Your First 5 Minutes With a Web Developer

Websites are one of those products for which the price and quality seem to vary greatly--and not always as a function of one another. If you're trying to create a website that gives you what you need at a price you can afford, you need to make sure to find the right web agency to build your site. Start by spending five minutes with any of the agencies you are considering and making sure the agency is willing to agree to the following ground rules.

1. An initial scope of work.

Website construction can seem like a moving target if you are not clear in defining and communicating your needs to any potential agency. To make sure your request for a quote has been understood, ask any vendor you are considering to agree to provide you with a written document detailing what they think you are asking for in terms of a finished product. This document should be an agreement of basic understanding, but with enough detail that you feel confident the developer comprehends your request and can commit to making the requests a reality.

2. A discovery document with a clear roadmap outlining the functionality of your site.

Any agency that wants your business should also be willing to commit to providing you with a more detailed version of the scope of work, which will explain to you (in terms you can understand--not developer-speak!) how each section of your site will work. For example, how will a potential customer be able to login to your website? What information will he be required to provide to create a login? When he creates an account, will it require approval by an administrator at your company or will it be created without it automatically?

3. A monetized timeline for the build and implementation with specific date deliverables.

Your potential web agency should be willing to commit to a specific timeline for the completion of your website. Each section of the build should have a deliverable date, and a cost assigned to it--so that the project remains on schedule, and your developer is paid according to their output. The web agency may have response time requirements for your input, which indicates it is serious about finishing on time, and likewise, it should be willing to agree to a specified discount if it misses deadlines without notice or reason. If it can't commit to setting up a timeline like this, or are unwilling to accept financial penalties for non-delivery on their part, stop the conversation here.

4. A manual that explains how your site was built.

When you pay for a website, you are not just paying for a finished site that works, but for the keys to how it functions. Make sure that any agency you are considering is willing to provide you with all passwords, usernames, codes, scripts, and other tools used in the construction of your site. Having this allows you to truly own your website, and to manage and change it as you see fit going forward--whether with an internal webmaster or a different developer in the future. Talk about these aspects of your website rebuild as the first conversation you have with any potential partner, and you will have a much better chance of paying the right amount for a site that truly does what you need it to do.