



DO IT YOURSELF vs. THE PROFESSIONAL DESIGNER

Do It Yourself vs. the Professional Designer

Nearly every company in business today could derive substantial benefit from a well-executed and targeted web presence. In fact, consumer expectations and the significant reliance on the Internet as a primary source of information has created an environment where few businesses can achieve their full growth potential without investing in a quality website.

Creating a successful website is no longer a simple matter that consists of throwing together a few lines of HTML code, putting them in a file, and uploading the file onto the web. Web technology is continuing to develop and change rapidly, which means that by the time you finish reading this paper, the next best thing is already here.

With the ever increasing complexity of the web environment and the proliferation of web programs, services, and designers, how can a small business create a web presence that achieves its desired goals without breaking the bank? In the face of numerous options and potential costs, many small business owners are considering building their websites in-house rather than hiring the services of a web design professional.

The Do It Yourself (DIY) movement is spreading rapidly into the web services market. As the owner of a web development company, it is up to you to position yourself as essential to the design and implementation of successful websites. Achieving this requires a firm grasp of the merits and enticements of DIY, as well as a willingness to recognize how DIY can positively impact your business.

The Importance of a Quality Website

Ten years ago, typical small business websites often consisted of nothing more than the following basics:

- a few simple HTML pages
- some frames or tables
- a couple images
- static text
- an occasional link

A person did not have to know much about coding or have any significant design sensibility to create a simple and relatively effective website. However, as web technology has evolved, expectations have changed and grown; a basic one-page site isn't enough to maintain an adequate web presence or garner new clients anymore.

Internet users are more sophisticated than in the past – they want to see flashy, engaging elements, but they want meaningful content too. In a nutshell, they want to be engaged by the websites they visit. If a site is boring or bland, it can seem unprofessional. A business website must evoke a feeling of quality while being appropriate for its intended audience.

Successful websites accommodate these changes in overall expectations, as well as the specific needs of the customers it will serve. Determining the target customer base is part of designing a quality website, and evaluating the needs of potential clients can contribute significantly to determining the make-up of the target market and what that market will expect.

Evaluating Potential Clients' Needs

Before a business owner can decide whether to hire a professional designer or to employ a DIY plan of attack, it is imperative that he evaluate the needs of the company. By considering a series of targeted questions, the decision maker can better determine whether a DIY approach is feasible or if a professional designer is required.

It might seem like DIY competes with your potential business, but this is not necessarily the case. You don't really want every dreamer looking to hang out a shingle as a client. You only want clients who have a solid foundation and the growth potential to work with you for many years to come, so it makes sense to weed out businesses that would be better served by doing it themselves.

By asking potential clients the following questions, you can evaluate their needs and determine whether they are ready to hire your firm or if they would get more bang for their buck from a DIY approach:

- What do you want and need from your website?
- Will your website serve an informational purpose with the primary goal being to direct customers to your brick and mortar business?
- Are you trying to expand your business by tapping into the e-commerce marketplace?
- Do you want your website to be a destination where people interact with each other online?
- Do you want to expand the business capacity of your existing website?

- How much of your business operations do you plan to manage online?
- Will your site serve a clientele that might have difficulty accessing or using the web?
- How much time and money have you budgeted for your website?
- Do you have any design or coding experience?
- What do you expect from your business and your website in 2, 5, or 10 years?

By reviewing these questions with potential clients, you can help them determine if designing a website is something they can handle on their own or if they should plan to hire a professional (namely, you). If there are additional questions that you think would be valuable for you or your potential clients, don't hesitate to add them to the list.

You should decide at what point in the decision making process you want to get involved. Depending on what will best serve your goals and desired approach to interacting with clients, you can choose any of the following options for how you want to share your evaluation questions with potential customers:

- **Post on your website.** This is the least interactive method that requires minimal involvement on your part, but it also means you could convince potential customers they don't need you before they ever talk to you. You won't participate in the evaluation and you'll have little chance of earning their business.
- **Deliver by email.** This method requires a moderate level of involvement. It forces the potential client to initiate contact, which gives you an opportunity to get more involved if you feel so inclined.
- **Require an in-person or telephone consultation.** This is the most time intensive method, but it ensures that you participate in evaluating the potential client's needs. This option gives you the best chance of securing the contract if it is a project with which you want to become involved.

Do It Yourself

DIY is becoming a maxim in today's culture. Of course there are some things that absolutely require the services of a professional, but there is a growing attitude that is embodied by the idea that if I can do it myself and do a pretty good job, why should I pay someone else to do it for me?

In this sense the web services industry is no different from the home improvement industry. People want autonomy, they want to work on their own schedule, and they

want to save money. If they think they can achieve similar results as a professional for less money by doing it themselves, they're likely to make that choice.

The key is to know when the job calls for a professional. For example, while an unskilled person might be able to hang his own wallpaper to his satisfaction, he is less likely to be able to repair a broken pipe. It works the same for the web. A static, 5-page, HTML site is nothing like a 1000-page, CMS-based e-commerce site with dynamic content. An untrained person might be able to create an adequate site if it is simple in format and intent, but complex and technical sites should be left to the professionals.

Pros and Cons

DIY offers the following positive features:

- **Autonomy:** The vision of the business owners can shine through unfettered by outside influences. They don't have to worry about receiving things they don't want, and they don't have to deal with other people thinking they know what is best for the company.
- **Cost:** DIY requires little to no monetary outlay other than software products and web hosting charges.
- **Ease:** The learning curve to develop a simple, no frills website is relatively small, and numerous tools exist to help ease a beginner into the process. Many free or low cost templates with a good deal of customization are available on the web. Additionally, basic HTML is fairly easy to learn and a variety of free or inexpensive WYSIWYG web authoring programs can be found on the Internet.

DIY can be limited by the following potentially negative consequences:

- **Time:** There is a time-cost trade off with DIY. It might save some money, but it will require time to complete the project. Business owners should know what their time is worth so they can conduct accurate cost comparisons between DIY and a professional designer.
- **Effort:** Basic HTML is relatively easy to learn and use, but websites built using only basic HTML will struggle to compete in today's marketplace. WYSIWIG editors can be extremely useful, but they are limiting in their overall capabilities, the relatively unattractive code they produce, and the inadequate flexibility they provide for future changes.
- **Appearance:** It is difficult for an amateur to build a site that doesn't look like it was designed by a beginner, but if the company chooses to use a template to circumvent that risk, other problems can arise. Templates tend to look very similar, which can be devastating for a business that needs to stand out from the rest. Additionally, many free

hosting and template services require sites to display built-in advertisements that can detract from the professional appearance of the site.

- **Cost:** Inexpensive web services often advertise minimal packages with limited support. By the time a company subscribes to all the advanced services that are necessary, the cost savings has vanished.

The Professional Designer

Professional web designers and developers are people who know their industry, understand the requirements of the web environment, and are committed to their craft. In short, they are experts. When you market yourself as a professional web designer, you are telling potential customers that you know what you are doing and you will deliver a product that exceeds the quality they could achieve on their own.

Hiring a professional brings all the benefits one might expect, but it can have some potential downsides as well.

Pros and Cons

Hiring a professional designer offers the following positive features:

- **Knowledge:** Good web designers have extensive knowledge of relevant software, design fundamentals, current trends, and more. This knowledge allows them to recommend solutions that are appropriate for the needs of individual businesses.
- **Efficiency:** Professionals are familiar with the products they use and the solutions they provide, so they can produce quality results with much more efficiency than a beginner.
- **Creativity:** Part of being a web designer is having the innate creativity to blend form and function in successful ways. The creativity that a professional brings to a website can be the extra ingredient that makes the site stand out above all the rest.
- **Quality:** A well-designed website that is built using best practices has much more impact than a mediocre site that might not incorporate certain features that could improve accessibility, functionality, and search engine rankings.
- **Out of Sight, Out of Mind:** By hiring a professional, the business owner can relinquish responsibility for the implementation of the project, which frees up time to focus on other projects.

- **Ongoing Support:** Building a relationship with a design agency means that continued support is available beyond the completion of the project, which can be a welcome relief for many businesses.
- **Growth Potential:** As a business grows, needs and requirements can change. A professional company has the ability to grow with a business, spearheading the evolution of the web presence to match the current state of the business and contribute to its continued growth.

Hiring a professional designer can be limiting due to the following potentially negative consequences:

- **Cost:** Professional design services will cost more than a DIY approach – and they should. However, the cost isn't necessarily any higher once you factor in time value, initial and ongoing expenses, and the potentially higher profitability of the site due to its professional design.
- **Time:** Web design firms are often working on multiple projects at the same time, so it can take awhile for the project to be fully completed.
- **Communication Breakdowns:** Anytime another person is added to the decision making circle, it increases the chances of a breakdown in communication. Professionals constantly have to interpret the desires of their clients, but sometimes the expectations get lost in translation.
- **Ongoing Costs:** If the original website project evolves into a maintenance and update plan, there will be ongoing, regular costs that would not exist in a DIY implementation.

Addressing the DIY Trend

Embracing the reality that DIY is a growing trend in web design will give you a better foothold in the market than ignoring it in the hopes that it will go away. By understanding how DIY impacts your industry, you can adjust your business model to capture valuable clients and take advantage of the interest generated by the DIY philosophy. Don't immediately write off people who express an interest in DIY – if you market yourself effectively, they could end up being some of your best clients.

Including DIY-related information and/or resources on your website can draw traffic from potential clients who are initially leaning toward DIY. Once you have their attention, you should explore the differences between DIY and professional designers. This allows you to highlight how a business will benefit from hiring your company.

Be sincere in your analysis of the differences; if your content isn't useful and valid, you will undermine the effectiveness of this technique.

Optimizing Your Site with DIY Resources

If you plan to offer DIY evaluation questions or other information on your website and you would like to increase your SEO content at the same time, consider adding some general resources for DIYers. A list of common tools is a great way to add high impact design terms while maintaining meaningful content.

The following list of product names and links should help you get started on your DIY resources page:

Website Design Software

- Adobe Dreamweaver: www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver
- XSite Pro: www.xsitepro.com
- Kompozer: www.kompozer.net
- Amaya: www.w3.org/Amaya/Amaya.html

All-Inclusive Web Design

- Network Solutions:
www.networksolutions.com/create-a-website/index.jsp

Image Editing Software

- Adobe Photoshop: www.adobe.com/products/photoshop
- Gimp: www.gimp.org
- Pixia: www.ne.jp/asahi/mighty/knight
- FreeSerifSoftware: www.freeserifsoftware.com

Conclusion

DIY is a valuable addition to the web services family of options, but it does have its limitations. Business owners who choose to build their websites themselves are often disappointed in the overall results or the necessary time investment. Many end up passing the project off to a professional because of these (and other) frustrations.

Still, DIY definitely has a place in web design, and it is the right choice for some companies. Make a concerted effort to recognize the value of DIY, if for no other reason than to develop techniques for convincing potential clients why your services are worth the extra money they will pay. Use your creativity to find ways to leverage the growing DIY movement to your advantage.

Most importantly, remember that any contribution to the continually increasing relevance of quality websites to the business world is good news for you!