

Website Design and Online Marketing for Contracting Companies

WORKBOOK: How to Choose a Web Company

From The Smart Business Guide to the Web

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■ How to Choose a Web Company

STEP 1. Identify Initial Candidates

Identify a list of potential candidates from the following sources (you don't have to use them all):

Google searches for web design companies in your area

Word-of-mouth recommendations

Other sites you like (find out who did them)

The Yellow Pages

STEP 2. Evaluate Initial Candidates

Once you've assembled a list of candidates, you should evaluate each company's own website according to the criteria listed on the worksheet on the following page.

Photocopy or print multiple copies of the worksheet and fill one out for each company you're considering.



Website Evaluation Worksheet for Potential Web Design Companies

(Photocopy and fill out this sheet for each company under consideration)

Name of Company _____

Website Address _____

Design/Usability

- Yes No Does the homepage make you say “wow”?
- Yes No Do you like the overall design of their site? If not, are there other sites in the company’s portfolio that you like?
- Yes No Is it easy to find information on the site, and to go back to the homepage when you want to?
- Yes No Does the text on the site answer all or almost all of your questions about the designer’s skill, portfolio, and qualifications?
- Yes No Is the site easy to read?
- Yes No Is the navigation clear to you?
- Yes No Does the site provide information (easy-to-find phone numbers) and opportunities (a user-friendly online form) to enable you to contact the web design company easily?

Technology/SEO

- Yes No Do links and other technical elements (animation, images, etc) work properly?
- Yes No Are elements on the site aligned properly, and are they consistent from page to page?
- Yes No Does the site load quickly?
- Yes No Are page titles (the titles that appear in the upper, outer area of the window) appropriate and informative?
- Yes No Does the website use H1 tags (right click, View, Source to see code)?
- Yes No Does the website use custom Meta Keywords and Meta Descriptions?



Yes No Does the site use <DIV> tags and not <TR>, <TD> tags?

Relevant Experience

Yes No Does the site offer testimonials that make you feel that the company will understand your needs?

Yes No Does the company's online portfolio include sites made for other companies in your industry?

Customer Service

Yes No When you contact them to ask questions about their services, do they return your call or email promptly and pleasantly?

SCORING: Add up the number of "Yes" and "No" answers and enter the totals below:

"Yes" _____ "No" _____



STEP 3. Selecting Your Short List

Add up the Yes/No scores for each company you’re considering, and enter them into the following table:

Name of Company	Number of “Yes” boxes checked	Number of “No” boxes checked

Using the scores above to identify the most promising candidates, choose a few (at least two; ideally three or four) web companies for your short list.

(Note: If all your candidates score fewer than ten “yes” answers, go back and find more candidates. Don’t proceed to the next step without at least a couple of really good candidates.)

STEP 4. In-Person Meetings

Next, contact the companies on your short list and request an in-person meeting (or conference call, if you’re considering working with a firm outside your geographic area). The purpose of this meeting is for you to evaluate the company more closely, and to flesh out your website ideas so that the web company can give you an estimate.

After you’ve met with all the companies on your short list and read their proposals, fill out the evaluation worksheet on the following pages.

(It’s okay to go to the meeting unsure of what you want – it’s part of the web company’s job to help you understand your options. You can also use the questions on the worksheet to guide the discussion.)



Initial Meeting/Proposal Evaluation Worksheet for Potential Web Design Companies

(Photocopy and fill out this sheet for each company on your short list)

Name of Company _____

Names of the People with Whom You Met _____

Technology

Yes No Will the technologies (programming/database languages, content management systems, etc) used by the web company work well with technologies (especially databases) that you're currently using and want to keep, or technologies you plan to use in the future?

Yes No If you particularly like a website in a company's portfolio and want to emulate it, are the people who created it are still working there? Will they be available to work on your site?

Yes No If the company builds its sites on a database or Content Management System (CMS) platform, will you be able to customize your site enough to maintain your branding?

Yes No Are you happy with the technology the company proposes for you to use to update your site after it is launched? Do you feel that you have the time and skill to use the proposed technology comfortably?

Does the company have expertise in all facets of web design and development, specifically:

Yes No Current coding standards (does the company use generally-accepted best-practice programming languages – not fringe, new/trendy, or old/obsolete programming languages)?

Yes No Website usability (is the company aware of and does it implement best practices for usability)?

Yes No Website accessibility for users with disabilities such as blindness or an inability to use a conventional keyboard (is the company familiar with accessibility standards and know how to implement them)?



Yes No Online Marketing/Search Engine Optimization (SEO) – (does the company talk to you about your online marketing goals, particularly search engine marketing, and can it demonstrate success with previous clients)?

Yes No Content management (does the company's proposal include a recommended content management strategy)?

Relevant Experience

Yes No Has the web company been in business for a while and does it have a good reputation in the community?

Yes No Has the web company created sites for other businesses in your industry?

Yes No If so, did they do a good job?

Customer Service

Yes No Did the company send you an estimate promptly?

Yes No Do you like the people you met and feel comfortable with them?

Yes No Did they take the time to answer your questions?

Yes No Did they explain things well, without talking down to you or using confusing jargon?

Yes No Are you happy with the level of support you will receive from the company during the development of the site?

Yes No Are you happy with the level of tech support you will receive from the company after the site is launched?



Policies

Yes No Are you happy with the web company’s policies regarding copyright and payment?

Yes No Are you happy with the web company’s policies regarding payment?

Yes No Are you happy with the guarantees provided by the web company in case the site is late or you are unhappy with the results?

SCORING: Add up the number of “Yes” and “No” answers and enter the totals below:

“Yes” _____ “No” _____



STEP 5. Choose Finalists

First, eliminate any companies whose technologies won't work with the technologies you currently have and want to keep, or technologies you know you will want to have in the future.

Then, add up the Yes/No scores for each company you're still considering, and enter them into the following table:

Name of Company	Number of "Yes" boxes checked	Number of "No" boxes checked

Using the scores above, you should be able to identify two or three finalists.

(Note: If all your candidates score fewer than 15 "yes" answers, go back and interview more candidates. Don't proceed to the next step until you have at least two really good companies to choose from.)

STEP 6. References

Once you've picked your finalists, ask for references from each of them. Two references are a minimum; three or four are better. This is a big investment, after all!

Contact each reference, and based on your conversation, fill out the worksheet on the following pages.



Reference Evaluation Worksheet for Potential Web Design Companies

(For finalists only; photocopy and fill out this sheet for each reference for each company)

Name of Web Company _____

Company Name and Contact Name for Reference _____

Website Address of Reference Company _____

Note: If references mention problems, ask follow-up questions to make sure that they weren't the result of the following common client-side mistakes: being late in delivering materials or providing feedback; not communicating well internally and giving conflicting instructions to the web company; and/or having unrealistic expectations about what a website can do.

Yes No Was the company pleasant to work with?

Yes No Did the company clearly explain the scope of the project?

Yes No Did the company deliver the project as specified?

Yes No Did the website launch on time?

Yes No If there were any problems with the project, what were they?

Yes No Did the company follow up and offer support after the website was launched?

Is the site performing well now in terms of:

Yes No Ease of maintenance/updates

Yes No Customer feedback – do people like the way the site looks, can they find information

Yes No Serving as a sales channel – generating leads, funneling users into making contact

SCORING: Add up the number of “Yes” and “No” answers and enter the totals below:

“Yes” _____ “No” _____



STEP 7. Choosing Your Web Partner

In theory, you should now be able to select the web company you want to hire simply by adding up all the scores from your evaluation of each company's proposals and references.

Of course, in real life, things aren't quite so easy. Maybe you reached one of the references when they were in a bad mood; maybe someone has a personal connection to someone at one of the companies you're considering.

However, by following the system we've created here, you should have selected finalists with solid skills. Chances are you will be in good hands no matter which one you choose.

Now comes the subjective part. Maybe you've fallen in love with the design ability of one of your finalists, or maybe you're really impressed with the marketing savvy of your other finalist. At this point, it's up to you to decide what is most important to your company, and which set of skills will serve you best.

You should also make sure that you feel really good about the customer service offered by the company you choose, because the ability to reach out and connect with a client at the right time is crucial to the success of a project.

Despite all this subjectivity, it can be helpful to see in black and white how your finalists stack up, so enter their "Yes" scores in the table below and add them up.

Finalist Name	Website Evaluation Score	Meeting /Proposal Evaluation Score	Reference 1 Score	Reference 2 Score	Reference 3 Score	Reference 4 Score	Total

Best of luck to you with your website!

The iMarket Solutions Team

