



## T75 What you need to know to Hire and Manage a Web Developer

*Market your business without going Nuts!*  
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### **A Good Design / Marketing firm WILL . . .**

...Ask you about your business and what type of guests you are currently attracting. They should also ask you what type of guests you want to attract if you aren't getting the volume you need. What your niche traffic is (special destination draws), if you have any current statistics that can be reviewed, what type of increase in bookings you are looking for, etc.

...Ask you about any Search Engine Marketing Programs you may be paying for. Google Ad Words, Overture, etc. And what directories you may or may not be currently advertising with.

...Want to identify what is currently working on your site, expound on those things that are working, and suggest changes to fix what isn't working BEFORE they begin a new design.

... Caution you regarding visual impact (splash pages, too much flash, etc.) vs. the usability, load time, search engine friendliness factors, etc.

...Walk a fine line between a "Gorgeous Piece of Artwork" web site and a highly functional, easy to navigate, quick to load site that is built to place high in the search engines. The weaving of the two together requires the designer to have knowledge of what the search engines want, and a good understanding of how to provide it in a visually rich environment.

... Have a basic understanding of Link Popularity, and how it works in conjunction with the design of the site.

... Spell out all the costs in advance and in writing.

... Provide as many references you want to request.

... Provide you ownership of the web site code once it is completed, online and has been paid for.

... If hosting with your design / marketing firm, they should be able to provide FTP access to you at no additional charge should you wish to request it.

... Take the time to make sure you understand what they are doing for you and why. YES! Innkeepers can understand the basic concepts of Internet marketing. They simply need someone to take the time to explain it so a non-developer can understand it. Don't let a design / marketing firm talk over your head or tell you it's too complicated to explain. Be cautious of designers who cannot provide proof or examples of how what they are doing for you is going to help you and your business.

... Keep in mind it's useful to hire a design / marketing firm that understands your industry.

### **A Good Design / Marketing firm WILL NOT ...**

... Recommend a Framed Site.

... Begin a new design without clearly identifying your goal for the re-design, and look and feel, number and type of pages etc. in advance.

... Recommend you purchasing multiple URLs to raise your placement in the search engines. Marketing multiple domains to one web site can produce disastrous results with your organic placement.

... Take ownership of your URL. This is your ONLINE IDENTITY. If you don't own it – you could find you've spent a good deal of money promoting it only to lose it. You need to be the primary administrative contact for your URL -- not your designer / marketer or hoster. They should be assigned as technical contact only.

*You should NEVER consider hiring a design / marketing firm who DOES NOT realize that the <title>, <meta name="description">, and <meta name="keywords"> tags should be different on every page. The more pages your site has, the more opportunities you have to appear in the search listings multiple times for multiple pages with unique search phrases.*

**Once the site is live you should expect your design / marketing firm to provide you access to purchase (or provide you) the tools to...**

- Track your visitors (human vs. spiders)
- Track your trends – what pages are being found and visited.
- Track your bookings and where they are coming from.
- Know if your design is working by watching your bounce rates.
- Allow you to have tools installed to modify your web site text on your own. (Search Engines want fresh sites; if you can do it yourself, you will experience a cost savings)
- Allow you to create ways to drive more traffic and thus more bookings. Specials pages updateable by the innkeeper, a newsletter and e-mail sign-up programs to help you increase your business.
- Offer Programs for Monthly Tracking and useful advice or offer training for you to be able to do it yourself.

**Association and Regional Site Development Do's**

- DO Create a web site committee.
- DO Search out other State web sites you like and feel are user friendly.
- DO Limit the site selection to 3 sites identifying the site features that would best represent the needs of your Association members.
- DO Realize this analysis will be different when developing a state wide site as compared to a regional site.
- DO Choose at least 3 Development Firms and get preliminary costs.

Note: Costs will be different with each web company. Choosing a web designer in a critical to the success and completion of your project as is the design concept.

- DO Choose at least 3 Development Firms and get preliminary costs.
- DO Have the committee agree to start the project in stages, when necessary, in order to meet their budget requirements.
- DO Develop a road map of how and when each phase of design will be completed and identify the budget to support each phase.
- DO Realize that even at the first stage of development the site must be efficient and functional. And in the case of a database site, functionality includes the members loading their photos and information and the design such that the search engines will find the site properly.

Caution: Future site development should happen according to the web site road map. Planned stages will lead the site to a financial level of refinement. Without a roadmap to success an Association very well may run into financial troubles, and may have to shelf the project till a later future date. Choosing a seasoned and experienced Web Designer and Hosting Company is critical. They need to provide the knowledge and experience to assist the association in making good decisions to create a highly functional site staying within the budget of the association.

We owe our very existence to the caveman's (and cavewoman's) ability to know when to run away. Without this vital skill, we would have died out as a species long ago. In the time of the caveman it tended to be a lot easier to identify and respond to danger than it is today. Not a lot of time was lost standing around trying to identify the intentions of the saber-tooth tiger that was chasing the tribe.

Just like their ancient ancestors, modern day website managers/owners need to be aware of and avoid danger. One of the most dangerous times for websites is during a website re-design. Today the survival of many websites depend on the ability of the website owners/managers to recognize (and run away from) danger during a re-design.

"Today the survival of many websites depends on the ability of the website owners/managers to recognize (and run away from) danger."

Over the years, I have seen many companies sacrifice their website Search Engine visibility on the altar of re-design. Perhaps the most extreme example occurred a few years ago with a rental and service company for whom we had achieved phenomenal Search Engine visibility. The company thanked us very vocally for the literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of new business they were generating from their website now that it was being found on all the major Search Engines. As sometimes happens, our main contact within the company moved on and a new person was hired to manage their website. Unfortunately, without consulting with us, or bothering to find out why the website was doing so well on all the major Search Engines, the new website manager took down the carefully crafted and optimized website pages and replaced them all with images. Each website page was now one image. Search Engines cannot 'see' the content that is displayed via images. Predictably, the website Search Engine visibility began to plummet. We tried speaking with the website manager and even ended up speaking directly to the company owner – explaining what was happening and the need for swift action. His reply was, 'well it's ok – we are pretty booked up right now.' As a result, the website lost all of its Search Engine visibility and they no longer had to worry about all the new customers coming to him via the Search Engines.

An inexperienced and unknowing employee sinks a website. It happens. But what happens even more often is the sinking of websites during re-design by 'professional' designers. Unfortunately, there are a lot of web design companies that have absolutely no clue about Search Engine Marketing or Optimization. There are still web designers who are convincing site owners to use a Splash entry page, think sites that are all in Flash are a great idea, and still kinda like Frames! These designers are not interested in promoting your business – they are interested in getting their designs up on the Internet. To them it does not matter that your site cannot be found on Search Engines, or that those few visitors who do stumble across your site find it unusable – what matters is that the website conforms to their idea of good design.

To assist individuals thinking about a site redesign I have developed a "Run Away If" list that will save you grief, time, and money. This list presents very real danger signals that cautious website owners and managers should be aware of.

## **RUN AWAY if your web designer:**

- \* **Does not ask you about your business**
- \* **Does not ask you any questions about your Search Engine Marketing and Optimization programs**
- \* **Begins the new design without discussing with you the goal of your website**
- \* **Begins the new design without discussing with you who your target audience is**
- \* **Puts visual impact ahead of the usability of the web site**
- \* **Recommends a Splash entry page (Search Engines cannot normally 'see' Splash pages. This is a dated feature that tends to put off site visitors – who will often simply leave the page (and the website) before it has had a chance to load)**
- \* **Recommends your entire site be in Flash (Search Engines cannot 'see' Flash pages)**
- \* **Recommends putting your site in Frames (Search Engines have great difficulty 'seeing' Frames pages – there are workarounds for using Frames but they are a costly retro-fit. A good designer will recommend using tables rather than Frames if you have your heart set on a Frames look)**
- \* **Does not realize that the <title>, <meta name="description">, and <meta name="keywords"> tags should be different on every page**

If you are using the services of a professional Search Engine Marketing company, please ensure that your web designer follows their recommendations. If you are not using a Search Engine Marketing company, speak with your designers and make sure they understand:

- \* **How to optimize a website for Search Engines**
- \* **How to design a website that will be user friendly for your target customers, and . . .**
- \* **What you want to achieve with your website.**

Be careful out there – there are very real dangers facing your website.

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