

How to Choose the Right Web Site Design Company

A White Paper on Choosing the Perfect Web Site Design Company for Your Business

By Lyz Cordon

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Diligent Design specialises in providing small business web site design and Click2Customer is a blog providing SEO tips, techniques and consultancy services to business owners and managers.

Lyz has over 10 years experience of designing successful web sites and providing search engine optimisation (SEO) services to companies large and small.

So you have, or the company you work for has, decided you want a new web site. Who should you choose to design and build it? How much will it cost? How can you tell if you're being ripped off? How will you understand what you're getting? Will it look professional? Will it rank well on Google?

These and many other questions are common concerns that should be addressed from the start. The good news is you're not alone! Like many people I talk to you may have already had a disastrous experience with a web site that's left a bitter taste in your mouth and you don't want to make the same mistake again. It's my hope that this paper leads you in the right direction.

This paper's objective is to guide you in the process of choosing the right web site design company for you.

What are the Different Types of Web site Design Companies?

There are literally thousands of web design companies ranging in size from specialist web site agencies to freelance web site designers so how do you know which is right for you?

Before we look at the different types let's just discuss the different names they go under; you may have come across the words interactive, online, digital and less so these days new media. These are all still words used to describe web agencies but they just sound a bit sexier and are more all encompassing. Web design companies will usually offer other services besides just web design including search engine optimisation, paid search campaign management, content generation, blogging and social media.

So let's take a look at the four main types of web site design suppliers out there:

- **Interactive department within a large design agency:** Large marketing companies or advertising agencies are also known as full service agencies - they offer you a full complement of marketing services. They're characterised by have several different departments each specialising in a single marketing

Web site design companies come in all shapes and sizes

channel e.g. PR, direct mail (DM), advertising, creative and interactive. They'll have a separate client services team with account managers who deal with you day to day; you won't necessarily ever meet the person whose job it is to design your web site. *An interactive department is the best choice for you if you're a large blue chip company with a big budget launching a large consumer web site for which you need coordinated offline activity such as PR, direct mail and/or TV advertising.*

- **Specialist digital agencies:** There are an increasing number of these types of company and they're characterised by working exclusively online. Like the large design agencies they too will have different departments specialising in specific marketing channels - the difference is that the specialist digital agency will work only in the online equivalents e.g. online PR, online copywriting and online advertising. They'll also likely have specialists in search engine optimisation (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), social media, blogging, accessibility and usability and even link building strategists. You'll still need a decent budget to work with one of these companies but the results you get will be outstanding - they're packed full of specialists who are at the top of their game. *If you do most of your business online, need a large and robust web site with customer interaction, gaming or e-commerce you'll need a healthy budget to invest but these are the guys for you.*
- **Small web site design companies:** A small web site design company will have around 5-15 employees and will specialise in designing and building smaller web sites. They don't usually get to work directly with large blue chip companies and their portfolio of work will probably consist of SMEs. The advantage of working with this kind of company is that you get a more personal service and of course they command lower fees. Choose one that's local to you as they probably won't have the time and man-power to travel large distances for regular meetings with you. The people who set-up these kind of companies have usually had many years experience working in a larger agency in which case they'll know exactly what they're doing. *Choose a small web site design company if you have a budget around £8-£20k - make sure you check their experience and work examples carefully.* Don't be afraid to ask for references and to talk to some of their existing clients.

Some freelance designers will work in your offices for the duration of your project so you have more control

- **Freelance web site designers:** Freelance designers work by themselves although usually have large, well established networks of contacts they can call on for skills outside of their own. They usually work from home or rent desk space within another business. Some freelancers work on a contract basis; you hire them full-time for a set period of time to complete your project and they usually work in your office space. Others work on many contracts at a time and you hire them to deliver your project to a deadline - they won't work in your office but will meet with you for strategic or milestone meetings. Freelance designers have usually worked in design agencies for a number of years before they go freelance and so have lots of experience however, do check that they have the necessary project management skills to deliver your web site on time and on budget. If they've worked in an agency that would have been someone else's job! ***Freelancers are a great choice if you have a smaller budget around £500-£6k and your requirements are quite simple. You'll get a high level, personal service - they have to do a good job because their mortgage depends on it! It's best to choose someone local to you; unless they come very highly recommended.*** Again be sure to check out their portfolio of work and testimonials. It's also a good idea to meet them because if you don't click or they don't appear to be interested in your business, then it's going to be hard work. Something else you can do is 'Google' them, see if they're registered with design directories and LinkedIn or Twitter. If they are you can read more about them and see who's recommended them; the more visible they are, the safer bet they're likely to be for you as they won't do anything to damage their reputation.

A Few Words on Web Site Designers

Not all designers are created equal, they have different styles, different types of experience and different skill sets.

Different web site designers have different styles and skills

The key of course is to match the designer's skills to your needs - don't be tempted to choose a highly creative designer with great animation skills to design a site that has to follow very rigid corporate guidelines. You'll probably pay over the odds for skills that you don't need and they might get bored and sub-consciously give your job a lower priority. Of course a good designer would be more likely to refer you on to one of his contacts with better suited skills.

When seeking a web site design company, ask to see examples and speak to former clients

Your best bet is to look at the portfolio of the designer to see if they've worked on projects similar to yours and with similar types of companies. If you're a business owner you're passionate about your business so make sure your designer is too. Make sure they understand marketing - sadly too many designers and developers can design and build fantastic web sites but have no grasp of commercialism and how the web site can actually contribute to your bottom line rather than being a perpetual cost centre.

If you're using a freelancer, then they need to have a larger skill set to ensure that your web site not only looks professional, but will perform well in search engines and convert visitors into leads. This is a tricky one to assess particularly as you're probably not a search engine optimisation expert yourself but start by searching for the designer and their company name on Google - what do you find? If nothing or very little then that's a very good indication that they don't understand SEO or social media!

Also check out if the designer or company has a profile on LinkedIn, this is a business network and people who've worked with the individual or company can make recommendations about them - these are much harder to fake than testimonials on a web site.

What to Look for in a Web Site Designer/Company

So now you know what type of web design company is best for you, how do you narrow the field down? Well *it's a good idea to get a quote from at least three suppliers and here's a checklist of what to look for when you're choosing who to quote:*

- **Design skills:** look at the designer/company's portfolio do they have experience relevant to you and your project and do you like what you see?
- **SEO skills:** No matter what your view or understanding or SEO, you cannot afford to ignore it. A web site with no search engine visibility will not get visitors in any significant numbers so make sure the company/ designer offer these services - it'll be mentioned on their site if they do.
- **Experience in web site design:** Read the about us or team page and research the owners and employees by Googling them - find out where they've worked, how long they've been around and what their previous experience is. Satisfy yourself that what they say rings true.

It's important to research web site design companies using Google as well as their own web sites

Take time to visit some of the web sites that the company has designed as well as looking at their portfolio - small graphics can be made to look very slick and often the reality of the actual web sites are somewhat different

- **Technical competency:** The first measure of this is how easy you find their site to use and does it work properly. Second, visit some of the web sites they've built and see how they perform - if they're unintuitive, slow to load, have broken links and missing pages, skip on to the next company. Perhaps the best measure is that they don't bamboozle you with jargon but can instead explain what they do in terms you can understand.
- **Passion:** This you can only judge by what they say on their site and how they talk to you if you meet with them. If they don't have any enthusiasm at the beginning of the project it's only going to get worse. People with passion will be involved with related projects outside of work - they'll read around the subject, find out what blogs they follow, what magazines they read, what books and which experts do they rate. You don't need to understand their answers but you can tell if they're making it up!
- **Location:** It is always better to choose a designer or agency that is local to you or at least easily accessible. The size and budget of your project will determine how many times you meet up during the design and build stages but you'll get much better results and more attention if you're on the doorstep rather than 200 miles away. What if the project goes off-track for some reason and you're developer is in India - not very easy to get in touch with them quickly or indeed hop in the car and have an emergency meeting. It's also easier to 'pop-in' on a local company if you feel things are not progressing quickly enough.

How to Get an Accurate Quote

I could actually write a whole other white paper about this subject alone and maybe I will at some point but here's a few do's and don'ts

Don't fill in quick quote forms. These usually give figures that can differ wildly from what you end up paying and won't help you to budget properly.

Do call up the company or designer and talk through what you're looking for and ask for an itemised quotation to be emailed to you along with an indicative timeline for project completion... And when they could start, some agencies are so popular they have a waiting list!

Do know who your target audience is and convey that to the person doing the quote.

Phone a few different companies and ask for an itemised quote with an indicative time scale

Do know what you want to achieve from your web site; its aims and objectives.

Do know if you need any special functionality, for example a content management system or integration into a back office system and make sure you say this. Any decent company will ask you about these kinds of things and probably much more besides.

Don't just say you want a ten page web site with a contact form or that's exactly what you'll get - you need the designer/agency to help you put together your internet marketing strategy if you don't already have one. Get them to tell you what they think you should do to attract traffic, what SEO measures they think you need and what else do they recommend. They're the experts and will probably think of things you haven't even considered that will make a huge difference to your business... if you give them chance.

Do give the designer or agency a budget guideline for example, between £2,500 and £4,000. Don't be afraid that they'll just spend whatever your higher limit is. Web site design is a very competitive business and no-one wants to lose out on work for being too expensive. If you ask for an itemised quote you can always ask to leave some things out.

To avoid nasty surprises ask for the web design company's payment terms and a copy of their T&Cs when you're requesting a quote

Do tell the designer or agencies if your payment terms are outside of the standard 30 days, it can be a deal breaker later down the line and you don't want to waste your time. Similarly if you do have standard 30 days payment terms it's worth checking that the agency does too - you don't want to be stung with an invoice that's payable on 7 days!

Do ask for an indicative invoice schedule. It may seem a little early to be asking for this kind of detail but a lot of relationships break down over misunderstandings about money so it's best to be absolutely clear upfront. If your project is a large one or your working with a freelancer you will more than likely be required to make stage payments and you need to know this to work out your cash flow. This can work to your advantage, if you're a cash rich business you can usually negotiate a good discount (10-15%) for full payment up front.

If your project is a large one then it's standard practice to invite several agencies to pitch for the work. It allows you to meet the people you'll be working with and get an idea of whether you think they're a good fit for your business. How to conduct the pitch process is outside of the scope of this white paper sufficed to say that you would only do this if you were working with agencies rather than the freelancers.

Where to go from here



This paper gives you what you need to confidently choose your next web site design company. *If you're currently looking for a web site designer to design a new web site that will look good, will perform well in search engines and will persuade people to engage with your company, consider Lyz Cordon at Diligent Design.* I offer the following services:

- Free website evaluation
- Web site design and build
- Search engine optimisation - SEO on a budget
- SEO consultation
- Online content generation
- Web copywriting
- Email marketing
- Article marketing
- Social Media account set up and branding

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The Last Word

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