

ComputerWeekly.com

Guide to sourcing Flash designers



**How to source the right
Flash designer for your business**

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FLASH DESIGNERS: A BUYER'S GUIDE

Flash is probably one of the most exciting technologies in use on the World Wide Web. Using Flash, designers can place sounds, music, videos, animations and interactive games into web sites and create advertisements that literally jump off or over web pages. Though Flash is an established technology, it is still being developed and designers are continually finding new ways to exploit its capabilities and create dynamic, entertaining and attention-grabbing content. This buyer's guide gives you an overview of what Flash is and how it works, the wide and increasing range of uses for it, and how to find, assess and choose the best Flash designer for your needs.

INTRODUCING FLASH

What is Flash?

The Flash Player is an add-on which is available for virtually all personal computer web browsers (e.g. Internet Explorer, Firefox) and an increasing number of portable devices such as mobile phones. Flash enables the display of multimedia content such as animations and videos – way beyond what is possible on ordinary web pages. By using a proprietary technology, Flash designs can be guaranteed to look and work the same on any device that has a Flash Player, whereas standard web pages will be displayed differently on different devices. A Flash design can be loaded on its own by a web browser or (more usually) inserted into an existing web page just like an image file, allowing a hybrid of HTML and Flash web design.

Why use Flash?

Animation on web sites can be achieved without Flash by use of standard image files, which store graphics as thousands of coloured square dots known as pixels (short for picture elements), a bit like a mosaic. The disadvantage of this is that the colour and location of each pixel must be recorded in what is called a bitmap. For all but the simplest bitmap animations (for example a banner advertisement with two or three alternating messages) a large amount of data must be stored, resulting in large files which make web pages slow to load.

How it works

The key distinguishing feature of Flash designs is that they use vector format graphics as opposed to bitmaps. Whereas a bitmap image is like the thousands (or even millions) of small tiles that make up a mosaic, a vector image is more like instructions on how to draw shapes – where to draw a line, how long, in which direction, what colour and how thick. This means graphics and animations in vector format have smaller file sizes, faster download times and crisper, more scalable images. End result: your site or banner advertisement looks better and is delivered faster, enabling you to make a vivid impression on potential customers. Research into internet usage has found that web pages have thirty seconds to make an impact, and with Macromedia Flash you can make every second count.

THE POWER OF FLASH

Flash is the easiest way to add rich content to web sites and is continually used in new and innovative ways. Recently, video playback through web sites has become very popular, and this became possible because of Flash, which can be used to create a video player that sits in a web page. YouTube is the most popular video site and a household name. The BBC's web-based version of iPlayer uses Flash too.

Flash animation is used in creating online animated cartoons, and some of these are so popular that they are broadcast on television or attract sponsorship deals. A notable example of this is 'Weebl and Bob', whose characters have appeared in a TV advertisement for butter. All sorts of games can be built with Flash, from remakes of arcade classics such as Pac Man and Space Invaders, to animated versions of games like hangman, point-and-click quizzes and mental agility exercises.

Flash also admits a considerable degree of interactivity. Interesting applications include: Guestbooks where users can draw or sketch their signature or a picture; tools to allow the user to create a picture of themselves in the style of popular cartoons like The Simpsons; and soundboards with clips of famous voices which can be played on demand. Flash applications can ask users for their name and allow them to upload photos. This has given rise to particularly elaborate Flash designs where a user's face is included in the animation, actors in a video scream the user's name, or simulated news reports show the user as a criminal on the run or the new US President.

Clearly there are all sorts of ways to exploit Flash for advertising and marketing beyond simple banner adverts. Flash-based adverts can expand over a page or literally call out to the user, or even be a mini-game, though it is a fine line between enticing and annoying users. How best to use Flash to promote your business depends on many factors, but there are all sorts of interesting and creative ways to take advantage of its capabilities.

WHEN NOT TO USE FLASH

Despite the almost boundless possibilities, there are many arguments against using Flash for particular projects or at all. Firstly, it is a proprietary, closed technology which means users must install the Adobe Flash Player to view Flash content. On personal computers Flash Player is available for virtually every type of system, but there are still many devices which Adobe doesn't support. The World Wide Web is designed to be universally available and most modern mobile phones can browse standard web pages, but very few can display Flash designs. Ordinary web pages will load on any standard web browser, even very old versions, although they may not look as good or be quite as functional as they would if viewed in a newer browser. Flash does not degrade at all in this way, which means a guaranteed user experience, at the cost of completely excluding some users.

With modern web design techniques, many designs which were once only possible with Flash can now be achieved using standard web design techniques. An example is a slideshow where photos fade in and out. Modern browsers will display such a slideshow in all its glory; older or more basic browsers may display the slideshow without the fading effect. If the slideshow used Flash, the basic browser would not display it at all.

Some web sites have a Flash version and a standard HTML version. While this means that visitors should always be able to view your site, it will inevitably create extra work in building the two sites and maintaining them both.

A key concern for any web site should be accessibility, or making the site accessible to the most people possible, regardless of any disabilities or impairments. The World Wide Web Consortium's HTML standards include provisions which aid accessibility, for example, images should have a textual description ('alt text') which can be read to a blind person by screen reading software. In addition, standard HTML web pages can be navigated using the keyboard, mouse or other input devices, whereas navigating a Flash design depends on how it has been made. Accessibility has long

been an issue with Flash, and it is now possible to solve a lot of these problems, but this is dependent on having a Flash designer who is skilled and knowledgeable.

For similar reasons, Flash can cause problems with Search Engine Optimisation. When search engines crawl the World Wide Web, they 'read' the content of the pages they visit in order to analyse and index it. This is possible because HTML web pages are simple text files. Flash designs are not based on text files so cannot be indexed in this way. Consequently, textual content in a Flash design will not contribute to the page's ranking on search engines results pages.

While it is possible to work around all of the potential problems with Flash, any one of them could be a good reason not to use Flash for a particular project. It's important to have a good idea of the implications of using Flash, so make sure you talk them through with any Flash designers or companies who you might work with.

A FLASH PROJECT: WHAT'S INVOLVED?

Flash projects vary greatly in their size and scope, from small specialised tasks like creating single elements for use within larger Flash projects, to large productions which might entail audio, video, a database, copywriting, graphic design and programming.

A project can be viewed as two separate stages: the design phase and the production phase. Effectively you will hire a Flash designer to realise the production phase, and you will want to have a major say in the design phase. In this respect the delegation of roles becomes a significant factor and you can choose to go one of two ways. If a Flash design agency is large enough it might be able to handle all your development requirements, or you may prefer to outsource various aspect of the work to an agency that specialises in copywriting or graphic design. Let's take a hypothetical project as an example to illustrate what's involved.

The Concept

Imagine a company wants a Flash banner advertisement. It may be that they have a clear idea of what they want it to look like (for example as part of a larger marketing campaign) and how they want it to behave; alternatively they may have a goal for the advert but no concept. Flash design agencies and creative agencies in general are likely to have marketing and advertising expertise, as well as understanding the possibilities for Flash design, so they will be able to help you produce or develop a concept for your project.

Design

The design phase is where the requirements for the project and the ideas involved in the concept are consolidated into a firm plan of how the project is to be implemented. Returning to the example of a banner advertisement, there are a number of decisions that must be made. The format of the banner could be one of a number of standard sizes and they can be horizontal (banner) or vertical (skyscraper). The overall look of the advert is obviously very important, but with a Flash advert this could include animation,

video, and audio. The banner could expand when the user hovers their mouse pointer over it. It could also include some degree of interactivity, for example inviting the user to choose an option or 'hit' (click) a moving target.

Given the range of possibilities for even a small-scale project, it's important to be aware of the options and have at least a basic understanding of what it all means. This Buyer's Guide will give you a head start, but your chosen Flash designer should be able to explain the alternatives and recommend the best choices.

Once the design phase is complete, the project will be ready to go into the production phase. All the important decisions should have been made, everyone involved should have a clear role and set of tasks, and a timeline for the completion of different elements of the project should be established agreed, taking into account interdependencies between tasks.

Production

The production phase is when the project is constructed. The various elements which make up the project are now completed and combined. Because each area is specialised, it is possible that the elements will be produced by different individuals or teams. A large creative agency should be able to provide all of these services themselves or source specialists. Alternatively you may already work with specialists in the different areas and wish to use them for the project.

Such decisions are of particular importance in cases where you want an advertising banner or piece of rich media developed, because it is unlikely that a Flash designer will be competent in producing advertising copy or managing every aspect of your rich, multimedia product. In this respect it is essential to hold a trial session including the members of your team specialising in the various competences

that are required to create the final product to see how well they communicate with each other and work together.

Graphic Design

Graphic design refers to the overall look of the project. The graphic designer will come up with all drawn or compiled visual elements, styles and colours. The graphic designer may not be involved at all in the production of a Flash banner. It may be that the graphic design work has been done in advance (for example for a major marketing or branding campaign) and graphics files can be passed to the Flash designers, but in most cases a Flash designer or agency will undertake an amount of graphic design.

Copywriting

Writing compelling, effective text for advertising is a specialised task, and is more difficult the fewer words are available. While an agency will probably be able to provide copywriting services, an individual Flash designer might not have the necessary skills. Alternatively, you may have copy from an existing advertising campaign to incorporate in your project.

Photography

The quality of your images is one of the most important factors in effective advertising, so it is imperative that you use a professional photographer to capture your products. Again, a creative agency should be able to provide this service, or you may have existing photos. For generic images, stock photos are a cost effective source of high quality photos.

Video

Flash has made video on the web ubiquitous and it can make an advertisement attention-grabbing and exciting. Although the technical quality of web video is relatively low, the production values for a piece of footage remain important. Video production is itself a

topic as broad as Flash design. All Flash designers should be able to include video clips in their Flash designs but the video production must be done by specialists, either within an agency or from an external company.

Sound

It is very easy to annoy a visitor with sound. Everyone has their own taste in music, and anything outside of this is likely to offend, particularly if it is played automatically and hard to see how to stop it. Attention grabbing sounds may be similarly irritating, but subtle, relevant sound effects can add interest and a message spoken by the right voice can add to the impact of an advert. In any case, professional sound production is important if it is part of your project, and this may be something that an agency can offer.

Programming

Some simple Flash design can be done in a similar way to constructing a PowerPoint presentation, but anything beyond the basics will require an amount of programming. Flash has its own programming language, ActionScript, allowing programmers complete control over how a Flash design behaves. Using ActionScript, a Flash design can tailor itself to a user's computer system, location or local time, and much more.

All of the above elements can be produced in isolation from one another, but to complete the project they must be combined. The programming is the glue that not only holds all the other elements of a Flash design together but also makes them work together in the right way.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT DESIGNER

Sourcing a good designer or agency can be difficult as there are innumerable Flash animators with various levels of skill and experience to choose from. This is where the Approved Index, the UK's leading online business to business referral service, proves invaluable, with a list of established, proven Flash design companies on its books for you to contact. You can complete a simple form on our website and receive up to six free quotes from Flash designers and agencies.

<http://www.approvedindex.co.uk/indexes/FlashDesigners/default.asp>
[X](#)

You will still have to choose one company to work with, so here are some things to consider.

Assessing a portfolio

The greatest resource available for researching a Flash animator's aptitude and suitability for the kind of work you have in mind is the portfolio of jobs they have done in the past. Qualities to look for include variety, originality and whether you consider the style of the designs appropriate for the sites in question.

Give consideration to the technical aspects of the sites under review as much as their visual impact. Does the site load quickly? Does it require any plug-ins or software downloads to operate effectively? It is well worth your time entering the site using different web browsers and connection speeds to test compatibility and adaptability, because these issues handicap the effectiveness of Flash and you'll want to see how well the designer accommodates them.

Be sure to read any descriptions of the projects to get an idea of what was involved. Though you may not understand the details of ActionScript development, if a project involved solving a number of problems with ActionScript programming, or tailoring its output based on data from a database, you can be confident that the designer is a competent programmer.

Getting references

Any Flash designer or agency should be happy to provide you with a list of satisfied clients as references. This is possibly the most important step in choosing the right company to work with as talking to past clients will give you an idea what the company is like to work with in practice.

There are a number of questions worth asking referees. How well did the designer communicate with the clients? Did the designer deliver what was required within budget and to schedule? Have the designs stood the test of time or presented any technical problems and are they dynamic and adaptable enough that alterations to the content can be made without difficulty?

Size of the organisation

You will likely find that there are all sizes of organisations available for your project, from freelance individuals to multinational corporations. Which is best depends on you and your project and there are advantages and disadvantages to either. While a freelancer will probably give you a very high level of personal service, they may not personally be able to take on all of your tasks, and employ a third party, losing the personal touch. Large companies offer stability, capacity and guarantees, but you may not receive such personal service, especially if you are a relatively small client. Additionally, a larger organisation is likely to be more stable. Ultimately, you should be confident that the individual or company you choose can provide you with high quality work and the level service you want.

A good relationship

It may seem obvious, but having a good working relationship with your designer is vital. You will inevitably need to communicate a lot and effectively in order to achieve the result you want, so you must feel comfortable with them. It's no good having the world's most sought-after Flash designer working for you unless you feel able to tell them that they've done something wrong or that you don't like something they've created. A designer should be able to take constructive criticism and suggestions and be generally personable. Compatibility between client and designer is key to generating the best possible end result.

PRICING GUIDE

As with any software project, it is hard to give exact prices, since every project will be different. The below is given as a guide, bearing in mind that special requirements can add to the cost.

Flash advertising banner

A Flash banner has a lot of power to captivate consumers, particularly when compared with traditionally print media or simple, image-based web adverts. In order to give the maximum impact, a Flash banner will require considerable development. Expect to pay at least £500 for a Flash banner.

Training, presentation and sales tools

Using Flash to build short animated cartoons (e.g. for presentations), for interactive training systems or sales tools is the next step up in terms of complexity and price. Expect to pay at least £1,000 for this kind of Flash design.

Full Flash web site

A website built exclusively in Flash can be a rich, entertaining experience for the user. Though it is hard to be definite, as the number of scenes (pages) and specific functions will vary from project to project, a Flash designer will likely charge at least £3,000 for a full Flash web site.

The top end

With Flash, the sky really is the limit. The most elaborate Flash creations can include complex functionality, perhaps using information from a database, or with advanced video and audio features. This class of Flash design will cost at least £5,000.

GLOSSARY

ActionScript	The programming language used in Flash.
Flash Movie	Flash designs or applications are technically known as movies, because Flash was originally intended to be used for animation.
Flash Player	The software add-on that allows playback of Flash Movies.
Object	Objects are the items that move, change or are otherwise animated within scenes.
Scene	A scene in a Flash movie is just like a scene in a TV programme or film, with a different background or setting. This can also be equivalent to a page of a web site.
Stage	In Flash, the stage is visible area of a movie.
SWF	Short for 'ShockWave Flash' .SWF files are the final product of Flash design and are the Flash files inserted into web pages.