



The Design Process

Before I define what the design process is, I'd like to give a short description of graphic design. The principle function of graphic design is to convey thoughts and ideas from one person to another. Through the use of visual expression combined with words, concepts are presented as a coherent whole. Design can also be seen as a quest for order and structure.

Graphic designers are specially trained professionals who are able to bring a lifetime of visual impression to the process of organizing materials and information for a specific form or purpose. Communication is almost always the primary function, and involves the appropriate expression of an idea, and the creation of a response from the viewer.

Good graphic designers will bring a combination of inspiration and originality to each project, as well as a wide range of skills and abilities. They also usually follow a decision-making process with the objective of creating something that is better than what has come before. It is this process I'd like to outline here.

I recommend the following steps be considered when beginning the process of finding a graphic designer. Hopefully, these steps will help guide you in planning a design project that meets the needs of the challenge at hand.

- 1) **Client Preplanning** – This step is one of the most crucial. As the client, you should spend time evaluating your needs: why you want a web site at all, what you want your web site to accomplish, and what back-end abilities may be required. Locating websites you like is good way to research this.
 - a. *Will you be selling online?* Then you need an e-commerce site with a secure shopping cart, a database to manage selections and inventory, tracking capabilities for purchases, fulfillment processes for orders, and customer support.
 - b. *Is it an informational site?* How should information be given? To whom should it go, and in what order? How much do you want to say? Some information lends itself better to online methods (such as online brochures) than other types (complex processes or instructions, etc.). Will there be a need for downloading newsletters, manuals, documentation, training materials, or the like?
 - c. *Is it a health care site?* Then bear in mind HIPAA requirements, and other functions like electronic medical records, appointments, etc.
 - d. *Do you want to maintain the site yourself once it's complete?* Then you're probably looking at a content management system. They're more expensive, but worth it to those who really want/need that level of control.
 - e. *Do you have a hosting company?* Not all web designers offer hosting... and vice versa.

- f. *Do you need help with the content?* Maybe a copywriter, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) specialist, editor, or some other online marketing professional is needed.
- g. *Are there special requirements?* These include online video or audio, streaming media, file download/upload, advertising capability, search capabilities, online forms, etc.

- 2) **Develop a Request for Proposal/Quote (RFP/RFQ) – This is the document that will become the basis for your agreement with the web designer, and should be prepared before you meet with them – I do not recommend hiring a designer without something in writing.** Some companies use formal proposal processes, others are a little less formal. But the answers to the questions in the planning stage put you a long way down the road to completing the RFP/RFQ. In addition to that information, your document may also contain budget requirements, desired timeline - especially launch date of the web site - company history, and a description of the marketing or informational needs of the project. If possible, the level of sophistication of the website can be outlined here. You can even include examples of existing web sites that have the features you want. This document is then submitted to your design candidates.
- 3) **Finding the Design Candidates** – More research. Talk to your colleagues who have successful web sites and ask them for referrals. Look on the web for sites you like, and scroll down to the bottom of a page – some web designers include a link there, so visit their website! Search the Internet for web designers, and again, visit their websites. Professional web designers will have an online portfolio of their work available, so view it. Call them. Talk to them. Ask about their experience. And if you like what you hear, send them the RFQ.

Here are some questions you might ask:

- a. *Do you offer hosting?* If the answer is no, you'll need to find a hosting company. Most web designers who do not host the sites themselves should be able to offer good resources for hosting companies.
- b. *Do you offer Search Engine Optimization (SEO)?* Briefly, SEO is a method of manipulating where your web site address appears when a web search is done. It is a worthwhile consideration, but is a profession in and of itself, and much too complex to go into here.
- c. *What does maintenance cost?* It's usually a monthly charge, although some charge by the hour. Either way, make sure you know up front what the requirement is.
- d. *What types of clients do you work with?* Even if this is evident when you view their portfolio, ask again. Yours may be the first web site they've designed in your industry. That doesn't mean they won't do a good job, but you have to decide what works best for you.
- e. *Ask about their process.* Some web designers want complete control, some prefer to collaborate. If you have in-house staff that may maintain the site or have input, determine the best way to handle that, too.
- f. *Who owns my website?* You should, but we've all heard horror stories of web sites being held hostage by a disgruntled web master. You should register your own domain name, for example, not the web designer. If they don't agree, consider carefully what might happen if your relationship with them sours.

- g. *How will the billing for the project be handled?* Some designers want payment up front. Some will take monthly payments. Some will take a deposit, and final payment once complete.
 - h. *How are changes handled?* I once worked with a developer who insisted on “change orders” every time a request from the client was made (and yes, it was billable). Get that spelled out before you agree to anything.
- 4) **Talk to them in person if possible.** – I always encourage face-to-face meetings. Designing a web site is an intense process, and you need to feel comfortable with the web designer or firm. The designer or firm will have questions for you as well in regard to your site. Here’s a small sample of what you might be asked.
- a. How many pages will your website contain?
 - b. Is it an e-commerce site?
 - c. Do you require hosting?
 - d. Do you need email addresses as part of the hosting package?
 - e. Do you require maintenance?
 - f. What is the budget for this web site?
 - g. Who will provide content, images, etc?
 - h. How will the website be evaluated (by whom in the company)?

You should be prepared to answer these and other questions in the initial meeting. It is extremely difficult to estimate a website, and unfair to expect an accurate price, without this type of information. Some questions may be difficult to answer – so ask the web designer to consult with you (some offer a free initial consultation for this purpose).

For example: The number of web pages. A professional web designer should be able to diagram a website before any actual work takes place anyway, so take advantage of their expertise. You can refer them to sample sites, or provide them with an outline of your content to help them. You can also request that a site map be included in their estimate.

- 5) **Get references – and check them!** – This is extremely important. A good web designer will happily provide these – and a word-of-mouth referral, as we all know, is golden. Visit the sites of the references, and ask them about their experience in working with the designer. You want to be able to trust this person/firm. After all, they will have access to a lot of information about your company, and are working on a very visible aspect of your identity. Make sure your designer is someone who inspires confidence.
- 6) **Making your choice** – Although price is always a consideration, be sensitive to the fact that a bargain isn’t always a bargain – you can end up with a site that is not flexible or able to grow. Good professional web design takes time, and costs money. Be cautious about consumer hosting sites like GoDaddy, Yahoo, etc.

Evelyn McCauley, Design Consultant
9401 Cartersville Court, Raleigh NC 27617
www.emdesignconsulting.com

While inexpensive, they don't always support all the functions you may want in the future, or have specific requirements regarding how the site is built – and this can cause major problems when you try to expand if you don't have that information at the outset. If you have a small budget, consider developing your site in phases. If you really can't afford the professional fees, you can consider a template, but again, be aware of the limits.

A well-designed web site should be usable, attractive, flexible, and easy to update. Dynamic content, virtually immediate access to information, and marketing cachet are just a few of the advantages to a thoughtfully planned, professionally developed site.

Evelyn McCauley, owner of EMDC, hires web developers, and designs, manages and produces print, web, and other projects for a variety of clients. Visit her website at www.emdesignconsulting.com

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