Integration

Social media has become the way of the world. It is the online version of "word of mouth" for businesses. Why? Well, mostly because anything mentioned within the realm of social media can spread like wildfire under the right circumstances. For this reason, countless businesses have established a presence on a variety of popular social media sites.

What social media sites are the most popular? Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, StumbleUpon, Flickr, Google+ and more are all very popular social media sites with millions of users. In fact, Facebook had more than 640 million users this year alone. Twitter has more than 100 million people actively using the site to send out an average of 230 million daily tweets. If you choose only two social media sites for your business to use, these two should be the ones.

Even if you are not interested in taking advantage of social media now, you might find it beneficial and worthy of your time in the very near future. So is your website capable of social media integration? Will it or can it be? These are questions that you need to ask your web designer.

If social media is not able to be integrated into your website, then you could be losing out on a whole lot of business – business that you can get yourself for free with very little effort and no real experience in marketing required. Think about it this way: a Facebook or Twitter post may take you all of 30 seconds to type. The result could be a message that is viewable by millions and shared with millions more.

With more and more people using social media on a daily basis to communicate their likes, dislikes, interests and more, the benefits to businesses with an online presence is obvious. Social media matters. Whether you realize it now or not, being able to link your social media sites to your website will give your business a bigger reach. It is also a fantastic way to save you money on advertising - especially if you handle your own social media posts.

With all of this said, it is imperative that you have the option to easily connect social media sites to your website. Yes, even if you don't think that you have time for it right now. Should you decide to jump on board the social media bandwagon in the future, you can do so immediately.

Chapter 10
Direct Response Integration

Your website is running and your page views have increased to thousands per day. You're ecstatic that your site has become so popular, but there might be a bigger picture that you are missing. Why? Well, if you haven't become overwhelmed due to customer emails, then chances are that either you don't have a way that your customers can contact you or you have already set up a fabulous system to route emails to the correct department.

Direct response involves exactly that. You respond directly to the customer or visitor's email inquiry. Visitors send emails for a wide variety of reasons. You may get emails praising your products or services, informing you of an issue, requesting more information about the product or service, expressing interest in bulk orders or combined services or requesting coupons. Of course, you might also receive emails from other businesses or affiliates interested in partnering with your company. For all of these reasons and more, it is important to have a good direct response system in place.

In addition to emails, direct response can also be beneficial for gathering the email addresses of customers that have opted to receive regular contact from your website. Countless Internet users sign up for newsletters, specials, updates and more every single day. Giving your visitors a way to opt in to these methods of contact allows you to then build a great email marketing campaign.

Email marketing campaigns may seem somewhat difficult to implement, but they are also the most rewarding. Building your email list is probably one of the toughest parts because people must voluntarily sign up to receive contact from you. In addition, the tactics that worked last year may not work this year. However, once you've built your list and created unique and worthy content to share with your subscribers, your email marketing campaign has the potential to turn into your business's most profitable marketing option.

Your web designer can be paramount in not only developing a phenomenal system for your direct response needs, but also in assisting you in the creation of your email marketing campaigns. For instance, if you plan to send out a monthly newsletter or weekly update, your web designer can often provide you with a customized template to use. He or she may also be able to suggest a good service to handle your email marketing campaign. That said; don't forget to discuss these aspects of your website with your web designer. The result will be a more functional, profitable site.