



**Selecting the Right Interactive Design and
Development Company - **Made Simple****

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August, 2002

Introduction

Here's the scenario: You're part of an internal ad hoc team at a large company looking to select an interactive design and development company to bring your company's online objectives to fruition. You've identified a handful of integrated marketing companies and are in the process of reviewing them. You're uncertain about how to accurately evaluate them. What questions should you ask? What criteria should you use to evaluate the companies? Which credentials are important? Which issues should raise concern?

Whether your company is looking for an "Agency of Record" for a long-term business relationship, or a vendor for specific short-term project work, several basic guidelines will help you make a sound decision for selecting the right interactive design, development and marketing company to fulfill your company's needs.

The best course of action is to assess firms based on the following criteria: Price, Methodology, Return on Investment, Experience, Portfolio, Team Qualifications, and References – although not necessarily in that order. Begin by compiling a list of the companies whose qualifications best meet these criteria and then factor in price.

If you find a company that provides the best solutions based on fulfilling your list of criteria, but is outside your price range, you shouldn't necessarily dismiss them. In many cases the company will work with you to reduce the scope of the project or the company's billing rates to fit your budget while still satisfying your project needs. They may propose structured financing ideas enabling you to pay for the project over a longer period of time. Lastly, the company may provide return on investment analyses that may help you sell the project and company internally based on potential revenue forecasting. If you don't ask, the answer is no.

Price

You've received proposals from several interactive companies for designing your company's website. Now it's simply a matter of selecting the least expensive proposal, right? Wrong. Selecting one interactive company over another based solely on price is not a trivial or inconsequential decision. Your company and corporate image is worth more than a cookie-cutter solution. In these cost-conscious times, choosing the lowest cost provider is not uncommon.

We have all seen the malpractice and personal injury lawyers who advertise on television. In all likelihood, you dismiss them as not being a reasonable option for your personal legal issues. The most reputable law firms don't often advertise on television and the lowest cost proposal or hourly rate often translates to subpar counsel and could actually wind up costing you money in the long run. There are very real and tangible differences in the value of services and experience one firm provides versus another. The bottom line is, in most cases, you get exactly what you pay for.

This rationale should apply to your business. The lowest cost provider probably isn't going to be able to deliver the thought leadership and interactive solution you'll be happy with in the long or short term. It's important to make a sensible and far-sighted decision because your company's website is a highly visible source of information about the services or products it provides. Your site will be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of the year and must reflect the professionalism and quality that is central to and reflective of your business.

It is also not as simple as going with the highest cost solution which is most typically delivered by large interactive development or consulting companies. In many cases, these companies cannot afford to accept engagements under \$50,000. They have substantial staffs, fancy offices, and in too many cases, insist on reinventing your business in their image. Make no mistake about it, the offices and staffs are all very nice but it's reflected in their cost far more than the quality of work they provide.

Avoid companies utilizing an open-ended hourly rate model. It typically works to your disadvantage. The scope of the engagement should be well defined and have a fixed cost. Hourly rates have their place for certain tasks that are executional, repetitive and predictable. For situations such as troubleshooting complex development problems, there is no guarantee on the number of hours it may take to identify and correct a problem. Your interactive development project has a defined scope and you should have a defined cost to match and agreed upon prior to proceeding.

Methodology

Perhaps the most fundamental and overlooked criteria are the steps an interactive company adheres to in the development of a project. These steps are the backbone of the company's development process commonly referred to as its methodology. Methodology is a set of methods, principles and rules a company utilizes to develop and manage a project from inception to completion.

The company should have a documented Methodology and be able to communicate and illustrate steps from the first "kick off" meeting to the final deliverable, and in some cases post-mortem analyses. This should not just include the major phases of the overall process but the intermediary steps and workflow utilized both internally and externally to accomplish each phase within the overall process.

An experienced interactive development company will clearly communicate its methodology, provide documentation for each phase or major milestone and will tailor their process to the deliverable or project.

Return on Investment

Of great importance and too frequently overlooked are return on investment ("ROI") considerations associated with the project or solution being considered. There are a wide variety of ROI models and calculations. It's best to stick to the basics and look for an interactive company that can document both tangible and intangible benefits and document any risks associated with implementing a given solution.

The interactive company's recommendation should include the tangible benefits of implementing solutions. Tangible benefits are quantifiable measurements such as labor savings, capital expense reductions, productivity benefits, increased sales, increased customer acquisition, higher conversion and retention ratios. These are especially important relative to ecommerce and social networking projects.

The intangible benefits should also be clearly outlined. Intangible benefits are difficult to quantify and measure in financial terms and should include such things as building brand awareness, developing intellectual capital, improving market perception, being recognized as an industry innovator, reinforcing corporate culture and identifying the risk of not implementing a solution, or project failure.

Specific Industry Experience

As you proceed to the next category on your list of criteria you may realize the interactive company does not have specific experience in developing websites within your industry. Many clients conclude the interactive company should be removed from consideration based on a lack of specific industry experience. Eliminating a company from contention solely for this reason is typically short-sighted and one of the biggest misconceptions that prospective clients make.

Websites are generally very similar from an organizational perspective. Sections typically included:

- "About Us" section, containing the mission statement/overview of the company and executive bios.
- "Products" or "Services" section, containing specific information on what the company sells.
- "News" section, containing press releases and links to industry publications.
- "Investor Relations" section for public companies containing key financial information.
- "Contact Us" section, providing driving directions and image map (when applicable) and appropriate telephone, address, email, and facsimile contact information.
- "Privacy Policy" and "Terms of Use" pages, which usually contain standard legal verbiage.

While these examples are simplified, the point holds true. Each section of the site may have its own functionality but typically isn't anything that hasn't been done before (e.g. search engines, stock tickers, newsletter registration, social networks, ecommerce, etc.). An experienced design firm will be able to capture the right "look and feel". You would still use a print shop regardless if they didn't have specific industry experience. The same holds true when working with a professional design and development firm.

Granted, there are engagements requiring specific industry expertise for a sophisticated product or custom application. Companies requiring specific industry experience or knowledge for their site or application are the exception not the norm. Your company's interactive needs and objectives most likely won't be groundbreaking or uniquely complex.

Portfolio

The company you're evaluating provides several examples of previous work within the online channel in which you are interested. You might be impressed by their sample work demonstrating vibrant, cutting edge designs, utilizing rendering technologies such as Flash, or 3-D animation.

Before you elect to use a vendor based on splashy creative design, dig a little deeper and review some fundamental questions. Ask yourself if the designs vary for each project? Assess whether the "look and feel" is appropriate for the company/industry. Does the organization and navigation make the site or application easy to use? Does the use of "flashy" technology make the user experience dramatically better or are they using "splash" technology for technology's sake? Do the examples function properly across multiple platforms (PC, Mac, Linux, etc.), on different browsers (IE, Netscape, Mozilla Firefox, Safari, AOL, etc.), using a variety of connection methods (dial-up, broadband, wireless)?

Many interactive companies claim to be experts in design and development. Take a further step to review their website or promotional materials. Do you find they fall short creatively, organizationally or functionally? Do they use buzz-words, jargon, and techno-babble to mystify and confuse as excuses/explanation for unintuitive and poor design?

If you're at all uncomfortable with the answers to these questions, the organization you are reviewing may not be the best choice for your company.

The Team, References and Awards

Maybe you're impressed with the team of individuals you meet and the lengthy list of awards attributed to the interactive company you're reviewing. The team seems pleasant, competent, experienced and you're looking forward to working with them on your project. Be mindful that this team may not end up being *your* team. For many companies it is common practice to send their best and brightest to new business pitches, while using less experienced or talented employees on the actual project.

If you're certain the company has the qualifications you require, ask who will be specifically working on the project. Make sure you meet the project and strategy lead and designated point of contact that will be manage day-to-day operations. If the team meets your approval, you may also want the company to revise their proposal to specify the specific team members you met with are assigned to your project.

It's good practice to request references from 2-3 clients the team members have worked with. An experienced interactive development company won't have reservations about providing names of clients with whom you can speak candidly. Find out what their experience was like working with the specific individuals on the team and the company as a whole.

The list of awards that seemed impressive can be misleading. Several design award competitions have merit and are judged on strict objective criteria by qualified industry professionals. However, there are many other awards and competitions that have little to no standards in terms of the selection/evaluation process. Be mindful that many large, and now departed interactive companies boasted pages of awards that didn't necessarily deliver value to their clients or help them stay in business.

One of the longest running and most credible and distinguished design awards is the Web Marketing Association. The Web Marketing Association employs strict judging criteria and their results are transparent in terms of ratings and comments provided by the judges to the entrants.

Conclusion

Not all interactive design and development companies are right for all clients and not all clients are right for all interactive companies. You can be sure to make the right decision for your company and maximize the likelihood of the success of your project by using these fundamental criteria as a basis to evaluate and select an interactive company.

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