Snowflake Creative

10 Questions to ask your Web Designer

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1 How friendly will my website be for search engines to pick up and rank in search engine results?

Websites are built with code and it's this code that search engines use to read websites. Using automated bots, they list websites accordingly in their search engine for keywords and phrases. There are many factors that come into play when building a website optimised to rank highly in search engines.

Your site will most likely be built using HTML and CSS (Cascading Style Sheets). Make sure that your web developer does not use tables to layout the page, this is what the CSS is for. Tables create a lot of unnecessary code and give more for the search engines to read. The ratio between code and quality content is an important factor to rank highly. If your developer is trying to encourage you to have a flash website then consider this option very carefully as search engines can't read the content properly and your rankings will suffer.

Make sure the URL for every page contains the most important keyword or page name to help the search engine understand what the page is about. Many sites use stings of irrelevant characters in the URL so the search engines have no idea what the page will be about and most importantly not rank as high in search engine result positioning (SERPs).

Ask if the page titles and meta data will be entered into every page as these tell the search engines what the page is about. They should be relevant to the page's content and if well written, will increase your ranking. Lazy developers will simply copy the same details across your site, or worse leave them out.

2 Is my website completely custom made or will templates/re-used designs be utilised?

A template design or site builder is a tool that lets just about anyone build a website. If your designer is using one of these they are not really designing at all, just cutting and pasting your content into a ready made structure as all the programming is done. You could probably do it yourself and save money! It's a cheap way of getting a web presence, and could be just what you need if money is tight. By default though, designs are generic and not as professional as a bespoke built site, plus your site will look similar to others and it might not be able to give you the design you need. Many also use poor html coding that search engines won't find as easy to read through, and that means less chance of high search rankings. Lastly, if you have a problem or want to change your site you'll be reliant on the support and capability of the template or builder tool – not the designer. If the site builder can't do it, your designer will be reliant on their helpdesk to sort the issue.

3 Will my website be accessible and follow W3C compliancy?

Sites built to a W3C standard conform to basic usability standards and use valid code and a structure that can be read by the search engines. It's a good indicator of a quality site – so test your supplier's site and some of the sites they have built using the W3C validation service: http://validator.w3.org

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4 How easy will it be to update my website or will you do it for me?

You may be getting a Content Management System (CMS) with your website which you can use to update content, add pages and imagery etc. If this is the case make sure you ask to see it. There are many CMS systems out there that are extremely hard to use, completely ruin the site's code when you try and make simple updates and give you no chance of remaining W3C compliant. We have developed our own CMS that allows you to do these things easily whilst keeping compliant and clean code for search engines to pick up.

If you do not have a CMS ask about maintenance plans or how much updates will be. Many companies deliver the initial site very cheaply and then charge an arm and leg to correct a typo.

5 Will I own the domain name and website and will I be able to host myself if I want to?

So many businesses have come to us after falling out with their web developer and find that they have no control over their domain name or website and either have to pay a fortune to get control or start again with a new name. You should own the domain, after all it is your website. Make sure you agree a hosting fee before you get the site built or if you are planning to host yourself make sure this is possible. If you own the website it is a pretty good indication that it is a bespoke design and you will not see it elsewhere. You should hold the copyright.

6 What happens if something goes wrong with the website?

Websites are like cars, things can go wrong from time to time.If something happens to your site what support do you have and what costs are involved? Bugs can develop or you many need something corrected that you are unable to do. When new browser versions are released your site may need its code checked - have you got a maintenance plan to cover this?

7 Do you do all the design and build yourself or rely on third parties to complete?

Many design agencies offering web design and development do not have a clue how to design or develop a website and outsource it to other companies. They will not be able to offer the best and most cost effective solution for your needs and rely on other companies to deliver your site. You should commission a web company that can give you guidance and tell you what is and what is not good web practise.

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8 If you use an off the shelf Content Management System will you be able to build additional functionality when needed in the future?

Using badly built or an off the shelf CMS can often lead to trouble. As your business and budget grows you may want to add additional functionality to your site. Make sure your developer and website has the ability to grow with your company and can deliver what is needed.

9 Will I be number one on Google?

Any company promising they will get you to number one, no matter how much you pay are not telling the truth. There are many ways to rank highly on search engines but there can be no guarantees that you will rank in the first position. Discuss your search engine optimisation requirements with your web developer but be cautious if paying lots of money. If they give you lists of what they will do with your site ask how much is automated and how much work is involved their end.

10 Can I see your portfolio?

Viewing a web designer's portfolio will give you an idea of the quality they produce. See if every site they have designed looks the same and look to see if they have done any complex web work. Many designers just have one style and deliver similar sites to their entire client list. Every site should look different and they should showcase a wide range of sites with various functionality.

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