

ComputerWeekly.com

Guide to sourcing Web designers



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

CONTENTS

About Computer Weekly	4
About Approved Index	5
Understanding what it's all about	7
Static and dynamic websites	7
Types of web site and price guide	8
Business Card sites	8
Brochure sites	9
E-commerce sites	9
Bespoke sites	10
Design and development	10
Don't do it yourself	11
The value of professionals	11
Working out your requirements	12
Questions to ask yourself	12
Prioritising features	13
Budgeting	13
Design and production phase	14
Researching companies	15
Where to look	15
Specialists	15
Experience with your industry	16
Freelancers and companies	16
Location	16
Their own website	16

User friendliness	17
Design and style	17
Content	17
Navigation	17
Loading times	18
Online portfolio	18
Marketing experience	18
Get references	19
Getting quotes	20
Pricing	20
Quality of service	20
The package	20
Read the small print	21
Friends	21
Stability	21
Glossary	22

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It is dedicated to providing IT professionals with the best information, the best knowledge and the best range of solutions that will enable them to succeed in the industry.

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If you have any questions regarding our service, just contact the Approved Index team on **0800 6122 113**.

WEB DESIGNERS: A BUYER'S GUIDE

In a world of rapid and constant technological advancement, having a company website is no longer an option, but rather a necessary and an invaluable extension of your business operation and marketing strategy. The World Wide Web presents something particularly beneficial to small businesses in that the advertising playing field is somewhat levelled. However, simply having a website does not necessarily equal effectiveness, and this is why your choice of a web design company is so crucial.

This buyer's guide gives you an overview of the ins and outs of web design and how to find the best web designer for your company.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

The internet and World Wide Web are now mature technologies, and while most people understand the main concepts, there are all sorts of buzzwords and jargon that web designers use every day. In order to get the best web design, you should make sure you understand the basics. If a phrase like 'CSS web design' means nothing to you, check out the glossary of terms at the end of this guide.

You should also familiarise yourself with the different kinds of website that exist and understand which category yours falls into.

Static and dynamic websites

Web sites can be broadly categorised as static or dynamic, depending on the functions of the site.

Static web sites simply present information that does not change. An example of this is a site advertising your company, with pages on the company's history, mission and contact details. A good way to think about this is like a brochure for your company, with the pages of the brochure as pages of your website. A website designer can construct a static website relatively easily and quickly, as it is essentially converting existing information into a website design.

Dynamic websites feature some kind of interactivity or information that may change frequently. This could be anything from your product catalogue (which could be updated with new products, prices or stock levels) to news, reviews, or an online community where users register with your site and take advantage of features like messaging or posting their comments. You can even have a website which allows you to add and edit information yourself, as you would do using a word processor. To provide this interactivity, your website must do more than just display information, so some computer programming by a web developer will be required. Many

web designers are also web developers, and web design agencies will probably include web developers or have preferred developers to work with.

It will be useful to look around on the web and find other websites that demonstrate the features you are looking for. This will give you a good idea of what is possible, and you can use websites that you like as examples to help show web designers what you want.

You should also be aware that web design is very different from graphic design for printed brochures or advertisements. Websites can be viewed on many different computers, mobile phones and other devices, which may have different screen sizes and support different features, so it is difficult to make a website design look exactly the same on every system. The job of a website designer is strike a balance between appearance and functionality, so that visitors to your website can make use of it however they are viewing it.

Types of web site and price guide

Perhaps a more useful way to categorise different types of web design is according to price, particularly as this may be a deciding factor in the kind of site you choose to have designed.

Business Card sites

Not all businesses require a full-blown website design. The simplest kind of website is a single page, which is the equivalent to a business card or a printed flyer and should be very quick and easy to build. Website designers will typically charge £200 or less for a single page website, though additional pages should be significantly cheaper.

Brochure sites

The next step up from a single page, business card type website design is one with a small number of linked pages - maybe four or five. This is known as a brochure style site and is equivalent to a printed leaflet or booklet. Brochure website design is much more flexible than a real brochure, as relevant information can be cross referenced wherever appropriate, including links to external sites for background or extended information. A brochure type site is likely to cost from £250 for four or five pages, up to around £500 for a site with 10 to 15 pages.

E-commerce sites

Moving on from simple website designs, we come to e-commerce sites. This is where the website functions as an online shop, which may mean that your products are listed on the site, or that customers can request and pay for goods or services. The exact requirements for your website design depend on your business and how you want the site to work. If you only sell one or a few products, then your site would simply need to list these products, allow people to order them and make a secure online payment to you. Online payments could be handled by a third party system, such as eBay's PayPal. This kind of site would come in at the bottom end of the price range for e-commerce sites, at around £800.

Larger e-commerce sites can be as complex as you can imagine, since online shopping is big business and the major companies are constantly developing their websites and systems. The key features for an online shop are a catalogue system to store details of your products, a shopping cart system and a maintenance or administration system. The catalogue will store details of your different products and services, including prices, postage and packing costs, and stock levels. The shopping cart system allows customers to choose multiple items to purchase while browsing your site, then 'check out' and pay for all of them. The maintenance system is the means by which you can keep the site up to date, for example by adding or removing products from the catalogue. A site

like this is a lot more complicated to design and build than the most basic kind of e-commerce site and will cost in the region of £1,500. There are many possible features for e-commerce sites, so you may have to pay a lot more to get all the elements you want.

Bespoke sites

There are all sorts of other applications that can be included in a professional web site design, depending on your requirements. The most likely is a Content Management System (CMS) which allow you to maintain and edit parts of the website simply and easily. Other systems that you could have built into your website design include discussion forums, photo galleries, blogs and pretty much anything else you've seen on another website. For all of these there are many ready-made software packages that can be used for free, so the software itself shouldn't add too much to the cost of your website design, although your website designer will have to customise the installation and design work to make it fit with the rest of the site. Adding dynamic applications to your site will add at least £500 to the cost for a basic system but this will vary a lot according to your exact requirements and how much custom coding is involved.

Design and development

Web design and web development are closely related but subtly different. Loosely, web design is about how a website looks, whereas development is about how it works. You can think of your website as being like a car. In this case, the web design is all the parts of the car that look and feel a certain way - the bodywork, the dashboard, the steering wheel. The web development is concerned with how things work, so in a car this would be the engine, the sensors which feed the dashboard display, and the power steering under the bonnet. This also highlights in important overlap between design and development – the speedometer looks a certain way but this is inextricably linked to how it works, for example if it is analogue or digital. This is the same for web design and development, since

some development or programming may be required to achieve certain visual effects. Having an idea of what components of a web site fall under web design or web development is a good idea as it will help you understand what features will be more expensive and take more time to build.

Don't do it yourself

While modern software makes web design a lot easier, it is still a world apart from designing a document in a word processor or a poster in a desktop publishing programme. The World Wide Web has developed with new technologies built on existing ones and creating an effective site which displays and functions correctly on different computer systems and web browsers is not a simple task. It may be tempting to attempt the job yourself, but the money you save by doing this will most likely be lost in time spent equipping yourself with the (only basic) skills, and in losing clients through a badly designed and inefficient website.

The value of professionals

Choosing the right web design company is be a sound investment, as a good company will be proficient in design and web technology, be aware of the latest design trends and technological advancements available, have experience and have knowledge of marketing for Internet sites. It is this combination of skills and knowledge that should ensure you have an effective site that is attractive to Internet users.

WORKING OUT YOUR REQUIREMENTS

The first thing you need is a clear concept for your website and what its function will be, and a set of requirements based on this. In essence, this can be seen as the shopping list phase of the process. Going to a website designer without an idea of what you want in your website can be compared to going to the supermarket without a shopping list: you end up spending too much money on things you do not need while forgetting to buy the bread and milk.

You do not need to have knowledge of specific web services and systems; you simply need to have a clear outline of the desired functions of your website. Being clear about what you want will help website designers to make your website's design fit its purpose. A professional web designer or web design company will spend time working out your requirements, but if you have a good idea of what you need, this will save you and your web designer time (and therefore money) as well as avoiding any misunderstandings.

Questions to ask yourself

To help work out the requirements for your web site, ask yourself the questions below. The answers will go a long way to defining what kind of site you need.

- How big will the site be, i.e. how much information will it contain?
- Will it be the online equivalent of a brochure about my business?
- Will it have a catalogue displaying products which the user could purchase online?
- Will the content need to be updated regularly?

- Will it be a long term or short term site?
- Will I want interactive features such as a search function or user registration?
- What methods do you plan to use to market the site i.e. search engine optimisation or marketing, email marketing, PR?
- What you want the site to achieve i.e. Lots of credit card sales OR lots of enquiries?

Having answered these questions, you should be able to see which of the categories listed above your web site fits into.

Prioritising features

It is advisable to rank the required functions according to priority so that you can cut back on the less necessary functions if your budget demands it. Sketch out a diagram of the proposed site outline. A clear and detailed outline will prepare you with what to look for in a website design company and also allow the company to give you an accurate quotation.

Budgeting

Take into account that cost will depend on the total size of the site as well as on the presence and level of interactivity in the site. Cost is not necessarily directly related to number of pages, however, as much of the work in designing web pages can be easily replicated for different pages.

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION PHASE

There are two stages to web design: the design phase and the production phase. The design phase is where the look, feel and functionality of the site are decided, and the production phase is where the design is implemented in practice. During the design phase you will work with your web designer to ensure that the design meets your requirements. The web designer will then realise the web site in the production phase, but you may need to contribute to it yourself or potentially seek other professionals' services.

The content of your website can be broadly divided between written information and visual elements. It may be that you already have copy ready to be put on your website, but if not it is important to realise that skilled web designers may not also be skilled marketing copywriters. By the same token, web designers are not necessarily skilled graphic designers. If you require original artwork for your website, it may be necessary to employ a graphic designer.

If you choose a web design agency they might be able to handle all of these tasks or source the services for you, but you may prefer to source various aspects of the work from other agencies.

RESEARCHING COMPANIES

Once you have a clear outline of your website's needs, you can begin the search for a suitable web design company. There may be many companies suited to your requirements, but the following suggestions will help you to narrow down the scope to a shortlist of potential candidates.

Where to look

Generally, the safest option is to select by recommendations, since a satisfied customer is testament to the quality and service a web designer provides. Another way to find a good web designer is by looking at sites that you like or at competitors' sites. The designer's contact information is usually available on the site.

Online directories list web designers and other professionals. This is where the Approved Index, the UK's leading online business to business referral service, proves invaluable, with a list of established, proven web 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 web developers and companies. You will still have to choose one company to work with, so here are some things to consider.

<http://www.approvedindex.co.uk/indexes/WebDesigners/free-quote.aspx>

Specialists

If, having evaluated your requirements for a website, you know the specifics of what you need, you can judge how suitable a particular web designer or company is based on whether they have skills and experience in the right areas.

Experience with your industry

In order to design the best possible website for your company, a web designer really needs to understand your business – your core values, what sets you apart from others, and your customer base. Experience in your industry can therefore be an invaluable quality for a web designer, as they should already have a lot of this understanding.

Freelancers and companies

There are advantages and disadvantages to both big design firms and freelancers. A big firm is usually equipped to deal with all your online needs, from design to copywriting, web hosting and extra marketing services, while there is the danger that you may get lost among the many clients. A freelancer will offer a more personal service, but not necessarily all the services you require. However, freelancers can outsource certain jobs to other freelancers skilled in that specific service.

Location

Thanks to the internet, you could employ a web designer based almost anywhere in the world. So although not necessary, it can actually be a good idea to choose a company, local enough to meet. This enables you to meet in person, to better judge their service, and will allow for more effective communication and problem-solving. Given that web design is inherently technical, there is a lot to be said for being able to meet in person to work through issues compared to communicating only via email or telephone.

Their own website

Evaluate the companies' websites. By visiting the company's own site, you will be able to determine a lot about their quality of work and work ethic, including how much they value the user. Below are a few things to consider when evaluating a web site.

User friendliness

The central functions of a website should be user-friendly and attractive, since an Internet user will very quickly leave the site if he or she experiences frustration. If you can't work out how to get what you want, or even what is available, then there is not much to be said for the user friendliness of the site.

Design and style

Visual style can be a matter of taste, but in the case of web design, form and function both play a part, and it's usually easy to spot an ineffective design even if choosing a 'good' design is more subjective. Assuming you find a site to be aesthetically acceptable, consider how well it represents the organisation it is for. Does it give you a feel for the kind of company they are, and does it give you a good impression of them?

Content

Read through the written content of the site. Although you may not want copywriting services, language used on a web site should at least be free of spelling and grammar errors, indicating attention to detail, and ideally will be have an engaging style.

Regularly added content makes a site feel current and relevant compared with one that hasn't changed in years, and with the ubiquity of blogs, it is easy for companies to have their latest news and updates on their site.

Navigation

Reading through the different sections and pages of a web site will give you a chance to see how easy it is to navigate. It should be easy to find what you want and to get back to where you started from. Web users can be fickle and any difficulties in navigation can be enough to make them look elsewhere.

Loading times

In a world of powerful computers and high speed broadband internet connections, web pages should load quickly. The loading time of a site can be affected by the capacity of the server on which it is hosted and also the quality of the design. Graphics can mean large files but successful web design is a balance of visual appeal and technical efficiency. If users have to wait more than a few seconds for pages to load, they will either give up and look for a different site or at best have a bad impression of the company.

Online portfolio

Most web designers will have a selection of past work in a portfolio on their web site. This is a critical deciding factor in choosing a design firm. You can assess whether their style and design is suited to your needs, and whether they are familiar with your industry and the technical requirements of your website. Again judge the sites with the above-mentioned criteria. Also remember that while a listing of large clients is impressive, this does not necessarily mean that they are the right company for you.

Marketing experience

Some web designer firms will have specialists in house who can help with marketing the site, though this will cost more. We would recommend that you consider Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and Pay Per Click (PPC) advertising as the obvious first marketing channels for your site. It is highly recommended that you have a company that knows search engine optimisation well and has some reasonable past results of getting other client sites to the top of the search engines, especially Google, as this is the most used one.

Pay Per Click advertising can be easily outsourced so is less essential for you web design agency to have experience of it. If you need a quote for Pay Per Click advertising then Approved Index can provide you with a quote from 6 relevant companies.

<http://www.approvedindex.co.uk/indexes/OnlineMarketing/free-quote.aspx>

Get references

A design company should be able to provide you with a list of satisfied clients who you can contact. Talk to the referees about the design company's services and delivery, and find out what they are like to work with on a practical, day-to-day basis. Having a good working relationship with your designer will make the process much easier and result in the best outcome, so take the opportunity to get honest opinions. This is particularly useful if the referee's companies or web sites are similar to yours.

GETTING QUOTES

Approved Index makes it easy for you to get quotes from established, proven web design companies. You can complete a simple form on our website to outline your requirements and quickly receive up to six free quotes. You can then evaluate the companies and make your choice.

Pricing

Cost will obviously affect your final choice, but do not be immediately enticed by the cheapest offer - a trustworthy truism is that you pay for quality. Aim for the best quality for price. By looking at a company's web site and portfolio and talking to their past clients you can judge whether they will give you good value for the price quoted.

Quality of service

Your first contact with a company is a good opportunity to assess their customer service. You will want to work with people who are passionate about their work and your vision, listen to you, explain their services clearly, are open to all your questions and respond with a quotation relatively quickly. If you're not happy dealing with a company at this stage you may have problems working with them.

The package

Before signing and accepting a quotation, double-check what the quotation includes and excludes. Ensure that you will get everything you need and that you won't have to pay more for things you have requested from the start. Carefully inspect the legal terms concerning work and payment. You have every right to ask questions about anything of which you are not certain and make sure that all terms are agreed by all parties.

Read the small print

Be clear on legal issues of ownership of site content. Copyright law differs from country to country, and you will ideally want to own the complete design of your site. Be sure to arrange a timeline with a set of deadlines or milestones for the various stages of the design with the company. This is preferable to having a single deadline for the finished design as it makes it easier to track the progress of the project and spot and deal with any problems.

Friends

Choosing a web design company should be a bit like speed dating. Make sure you get on with the company in the first meeting. If you get on with the company early it could mean the following:

- The company are likely to be more lenient towards any changes you may want
- The company will enjoy working on the project and will more likely deliver you a better result faster
- The company may lower the quote because they want to work with you so much

Stability

In this current climate, it is important to make sure that a company is solvent and has the ability to survive. You don't want a company going bust midway through your website development. Our recommendation is to view the latest accounts to ensure they have made no significant losses recently. It is also worth considering using Equifax or Experian for company credit worthiness checks.

GLOSSARY

Accessibility Accessibility refers to the ease of use of a website in the context of users with disabilities or impairments. It covers a range of matters: the visuals being clear to people with colour blindness; correctly ordering the HTML so that visually impaired users can use screen readers effectively; or making the buttons and link hit zones big enough that users with impaired motor skills can successfully click where they intend.

Bandwidth Bandwidth is used to measure the speed of your internet connection. It refers to the amount of data that can be transferred at any given time (usually measured in kilobits and megabits per second). A broadband internet connection is therefore a high speed connection, usually offering a minimum of 256 kb/s. A dial-up internet connection – the predecessor to broadband (remember that loveable screeching ringtone?) – is only capable of 56 kb/s.

Blog Abridgement of “Web Log”. Your blog is a section of your website (or can be a site in itself) where you can regularly publish news, comment, diary entries – almost anything you want your users to read. It’s different from a news page in that it can be written with a personal voice. Corporate blogs have become popular for being able to give a company a more accessible, personal tone.

Breadcrumbs Breadcrumbs, or **breadcrumb trails**, are navigation features of a website that improves its usability. They allow the user to see the structure of the site as they progress through it, and retrace their steps if they find themselves lost in its murky recesses. For example, an online store might display breadcrumbs at the top of its page as follows:

Home > Music and Videos > CDs > Jazz

In fact, you can find a breadcrumb trail at the top of most Approved Index web pages.

- Browser** Your web browser is the software that allows you to view web pages. The most common browsers are Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox.
- CMS** Abbreviation of **Content Management System**. CMS software allows the owners of a website to easily organise and edit its content (text, images, media files) without having to delve into a site's code. It's also useful for allowing staff to update the site from different locations.
- Cookies** Web cookies are little bits of text sent between a **server** and your **browser**. When you visit a website again, these pieces of text are sent back to the server so it can recognise who you are. When a site remembers your password, preferences or the items in your shopping basket, this is all thanks to cookies. They also allow pages you revisit to load faster.
- CSS** Abbreviation of **Cascading Style Sheets**. CSS is a language that allows you to shape the style and appearance of a web page. While **HTML** (or a similar mark up language) is used to create the content of a page, CSS determines its presentation (colours, fonts, layout, skins etc.)
- Domain** Your domain name is the name that appears before the extension (.co.uk, .com, .net) of your web address. It is basically an **IP address** that is easier to read and remember, identifying your computer, or your **host's** computer, on the web. So in the same way that your friend's phone number is 07123 456 789, but you have them in your mobile as Phil Mob, your website's IP Address might be 123.456.78.910, but your domain name is www.phil.com.
- Ecommerce** Ecommerce is the practice of selling goods and services online. Simple as that. An ecommerce site is a site with the **functionality** to display a catalogue of items and accept payment for them (with credit cards, PayPal etc) online.

Favicon	A favicon (“favourite icon”) is a small thumbnail image that acts like a website’s logo, appearing at the beginning of the URL , at the top of tabs and on your favourites list. Approved Index’s favicon, for example, is the white and blue tick you can probably see above.
Flash	Adobe Flash (formerly Macromedia Flash) is a type of software used for creating and viewing animation and videos on a web page. While you have to pay to get the Flash Authoring Tool, Flash Player is free to download (anyone with the player can view sites containing Flash). A “Flash site” is a web site composed predominantly of animated and interactive Flash components.
Functionality	The functionality of a website is simply the number and type of technical functions it is able to perform e.g. having the ability to take online payments, or to perform a “search” on stored data or content. Not to be confused with usability (see below).
Hosting	All websites need to be hosted. Hosting a website means storing all its component files on a server (a computer permanently connected to the internet). Web hosting companies have huge banks of servers where you can host your site in a secure environment.
HTML	Stands for Hyper Text Markup Language . HTML is the language used to write and structure text and links on a webpage.
Hyperlink	Usually just called “links”, hyperlinks can connect any piece of information to any other piece of information on the internet. The most common form type of hyperlink is the embedded link (usually underlined).

Internet	The Internet is a computer network, in fact the biggest network, which connects computers the world over. While often used interchangeably, the terms internet and World Wide Web are not the same thing. The World Wide Web refers to the interconnected (linked) web pages which are available on the internet, whereas the internet is the network which enables systems like the World Wide Web and email.
IP address	Your IP (Internet Protocol) address is a set of 4 numbers that identifies your computer. If you're hosting your website through a hosting company, your site's IP address will be the IP of that company's server. Every site also has a unique domain name that matches up to your IP address.
Keywords	Keywords and key phrases are the terms that users type into search engines. These are the words that should appear in the titles and content of your website so search engines know that it's relevant.
Metatags	A metatag is a piece of HTML code that allows search engines to more accurately determine the content of a webpage. Metatags aren't actually visible on a webpage, but do appear in the search engine results as a description of what the page is about. They can also be a list of keywords visible only to search engines, although this type of metatag is generally no longer used.
Navigation	Web navigation is simply the process of finding your way around a website or around the internet. The navigation bar is the bar at the top of your browser containing the "Back", "Forward", "Stop" and "Home" buttons.
Organic Search	Organic search results are all the pages that are indexed by search engines purely on the content of the page. Non organic (or paid) search results are the sponsored links you see in the yellow box and down the right hand side of the Google results page.

Permalink

A permalink (“permanent link”) is a **hyperlink** that is used like a bookmark. They are usually used for linking to a specific **blog** post so you can keep track of it when the blog is updated.

PPC

PPC (**Pay Per Click**) advertising is a type of online marketing that makes use of search engines. A PPC campaign involves paying search engines to show a link to your site when users search for a product or service that you provide. Whenever a user clicks on your ad, you pay a fee to the search engine. The sponsored links you see in the yellow box and down the right hand side of Google are all PPC ads. They also appear on web pages that search engines deem relevant to what the advert is offering. So if you’re reading a page that has something to do with saxophones, you might see PPC ads offering discount brass instruments.

SEO

Stands for **Search Engine Optimisation**. This is the practice of improving the relevance and value of your website to achieve higher **organic search** positions. This is done through improving content (e.g. by adding **keywords**), and most importantly through **link building** (getting related sites to link you and hence make your site seem more relevant).

Server

Your server is the computer on which your website is **hosted**. Servers store data and allow it to be accessed and shared at all times over the web.

URL

Stands for **Uniform Resource Locator**. A webpage’s URL is its full address, e.g.
<http://www.approvedindex.co.uk/indexes/WebDesigners/default.aspx>

Usability

A website’s usability is a measure of how easy it is for visitors to understand a website, find their way around it and successfully achieve their goals. Not to be confused with **accessibility** or **functionality**.

Web Application

A more specific term than the generic web site, a web application is a kind of web site with some specific functionality. Common examples are message boards (forums) where users post messages structured in topics or threads, or **blogs** which are essentially online diaries. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, which give users their own profile pages, photo gallery and the ability to connect and share with friends, are also web applications.

World Wide Web

While the terms are often used interchangeably, the internet and the World Wide Web are not the same thing. The World Wide Web refers to the interconnected (linked) web sites and pages which are available on the internet, whereas the internet is the network which enables systems like the World Wide Web and email. The issue is further clouded by the availability of, for example, email system which are available on the World Wide Web.