



HOW TO CHOOSE A WEB DESIGN COMPANY



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In an industry with no barriers to entry, the quality of website and digital marketing vendors can swing wildly. How do you know you're selecting the right vendor? This guide will help you navigate the vendor selection process, ask the right questions, and select a strong partner for your digital marketing efforts.





PHASE 1 : IDENTIFY

PHASE 2 : ENGAGE

PHASE 3 : INTERACT



PHASE 1: IDENTIFY

As with any other selection process, it's important to narrow the field to an initial short list. Doing so will minimize the time you spend interacting with vendors that are clearly not a good choice. We've identified two steps to help you through this process:

STEP 1 : SEARCH

A vendor's website should provide a wealth of information to help you identify whether a vendor is a potential fit. A quick Google search will identify some potential candidates. Be sure to search for a mix of regional keywords as well as industry keywords. For example, you can search based on your city, such as "Pittsburgh Web Design." You should also search using industry terms, such as "manufacturing web design" or "law firm web design," depending on your specific industry. Your industry search keywords can also be combined with your regional search keywords.



STEP 2 : WEBSITE REVIEW

Once you've identified a list of 5-10 companies, begin your website review. Pay close attention to these areas:

- **Portfolio:** Does the portfolio showcase compelling projects? If the work on the website doesn't work for you, then the vendor can be scratched from the list.
- **Staff:** Does the organization identify its staff? Is the staff well-rounded, including project management, creative, development, etc? A quality group will include these positions at the very least.
- **Content:** How is the content written? Did you learn anything from the website?
- **Quality:** The vendor's website is often a reflection of their capabilities (and if it's not, it should be!). If the site is of poor quality, it's most likely a reflection of their capabilities.



PHASE 2: ENGAGE

Your next step is to interact with each vendor on your short list. An initial call, email, or contact form submission will begin the process. During this step, consider the following:

- **Response Time:** Did the vendor address your call promptly? If the vendor takes a while to respond to your sales inquiry, you can rest assured there will not be any more urgency once you become a client.
- **Competency:** Did your initial point of contact understand your needs? Did they seem competent, well-spoken? Remember, the barriers to entry in the digital industry are very low, and some vendors can be quite inexperienced. You should expect nothing less than a well-spoken, competent first point of contact, as it's often reflective of the overall competency of the agency.
- **Discovery Questions:** Did the contact do all of the talking, or did he or she ask questions about your business and goals regarding the project? A competent vendor will want to begin to understand your needs before considering even an initial picture of what the project might look like.
- **Next Steps:** Did the vendor identify a clear next step, and provide you with an idea of what to expect? Many companies are not process oriented, and if they address the sales process loosely, the project will most likely reflect the same.



PHASE 3: INTERACT

Once you have identified a few vendors that you are comfortable with, your next step is to meet with your finalists. During this phase, here's what to look for from the finalists:

- **Professionalism:** Inexperience can reveal itself through a lack of professionalism. Sometimes companies give creative vendors a pass on their professionalism, chalking it up to “well, they’re just creative.” It’s important to recognize the difference.
- **Relationship Fit:** As you dive deeper into the prospective vendor’s processes, you should ask to meet with the individuals you will be working with. You should meet your project manager and the creative director, at the very least. Those individuals will be highly involved in your project, and a good relational fit can mean the difference between a successful and a failed project.
- **Qualifications:** A qualified vendor should be able to provide you with in-depth examples of work similar to what you’re looking for. Since there is no governing body with the industry, a qualified vendor will walk you through work they’ve completed in the past, and provide you with strong references related to the projects that you select, not them.
- **Proposal Process & Detail:** Many vendors provide a one-size-fits-all proposal, and hope that the prospect isn’t savvy enough to know the difference. The proposal process should include significant discussion regarding your business goals, and the proposal should clearly be tailored to your company. Details related to each phase of the project, along with specific deliverable descriptions should be included. Remember- if it’s not detailed in the proposal, it’s not included in the price. That’s why the typical “low cost option” usually contains fees that aren’t necessarily hidden, but not accounted for because of the vendor’s lack of detail and understanding.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

RFP PROCESS

Many companies treat a digital marketing purchase much like buying a widget. They issue an RFP with requirements, don't talk to the vendors through the process, and then make a buying decision based on the proposal alone. Projects that result from this type of process often fail.

Creative, intangible projects such as website design require a significant amount of pre-sale consultation. There are many ways to execute a project to meet a specific set of business goals, and there are many questions a vendor should have throughout the process. Additionally, the relational fit is important and often gets lost within the RFP process.

RFPs are not recommended, however, if an RFP must be issued, by far the single most important thing that can be done to ensure the process will work is to provide vendors with the opportunity to have a sit-down discovery session after having received the RFP. This will provide the opportunity for the vendors to better understand the project, ask questions, and provide options. If a vendor fails to take advantage of the opportunity, that vendor should be disqualified from the process.

PLATFORM AND TECHNOLOGY

Unless you have a very specific requirement for a technology platform, you should discuss the options with potential vendors. A quality vendor should provide options, however, be wary of the vendor that provides too many options. If too many options are provided, it could be a sign that there's no real technology focus at the vendor, and that can indicate poor quality and future support issues.



OPEN SOURCE VERSUS CUSTOM

Many companies consider open source platforms under the false assumption that an open source system can be worked on by virtually any other vendor that has experience on that platform. However, there are many hidden dangers with open source software. First, security issues are much more significant because open source systems are often the targets of hackers. Additionally, by definition open source means that the software has no central developer- many open source implementations contain code written by many different developers, which can lead to more difficult ongoing support should something go wrong.

Custom or hybrid systems can be a great alternative to open source in most situations, assuming the vendor is stable and has a large install base with its custom platform. Typically, support is faster, easier, and is required less frequently with a custom system. The reality is that most companies stick with their vendor for years, and if they're well supported, the underlying platform should not make a difference.

TRAINING

For websites implemented on a content management system, your vendor should provide ongoing training opportunities for your staff. Without ongoing training on the system, new employees that need to utilize the system will stumble through self-training, which is extremely unproductive.

SUPPORT

Your vendor should have a dedicated support scenario in order to address time-critical needs. Many vendors do not have a formal support structure in place due to the expense; however, a strong client support infrastructure is imperative.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT HOW LONG A COMPANY HAS BEEN AROUND?

Company longevity in the website design and development industry is not as common as you might think. Because the industry trends and standards change rapidly and consistently, many web design companies shut down every year. Why does this matter to you? When you choose a web design partner, you want to know you will be supported even after your project launches. Finding a web design company that has a strong financial history means you will have a partner that grows with your business and understands your needs over the years.

HOW DO I CUT THROUGH SALES LANGUAGE TO DETERMINE HOW LEGITIMATE A VENDOR IS?

Meeting with vendors can be intimidating and overwhelming. Look for a web design company that skips the marketing jargon and focuses on getting to know your business, unique challenges, and goals. Do your homework, and check out their project portfolio. Consider reaching out to businesses in their client list or project portfolio to ask how their experience was with the web design company. Browse their social media sites to get a feel for the company culture and how they work through projects.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR IN A WEB DESIGN COMPANY'S PROJECT PORTFOLIO?

When you are compiling your list of potential web design companies to contact, first spend some time exploring their portfolio. The designs will likely be the first thing you notice, but remember to dig a little deeper.

What was the project challenge? How did the web design company solve the problem? Well done portfolios will walk you through the project processes so you can understand and envision what it is like to work with the company. Does the company jump right to design, or is there emphasis on a discovery and research phase in order to make informed design decisions?

You will naturally navigate towards projects that focus on your particular industry, but remember to view the portfolio as a whole. Does the portfolio include varying project scopes and budgets? Are all of their services represented within the portfolio?



HOW DO I DETERMINE WHAT SIZE PARTNER IS APPROPRIATE FOR ME?

From do-it-yourself website builders and freelance designers to large advertising agencies, there are web design solutions of every size. Consider your unique needs.

If you are a small startup food truck with a limited budget that needs a simple 3-5 page website, a website builder like Wix, Weebly, or Squarespace could be a great budgetary fit. On the other hand, if you need a complete strategy, content consulting, or custom software, you will need to work with a mid size web design company staffed with those experts. Have a big budget project that requires advanced media buying, and large scale communications and event planning? A larger advertising agency might be your best fit.

WHY DOES A VENDOR'S APPROACH TO PROJECTS MATTER?

Each prospective web design partner will bring a different approach to your project. Some vendors will function primarily as design shops. These companies will pitch compelling design narratives, but they may fall short on understanding your unique business goals and how your website can solve problems, streamline internal processes, and support your bottom line.

To determine what approach will work best for your business, spell out your project goals. If your digital needs extend further than basic design, consider hiring a company that includes experts in marketing, business analysis, and more complex software development.

I WANT A WELL DESIGN SITE. WHY SHOULD STRATEGY MATTER?

Design is different from art. It's about creating a solution. A gorgeous website may pull users in, but if the information architecture and site structure does not support the design, frustrated site visitors will abandon your site after not finding the information they need.

A comprehensive strategy phase including market landscape evaluation, competitor analysis, user persona creation, and more sets the foundation for your project and ensures that every project deliverable is in line with your business goals.

WHY IS HAVING A SUPPORT TEAM IMPORTANT?

Whether you have a simple question, are interested in adding additional functionality to your site or have accidentally deleted your homepage (it's happened), you're going to want a support team you trust to take care of things for you so you can continue to focus on your business.

Look for a design company that includes hosting, maintenance, and a friendly support help desk so you have your bases covered even after your project launches.

IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE A CMS (CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM) THAT I CAN USE, OR SHOULD I LEAVE WEBSITE CHANGES UP TO THE PROS?

Chances are you are going to want to make changes to your site over time as your business grows and develops. Those changes could range from small tweaks like changing your business hours to adding completely new service pages.

Either way, you should be able to make those changes on your own if you choose. Relying on your web design company to make every single change to your website after launch can lead to hourly billing that adds up fast. Look for a web design company that offers you CMS training so you can make changes to your site over time.





WE CAN HELP!

Whether you need a digital partner for a new website or a software application, or you have questions about what you read in this guide, we want to help you through the process. Contact us at www.BlueArcher.com to take the first step.

WEB DESIGN COMPANY CHECKLIST

Fill out the checklist below as you meet with vendors to help you assess prospective digital partners.

	Prospective Vendor	Prospective Vendor	Prospective Vendor
Number of clients			
Dedicated, multidisciplinary project team			
Comprehensive project strategy			
Full service hosting			
Custom responsive design			
Website content specialists			
Proven project management methodology			
Experience across multiple industries			
Experience from startups to Fortune 500 companies			
Support Helpdesk			
Unlimited free CMS trainings			
Multiple CMS options			
Full service			