7 Questions to Ask Before Hiring a Web Designer

There are many web designers out there, eager for your business. They know that authors and others in the book industry understand the need to have a web presence. A lot of them are well-trained in the technology of building a website, and are quite good at what they do. Still others are graphic designers who needed to offer website design as a service, as this is what their clients needed and wanted. Then there are large companies offering template websites with enticing functionality, who have a team of website salesmen, essentially. There is no web designer involved in the sales process, only a technician on the other end of the phone. Then there are those who have taken an online HTML course, and start selling their services as a web designer. No wonder business owners are confused about who to hire, and how to decide who to hire.

Your website is your online face. It must represent you well. If it looks unprofessional, potential customers will get the impression that you're not a serious author or publisher. A website that looks unprofessional is worse than no website at all.

There are some specific questions to ask that will give you clues as to whether a web designer that you are considering hiring can produce the results that you desire from your website.

1. How will you build a website that will load fast, capture the attention of the visitor within seven seconds, and keep them coming back again and again?
That's right; you only have 7-9 seconds to capture the attention of your visitor before they leave for another website. Therefore, any designer whom you hire must understand how to build web pages that load quickly, with content that gets the visitor's attention and tells him that he should order your book if you're an author, or hire your services if you are a publisher.

2. Do you know how to set up an email-capture form and hook it up with an autoresponder?
Without a way to capture the email addresses of your visitors so that you can continue to correspond with them, you're leaving a lot of money on the table. That visitor may hesitate to buy your book, or other products or services, and may have every intention of returning in the future. If you have his email address, which you have enticed him to give you in exchange for free information, book chapters, or something he would consider of value, you can build a relationship with him until he is ready to become a customer.

3. Can you design my site so that the call to action is clear and prominent?
Again, a good web designer will understand that without a clear call to action, you are wasting your resources. The visitor needs to know what it is you want them to do, whether it's to buy your book, sign up for your newsletter, or call you to find out more about your services.

4. Will my pages be optimized for the search engines, and how?
 The web designer you hire should understand the uses of keywords in the content as well as the coding and linking strategies. This is vital to the success of your website. It can be beautiful, but

if potential clients fail to find you on the Internet, what good is it? Even if you are a well-known author, you want your website to pop up in search results ahead of any reviews or articles about your published work.

5. **Which browsers and which versions do you check to ensure that the site is workable?**
The two major browsers being used today are IE (Internet Explorer) and FireFox. AOL has its own version of IE. Mac users have Safari as a browser. Your web designer should be checking your website <u>at least</u> in the last two versions of IE, FireFox and Safari to ensure that everything works properly. Although there are standards for coding web pages, browsers see things differently. You want as many people as possible to see your site the way it was meant to be seen.

6. **Will my site be designed according to the accessibility guidelines and other W3C standards?**
 The W3C is a non-profit commission that sets the standards for website coding. There are guidelines that should be followed to ensure that people with disabilities have the same access to your website. For instance, on a lot of sites these days the links fail to be underlined. They will make the linked text another color instead. Someone who is color blind will likely miss the different color, and fail to know that the text is a link.

7. **Can you design the navigation so that it is clear, understandable, and the visitor will always know where he is in the site and can find what he wants without clicking more than three times?**
The 7-9 second rule applies here. If the visitor is unable to figure out where to go for the information he seeks, he'll move on to the next website. A common, unfortunate phenomenon is referred to as "mystery meat navigation". This refers to the use of images for buttons, but they fail to say anything! You have to run your mouse all over the site to try to figure out where the information is.

If a web designer can answer these questions to your satisfaction, then there is a good chance that he or she will be able to create a site that will bring you business. It doesn't even matter so much whether they specialize in book and publishing industry websites, as long as they can answer these seven questions to your satisfaction.

Here are a couple more basic tips:

- Make sure that YOU are the owner of your domain name. Some web designers register their customers' sites in their own name. But what if something happens to that person? You have to jump through hoops to convince the domain registry company that you are really the owner!
- Make sure that you have all of the hosting company codes and contact information necessary to access your website, even if your web designer is maintaining your site for you. Again, if something happens, you need to be able to get to your own site, or know who to call so that your new web designer can access the site.

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