10 Questions to Ask Your Website Designer

You need more than just a pretty website. You need a site that delivers business results. And you need a website designer who can do that. Look at their portfolio, ask for references, and talk with current/past clients. Then ask these questions before you consider hiring them.

- [ ] 1. What is your typical process when working with a new client?
- [ ] 2. Will the site be built using a template, or is it a custom design?
- [ ] 3. Will my site be mobile responsive and cross-browser compatible?
- [ ] 4. How will you help my website get found online?
- [ ] 5. Who will own the website when it is complete?
- [ ] 6. Can I update the website myself?
- [ ] 7. How much will you charge for hosting?
- [ ] 8. How do you handle updates and ongoing support after the site is launched?
- [ ] 9. Do you offer training to help me manage my own website?
- [ ] 10. What other services do you provide?

What is your typical process when working with a new client?
Designers vary widely in skills and experience. Often, they're focused on building a site that looks nice and works well. But the better designers are more focused on helping you achieve business-related goals. Experienced designers will work with you to understand your business, customers, strategy, short- and long-term goals, available resources, and more. This process can take considerable time, depending on how well you've thought through these issues. Beware of any designer who starts out with "So, what do you want the website to look like?" And run, fast, from any designer who says "Just send me your logo, some photos, and what you want to say. I'll take it from there."

Will the site be built using a template, or is it a custom design?
Many "designers" take an existing template, slap your logo on the home page, change a few colors, and call it good. Sure, the template has been "customized" but the end result is unlikely to meet your unique needs. In many cases it looks sloppy and unprofessional. Make sure that the site is built just for you to reflect your unique brand and business goals.

Will my site be mobile responsive and cross-browser compatible?
You want your site to look reasonably similar (and to work flawlessly) on all major browsers. Make sure that your designer tests for this as part of the development process. Modern websites should also be mobile responsive, meaning that they display well and can be easily read on all mobile devices, from smart phones to tablets. Note that they will not look the same across devices; instead, the layout shifts to provide the best reading experience for the user.

How will you help my website get found online?
If no one finds your website, you've just wasted your money. Search engine optimization (SEO) involves the things that are done to your website to help Google, Bing, and other search engines find your site. A good designer will work with you to ensure that SEO is built into every page of the website from the very beginning. Some also have expertise in online marketing, including

pay-per-click (Google AdWords), Facebook ads, social media, and more. A designer with SEO and internet marketing experience is worth their weight in gold.

Who will own the website when it is complete?

Believe it or not, in some states the web designer will own the site, even though you paid for it. Web designers can also claim the site as their own copyrighted work. Make sure the designer waives all right to the site (including the design, content, graphics, etc.). Other companies build websites using proprietary technology (e.g., WIX, Hibu, Hearst). While you may own the content, they "own" everything else and you cannot take your website elsewhere (you're basically held hostage). Make sure you have (or have reliable access to) a copy of all graphic and content files used on your site.

Can I update the website myself?

Good websites aren't static – they're constantly updated to keep things fresh and provide the latest information for customers. Some sites can only be updated by your designer, meaning that you're at their mercy. You'll need technical coding skills or expensive software packages to update other sites. But some websites are built with an easy-to-use content management system (CMS) that lets you update key parts of the site with no coding knowledge or help from your designer. A very popular option these days is WordPress.

How much will you charge for hosting?

Once the website is built you will need to host it (think of it as publishing it so that it can be seen online). This will be a monthly fee. There are companies that just provide hosting (and they do that at a reasonable rate) but your web designer may also offer hosting services. The price can range from a small number for "hosting only" to a larger number that includes website monitoring, security checks, updates, and more. Make sure you understand exactly what will be included in your hosting plan.

How do you handle updates and ongoing support after the site is launched?

As your business evolves, so should your website. You may want to add new functionality, change up the design, or remove sections of the website. Find out how much these updates will cost and how to contract with your designer for this. Some designers charge an hourly rate; check whether they bill in 15 or 30-minute increments, or just by the hour. Also ask for examples of follow-up work they've done with other clients; you want a designer who stays in touch with clients and continues to work with them over the long term.

Do you offer training to help me manage my own website?

If you'd like to make updates yourself, particularly if you have a WordPress site, you can find training courses online. Or you can ask your designer to give you the training you need to work with your own site; typically, this training would be tailored to your site so you'll know exactly what to do and why. Of course, you should expect to pay the designer for this training.

What other services do you provide?

Some website designers just design. Others do design, development, and programming to actually build the site and get it online. And still others offer a range of services, including digital strategy, logo design, online marketing, social media, PR, email marketing and newsletters. If you can find a design service that offers multiple options, this will typically be your best return on investment as all of your online efforts can be coordinated to deliver the business growth you want.