

How to Evaluate Web Design Professionals and Firms – A Handy Checklist!



Technology Outsourcing – high quality, yet affordable solutions

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This is part of a series of business articles on our corporate website that aims to share our knowledge of how various business models and their associated processes are COMPLETELY TRANSFORMED by the Internet – for better or worse.

Why do websites have such a wide price range? From \$50 to more than \$10,000?

When it's time to create a website for any type of a business or individual/family, there is a lot of confusion among consumers. There are too many choices varying in price from \$50 to thousands of dollars. So why is there such a vast difference in price? Is it just a difference in quality?

When it comes to normal consumer purchases, there isn't such a large difference in price between the low end (inexpensive) product and the high end (luxury) product. For example, anyone can purchase an automobile starting at \$10,000 and stay under \$60,000. There are a few automobiles that can go up to \$250,000 in price but a majority of automobiles sold are in that price range (\$10,000 to \$60,000). Most of the times, we know why a particular product is sold at a given price. So why do websites have such a wide price range?

There are several reasons for why websites come in all prices. Let's look at one of the most basic reasons. We all know someone who has purchased a brand name product for a much lower price than the store price and the reasons range from the product being a cheap knockoff of the original, to being slightly defective (and hence sold at factory outlet stores) and sometimes being stolen merchandise. This happens with websites as well. The details are a little complicated to discuss here but usually the websites you purchase at too low a price have some kind of a problem that you will discover soon enough after investing a lot of time working with the designer. If you purchase websites that are legitimate, you will find that the prices are higher. Sometimes you can get a good bargain by purchasing a website design that is being reused by the web design professional or web design firm. This is because they save on time spent in designing a brand new website and pass the savings on to you.

The second set of reasons for has to do with the quality of the website. Quality takes on many shapes and forms. But here are a few issues you will run into if you pay too little for a website –

1. Customizing (or even making small changes) the website are difficult if not impossible.
2. The website is too slow.
3. The website is down quite a bit.
4. The email associated with the website name is not reliable.
5. The website is difficult to manage (takes too long to update, sometimes updating isn't an option, etc.).
6. The website doesn't work on certain computers, certain browsers (yes, there are hundreds of different types of browsers in the world), certain monitor settings, etc.
7. The website isn't an accurate reflection of your everyday business brand.
8. The website cannot be upgraded to a better technology that offers more features. Everyday, new features are becoming possible on the Internet for websites. Low quality websites cannot be upgraded to have these new features.

9. Low quality websites are not secure. Hackers can easily steal data from your website or wreak havoc by bringing the site down.
10. Low quality websites do not have a professional look to them. Sometimes the professional look doesn't matter but in some cases it does matter. That's when you need to utilize the services of a professional web design firm.
11. Most of the times, these low quality websites cannot be found on search engines! This is a very crucial aspect of having a website – to be found by your users on search engines.
12. Database functionality is most often not a possibility on low quality websites.
13. Software integration is most often not a possibility on low quality websites.
14. The list goes on and we could probably name another 100 issues you could have by purchasing low quality websites. In summary, what you save up front you end up losing a lot more in the long run.

7 Things to look for in a Web Design Firm and Ways to Evaluate them

There are more than 7 things to look for in a web design firm but these 7 listed below are a good place to start checking their credibility. We are providing some blank space after each point for you to take notes.

1. **One Stop Shopping?** Can the web design firm create a website for you that meets all of your short term and long term needs? There are hundreds of technologies involved in creating a website. Your website may only need a small number of them but it is important to check if your web design firm can handle everything you need. Here are a few examples –
 - a. **Corporate Identity:** If you are a startup business or looking to do a website makeover, you need to ensure that the web design firm knows quite a bit about corporate identity. It's not just putting together a random logo (these can be purchased for just a few dollars at your local computer store). The design firm needs to understand your business needs for the right logo and design a website around the logo. There are thousands of examples on the Internet of websites with mismatched logos. Corporate identity involves using fonts, images, navigation, etc. that embody the main theme (branding) of your business. The skill sets needed? Ability to use professional graphics design software (not just photo editing software), understanding the right usage of fonts (this makes a difference when you are trying to design ads for print), etc.

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- b. **HTML:** This is the guts of your website and a lot of web designers underestimate the importance of having expertise in this arena. It's not just HTML (web design software can generate this for you) but it's also the skilled usage of CSS, DHTML, and other related technologies.

- c. **Graphics Design:** The web design firm needs to be very talented in the technical usage of graphics design software and the creative design aspects of graphic design. This is such a complicated field that most web design firms max out in just mastering this one aspect of website design.

- d. **Scripting Languages:** If you want any type of advanced functionality on your website (like printer friendly pages, etc.), you need to find someone that can manipulate scripting languages to make your website do exactly what you need it to do.

- e. **Animation, Video, Audio:** This is a whole another world that companies specialize in. At the bare minimum you need to ensure that the company you are working with has someone who can use animation software.

- f. **Programming Languages:** If you want any type of interactivity on your website, you need a web design firm that has expertise in programming languages. This is one of the most complicated aspects of websites and there are hundreds of programming languages.

- g. **Database Programming:** This is even harder than programming languages and is usually very expensive. There are several different types of database technologies and it is important that the web design firm is very competent in this field if your website needs a database to store products, services, and the customer database.
- h. **Software Integration:** Large companies offer their software systems for you to utilize if you can integrate your website with them. This is extremely complicated and takes years of experience before a technology company can do this reliably and successfully. Most web design firms cannot handle this and hence you need to look for an IT firm.
- i. **Web Hosting:** If the web design firm doesn't have a firm grasp on web hosting, you end up paying the price in decreased performance. This is not simply paying for disk space, there is a lot of thinking that goes into a solid strategy for having a reliable website. This involves a deep knowledge of computer networking and designing robust systems.
- j. **Maintenance:** This is often overlooked. A website is always changing and as the world around us changes, so should your website. If you don't look into maintenance details, you may not be able to effectively use your website. Many companies are either too expensive to choose for maintenance or they are not around next year when you need them! Look for a 3 year track record and see if the company is incorporated (you can check state incorporate records online in most states) or at least a member of the local Chamber or Better Business Bureau.

2. **Marketing Channels:** Every business has multiple channels of marketing. The web design company needs to have more than one channel. Why is this important? If the only channel they use is the Internet, it is quite likely that they don't have sufficient experience in creating a website that has to be part of a multi-channel strategy. For example – most web design companies recommend using 'web safe' colors on a website. What if your company already has several print ads that don't use 'web safe' colors? What will the web design company recommend? By checking if they themselves use multiple channels in marketing their web design services, you can get a better idea how they will handle your website.
 - a. Simple check 1 – ask if they have any business cards and who designed their business cards. Check the business cards against their website.
 - b. Simple check 2 – ask if they have any flyers or brochures and who designed them. Check the flyers or brochures against their website.

3. **Website as a Marketing Channel:** How effective is the web design firm's web strategy? Can you find any of their websites on the Internet through search engines? Are they effectively using their marketing dollars in marketing to you? If the answer is no, then what are the chances they can help you with a good web strategy? Here are a couple of things you can do to perform a simple check on their capabilities -
 - a. Check their Google Page Rank. Most reputable web design firms seem to manage a minimum page rank of 5 or 6. To check their Google page rank, simply download the Google toolbar and follow the instructions. It typically takes less than 10 minutes to accomplish this.

 - b. Ask them if they have proof that any of their websites show up in the search engines. Make sure that the keyphrases they provide as proof are relevant. Check whether those keyphrases show up in major search engines like MSN, Google, and Yahoo.

4. **Can they be trusted?** There are several simple checks you can perform to weed out the scam artists. Try a few of these –
 - a. Check the state incorporation records online to see when the web design firm was incorporated. If they are less than 3 years old, proceed cautiously.
 - b. Check with your local Better Business Bureau if there are any complaints against the web design company you are planning on working with. It would be a good indication if the web design company is registered with the Better Business Bureau and has the BBB Online Reliability seal that can be verified by clicking on it.
 - c. Other trusted marks: There are other reputable trusted marks you can check for. Verisign, TrustE, etc. are just a few of the trusted companies and you can check to see if the web design firm has any of these on their website (and verify them).
 - d. Member of the local Chamber of Commerce. Some legitimate businesses involve themselves in the local community by being active in the local Chamber of Commerce. This gives at least some indication of the seriousness of the web design firm in serving businesses like yours.
 - e. We will update this list in the future with more methods of checking for some type of trust. Ultimately, you must remember the old adage ‘Buyer Beware’ which means that it is your responsibility to check for fraud but list we are providing is a good starting place.

5. **Employees or Independent Contractors?** Some web design firms only use independent contractors and it isn't such a bad thing except you may have some problems in the future if the independent contractor that designed your website no has a relationship with the web design company. Second, if the web design firm is a one person show they may not be around when you need them (either because they went out of business or are on vacation, etc.). Make sure that the web design firm has the resources to build your website.
6. **Technical Certifications:** If the employees of web design firms have some type of technical certification, you are probably in better hands. These certifications don't ensure anything but at least you know that some basic qualifications have been met. Ask if you can see copies of these certifications (at least scanned images on their website are better than nothing).
7. **Price List:** Does the web design have a fairly detailed price list that they are willing to publish? If not, you need to be very careful. Examine the reasons they do not want to publish a price list and see for yourself if those reasons are valid.

This is just the first revision of this document. We will update this document at least once a month. You can expect to see a much higher quality document over time as we add to this document based on feedback from users like yourself.

Do not hesitate to email us at info@thummas.com if you have any ideas on other topics for this document or brand new topics for a new document.