How to Hire a Web Developer

**A Guide to Selecting the Absolute Best Service Provider
For Your Web Development Project**

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Why This E-Book?
Educate Yourself on the Components

**Where Do
I Start?** **What are the
Available Resources?** **How do I Pick
The Right Developer?** **Help Is On
The Way!**

Selecting the right Web developer for your project can be a daunting task. Do you need a static site? A site with a CMS? Do you know what a CMS is? And what about marketing the site after it's been launched?

Today's choices can be as traditional or cutting edge as you need them to be, and understanding ALL of the options and differences *before* you get started is the best way to guarantee the success of your Web project.

The information in the following pages will help you understand your options and their implications.

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Understanding the Different Types of Web Developers

Individuals and companies seek counseling from professional Web development providers for a number of reasons. Some companies simply do not possess the skill set in house to design, create, and manage the development of a Website. Many more are unsure of where to begin when it comes to marketing the site after it's built. Customers want the comfort of knowing that the Web developer they choose can be trusted to protect their business' online interests and assets, and help manage the ever changing technological and marketing landscape.

To this end, it has become increasingly important that consumers actively educate themselves about the Web development industry, and make an effort to gain some basic knowledge prior to entering into a professional relationship. The more information you compile in your search, the better equipped you will be to make decisions that impact your future.

You should know that "Web Designer" is a broad, general term that encompasses a wide array of resources including designers, programmers, marketers, solo practitioners, and agencies.

So what are the differences in Web designers? Read on....

Fred In The Shed

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The most common type of Web developer is the "Fred in the Shed" or "Solo Practitioner" who work by themselves. Because they typically have a low overhead, and in turn pass on smaller development costs to you, many businesses are quick to select this type of developer without really understanding the drawbacks. While a "Fred in the Shed" can save you some cash up front, let's take a quick look at some of the long-term issues that may arise.

1) **No solo practitioner is good at everything.** They may have strong programming skills, but not be a good designer. Or they may have an incredibly good sense of design, but it is highly unlikely that they have good programming skills. And, what about scalability? Can they bring you to the next level? Do they understand the world of e-commerce?

2) **What about midnight?** The Internet is a 24-hour business. How will the solo practitioner be able to support you off hours? Do they also have a full time job that they are responsible for? What if you have an issue that needs immediate attention? What if they go out of business?

3) **The maintenance issue.** Working alone, at home, running your own small business can be rewarding and fulfilling. But how does this business model impact you? Typically, it means that the customer suffers with maintenance issues. The solo practitioner is always worried about cash flow and therefore, needs to focus on the next development project. Many clients who use this type of developer *frequently* complain that once the site is up and running, they don't receive the attention they need.

4) **One Trick Pony.** Solopreneurs tend to have limited time, and so as a result typically learn only one type of solution. This means you get whatever they offer, even it's not a fit for your project. Square peg, round hole.

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Technical Firms

Many of the technical firms that run back office software, IT support departments, and your computer network are taking a stab at setting up shop as a Web developer too. The reality with many of these firms is that they may be solid at resolving technical issues, but the fact is *fixing computers is very different from marketing. Although your Website may have technical components to it, at the end of the day it's your number one marketing vehicle.* Read that sentence again. Let it really sink in. Do you want a repairman helping you to acquire new customers? It's a very different world, and typically not one understood by technicians.

Ad Agencies

Ad agencies are excellent at trying to run ALL of your marketing efforts, but typically these types of firms are best left for fortune 500 companies. Incredibly effective under the right circumstances, these firms are highly sophisticated and are also masters of Business to Consumer marketing for large companies. A good ad agency will demand a long term marketing commitment with a year-long editorial calendar and in store promotions tied to Web development and marketing initiatives. But, ask yourself, is this what you really need?

Web Developers/Digital Marketing Firms

Specifically focused in on helping you to create an online marketing strategy, these firms will develop messaging and functionality that will help create new client opportunities for you, as well as help you support your business. Typically, these firms have built thousands of Websites, and will endeavor to understand who you are as a company. Working with a firm that has experience in your vertical market will assure that your developer understands how to "speak" to your market and buyer personas. Also, firms of this nature will be on the cutting edge of the best

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technology choices, and be able to offer you an array of solutions instead of just a single option. They can also bring you to the next level, and most importantly, understand the complex and ever changing world of online marketing. And for a bonus? They will offer everything you need as an integrated, one stop shop. No need to deal with a vendor for hosting, another one for email, another one for design, another one for Search Engine Marketing, another one for….well, you get the idea.

Understanding the Different Types Programming Languages

Like all things, options and choices are the American way. But, what if you don't understand what anybody is offering you? In the Website development world, there are a few choices in which language your Website may be built in. Here's a simple guide so you understand where your developer's strengths and weaknesses may lie.

What is a programming language?

A programming language is a computer language designed to communicate instructions to a computer. Programming languages can be used to create programs that control the behavior of a machine. The earliest programming languages preceded the invention of the computer, and were used to direct the behavior of machines such as Jacquard looms and player pianos. Thousands of different programming languages have been created, mainly in the computer field, and many more are being created every year. As it relates to the Web, there are 3 main programming languages that are used today. This is not to say that there are not many choices, but if you walk into a Web development firm today, you are likely to find that they are developing in PHP, ColdFusion, or ASP/.Net. Asking a programmer what is the best option can be a loaded question – If you ask a chiropractor, "What is the

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best way to treat a bad back?" it's doubtful they are not going to tell you "Acupuncture!" The best way to choose is to find a developer that understands all 3 plaforms, and can offer you the best solution based on *your specific project needs*.

PHP

Designed specifically to help programmers create dynamic server side solutions for Websites, PHP has the ability to scale and has an amazing and robust functions list. That means it can handle just about anything. It can run on several systems including Unix/Linux and even Windows. A large community of developers exist, as do many books and resources. Also, it is free and open source, which means that almost anyone can use it. Since a tool is only as good as the person who uses it, this is a double-edged sword.

ColdFusion

Developed by a family of programmers, ColdFusion is extremely easy and powerful. The development time needed to create a Web application using ColdFusion is very fast; It will take less time to create an app for ColdFusion than for ASP or PHP. Database integration is a snap, and a lot easier to handle compared to ASP and PHP. Error handling is superb, and much better than PHP or ASP. There's a large community for ColdFusion, and since it's an Adobe product, support is excellent. Also, because it's an Adobe product, it does some pretty neat things out of the box. On demand PDF generation, graphics handling, photo manipulation, chart and graph generation, etc., are all pretty much standard. On the down side, ColdFusion is NOT free! It's quite expensive for the developer, so a lot of young programmers and startups don't have the option or money to invest in this technology.

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ASP/.NET

The Good: If you know VB/BASIC, it's a breeze. Because it's a Microsoft product, it integrates well with SQL Server, Access, COM, and pretty much anything related with Microsoft.

The Bad: Was only meant to be used on Windows. Microsoft tries to keep it proprietary to Windows. Out of the box, it does not contain a good function list: things such as upload must be installed as a separate ASP component. Too many components may crash the system at times. ASP requires more overhead than needed because it depends on COM. Error trapping is ok. The biggest problem is that ASP/.NET programmers tend to come from enterprise backgrounds, so creating simple Web apps is not easily accomplished, and a lot of the programming work tends to suffer from code bloat. And, if you don't know VB/Basic, there's an enormous learning curve.

Understanding the Different Types Of Platforms

There are several ways in which a Website can be implemented. This implementation is referred to as a platform. The first step in deciding which platform may be best for you is to answer the most basic question: Will I need to update my Website myself, or will I rely on my Web developer to handle changes?

If you are going to rely on your Web developer to make changes, then it really doesn't matter which platform you decide on. Your Web developer will use whatever they are comfortable in, and you won't need to worry about it technically, but here are a few rules to make sure you don't go down the wrong path:

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1) **Make sure you can take it with you.** Many of today's solutions are open source and/or non-proprietary. This means that if you decide to move on from your developer, assuming your contract says that you own your code, you should be able to take everything with you to be up and running again in no time. If anything is proprietary, requires a license, or is tied to other platforms, RUN!

2) **There is no short cut for experience.** Asking your developer for samples of their work, a walk through of the system, and a deeper dive shouldn't be an issue, and will give you a sense of what you can expect. If you ask for a demo, make sure *you drive*. Any developer can make anything that they built look easy until you take the wheel!

3) **Talk to customers.** Real conversations with happy customers who actually use the platform you are considering can go a long way to making you comfortable with your decision.

If, however, you intend to take control and manage your own updates, then a CMS (Content Management System) platform decision has to be made. As with programming languages, asking your developer what is the best option can be a loaded question – they are going to tell you the best option is the one they offer. *The best way to choose is to find a developer that can offer you an array of solutions based on your specific project needs, and help you understand why they feel a specific selection will be best.* With all of these systems, basic functions can be enhanced ad infinitum with an ever-expanding array of add-ons, contributed from their respective communities, and custom development teams. There's no one-size-fits-all solution here; it depends on your goals, technical expertise, budget and what you need your site to do.

For a simple blog or brochure-type site, Wordpress could be the best choice. More complex to learn than BravoCMS, it's very widely used. For a complex, highly customized site requiring scalability and complex content organization, Drupal might be the best choice. And, if you have a bunch of

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programmers who work for you, Joomla, a CMS built by programmers for other programmers, may be the answer.

Hosting Options and Implications

MANY hosting options exist today, and most of them are equally great. Unless you pay a premium, you won't be guaranteed 100% up time. However, 99.9% is good enough for most businesses. They're usually scalable, so as your business grows, hosting companies can offer you more inclusive solutions that can accommodate your growth. Whatever you decide, unless you have a specific, technical reason to host your own Website, there is no reason to do it yourself, and many reasons not to, despite what your internal IT staff may be telling you. There are a few simple but critical rules to follow, so pay attention, and you should be fine.

1) Hosting will cost you somewhere between $9.00 per month and $100 per month. Cheaper is not always better, and there is no substitute for live human interaction and customer service.

2) If you can get a hosting plan bundled with maintenance, awesome. You will save money.

3) Your developer is likely to either have their own hosting solution (which is very good…If there's a problem, you know who to call…) or be a reseller of a 3rd party solution. Be aware of 3rd party relationships. Are YOU the client of the hosting provider, or is the developer responsible when there's an issue? And there *will* be issues.

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Which Content System is Right for Your Project? Wordpress, Drupal, Joomla, and BravoCMS

1) **Wordpress.** Ideal for fairly simple Websites, such as everyday blogging and news sites, as well as anyone looking for an easy-to-manage site. Add-ons make it easy to expand the functionality of the site. Ease of use is a key benefit for experts and novices alike. It's powerful enough for web developers or designers to efficiently build sites for clients, and then, with minimal instruction, clients can take over the site management. Known for an extensive selection of themes, Wordpress is user-friendly (to a point) with great support and tutorials, making it great for non-technical users to quickly deploy fairly simple sites. Technical experience is not necessary; it's intuitive and easy to get a simple site set up quickly. Wordpress began as an innovative, easy-to-use blogging platform.

2) **Drupal.** Drupal requires a lot of technical expertise to manage and maintain. Capable of producing advanced sites, there is a commitment to learning the software. If you have a marketing team, it may be a worthwhile investment. For complex, advanced and versatile sites that require complex data organization, there are a number of plug-ins and features that make this a nice choice for large organizations, as long as those organizations have an IT staff at their disposal.

3) **Joomla.** A community and social networking platform, Joomla was written *for developers by other developers*. A strong technical skill level is required. Joomla allows you to build a site with more content and structure flexibility than Wordpress offers, but E- commerce is a bit cluegy. Although the Joomla user community is very tight, failure to keep up with today's standards and best practices have led to a huge loss of market share.

4) **BravoCMS.** Intuitive to use (the easiest to learn and manage), Bravo CMS can be designed and modified to do whatever you need it to

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do. The most flexible, users continue to demand new features and functions that can't be found in standard plug-ins. A simple test drive from your developer will highlight the platforms simplicity and power.

Custom Applications

Sometimes, companies need custom Web applications built to a specification. If you are happy with "out of the box" solutions, and won't ever need much scalability, Wordpress can be a solid solution. But, if you are looking to develop custom user portals, tracking systems, e-commerce and membership levels, you are going to want a custom Web application built for you. While all of the platforms support some level of customization, certain platforms do it much better than others. And, to keep it more interesting, fewer developers can accommodate this type of programming as well. So, again, it's imperative that:

1) You can see samples of the programmers completed work and get a real world, hands on demo.
2) You can speak to happy customers who have been delivered successful projects, and
3) Your developer has a process that they can demonstrate, so that you are assured of the success of your project.

Online Marketing: Inbound, Social Media, and SEO

Using digital space for your marketing strategy can be one of the most efficient and cost effective ways to promote your company and products. Again, not all companies benefit from this type of marketing, and not all developers understand it. Inbound marketing, social media, blogging, and search engine optimization and marketing may be necessary tactics that you may want to incorporate into your online presence. Online or Internet marketing provides you with a unique opportunity to reach customers whenever, and wherever they are. This has become extremely effective as

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Internet searches for goods and services continue to grow. Again, if this is important to you, you will want to have your developer demonstrate tactics, strategies, experience, and most of all, results.

Does my developer "Get it"?

Your developer should be able to discuss the benefits of email marketing, blogging, social media, and content marketing, and explain why or why not you should incorporate these as strategies to help you reach your target audience online.

How will my online marketing efforts impact all of my other marketing efforts?

A good developer or digital agency will be able to integrate all of your marketing efforts. That is to say traditional forms of marketing, such as TV, radio, and print media will *all* drive traffic to your online presence, so that you can measure the effectiveness of you other marketing efforts, as well as create new conversations and close new business.

Organic Vs. Pay Per Click SEO

There are two kinds of search. Organic search and paid search. Organic search is based on unpaid, natural rankings determined by search engine algorithms, and can be optimized with various SEO practices. In contrast, paid results are basically advertisements — the Website owners have paid to have their Web pages display for certain keywords, making these listings show up when someone runs a search query containing those keywords. The fee you pay is based on either clicks or views of your ads. A strong marketing strategy may use both search engine optimization and paid search to reach customers online.

Some developers understand organic, and some work primarily in paid search, but few incorporate them both. You will want to see examples and real world results from existing clients from a developer who is trying to sell you on search engine services.

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Social Media

Of all of the marketing channels in the industry, social media is one of the most unpredictable, simply because you are interacting directly with the public. However, it still promises to be a powerful tool when used properly. Social media marketing provides businesses with the ability to reach out personally to potential clients and cultivate a one-on-one relationship with them. Developing this kind of interaction can bring traffic to your website, as well as generate new leads for your business. And, since there is a virtually unlimited number of platforms available on the Internet, companies are able to target individual leads on different networks. Be it Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, or Pinterest, your chances of connecting with new clients will increase.

Depending on who you are, many of the customers you are targeting may already be on social media, providing you with a great opportunity to connect with them. Does your developer have the ability help you navigate the social media world? Can they manage it for you?

Blogging

The fastest way to drive new conversations about your products and services with prospects is with a Blog. Blogging provides avenues for your company to be discoverable by search engines. It's that simple. With each blog you post, you provide Google, Yahoo, Bing, or countless others, a new page to index and therefore, a new route to your content. Especially since content, like blogs, can be filled with keywords that Internet users will be entering into their search bar. That means, if someone is looking to answer the question "What are the common mistakes of SEO?" and you've written a blog on that subject, if managed properly, your information will

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be displayed in the search engine's results. Again, managed properly, this will continue to drive more traffic to your site, convert that traffic into leads, establish your company as an authority figure in your industry, and nurture long-term results!

Inbound Marketing

Inbound Marketing refers to all of the online marketing pieces together. Advertising a company through blogs, podcasts, video, eBooks, e-newsletters, whitepapers, SEO, social media marketing, and other forms of content marketing serve to bring customers in closer to the brand, where they want to be. In contrast, buying attention, such as cold-calling, direct paper mail, radio, TV advertisements, sales flyers, spam, telemarketing, and traditional advertising are considered "Outbound Marketing." Inbound marketing earns the attention of customers, makes the company easier to be found online, and draws customers to the website by producing interesting content. If you are interested in this level of support, your developer should have a team in place to perform market research, create content (or train you how to do it), and implement all of the pieces of marketing, including measuring and analysis of what is working and what is not, so as to prove out your return on investment.

Finding a Developer that is Right for Your Project

By now, you should have noticed a few recurring themes. It's better to decide what services you may need, and then try and find a developer who can demonstrate real world, consistent results based on what your specific project needs are. In this way, you will let your business needs dictate a solution, instead of having a Web developer dictate the platform (which may be the only tool in the shed…), ensuring a much greater likelihood for project success.

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What Kind of Developer do you need?

It's important up front to determine your projects needs. Do you just need a new site? Will e-commerce be involved? Custom applications? Will you want help with marketing?

What Type of Developer are you talking to?

Because technology changes so fast, MOST Web developers (especially the smaller ones) can only specialize in one type of platform. They are going to force their solution to fit your project, and it's going to be like forcing a square peg into a round hole.

How will your project be managed?

Understanding deliverables, what is expected from each party, and what exactly you are going to get from a Web developer for your money up front will go a long way to ensuring success and allowing you to sleep at night. Some developers have strong project management teams in place, and even stronger project management software. Asking to take a "peek behind the curtain" and demonstrate how your project will be managed is a great way to view what actually happens and to make sure all of the right systems are in place.

How will your project be supported after you launch?

Different types of projects require different touch points. For those types of projects that require simple updates once or twice a year, there may be little interfacing with the developer once the site has launched. Other projects may require constant attention from you and your developer. Since many small developers are forced to constantly bring in new business in order to stay afloat, keeping their attention on your project after it is complete can sometimes be difficult. So, you should find out what their maintenance policy is. Can you get ahold of them? How long do simple changes take? Do they have a change ticket system that tracks everything? How will your requests get priority?

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Summary

Well, now that you've read all of this, it's likely you have even more questions. Since the object of this document was to *educate* you (as opposed to confuse or overwhelm you) I'm going to try to distill this to its most important pieces.

1) Make sure your developer can show you examples of similar projects. I'm not talking about design here, but scope, vertical market, and overall feel of what you are looking to accomplish.

2) Talk to past clients (and even vendors) to make sure the developer you have in mind keeps their word. It's likely that problems will arise during the development process, especially if the project is even a little complex. The point is not to avoid all conflicts and problems, it's to make sure that your developer is willing to work through them to your satisfaction.

3) Take a test drive. If part of the project has a content management system or administrative tool, ask the developer to let you play around with the system. If you can't immediately figure it out…it's the wrong system for you.

4) I'm going to bold this one. It's important: **Make sure that your developer can show you an array of solutions. And yes, they should be able to give you a live demo of several different options. If they can't, its likely the developer is a one trick pony, and the trick they know might not be in your best interest.**

All of this may take a little time and patience on your part, but the old adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" has never been more appropriate.

About The Author

Jeffrey Cohen is a Web development professional with degrees in both Computer Programming and Graphic Design. With over 30 years of

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corporate marketing experience and 16 years as a Web development and Inbound Marketing Professional, Jeffrey has been a thought leader, featured speaker, and published author on many online marketing topics including Web development, Search Engine Optimization, Custom Online Application Development, Database integration, Social Media Marketing, Blogging, Traffic Analysis, and Content Creation for the Web.

About ImageWorks

ImageWorks, LLC is a full service Digital Marketing Agency, that helps businesses bridge the gap between their marketing needs and online technology solutions. ImageWorks is a privately held, Connecticut based Limited Liability company.

ImageWorks, LLC designs and implements cross-platform business workflow solutions that solve critical business problems and improve productivity for our clients. We help out clients by providing customized, single source, Digital Media solutions in harmony with the focus and operation of their business to maximize ROI.

Founded in 1997, ImageWorks became an LLC in 1999. What began as a cottage industry selling advertising spots on a local town Website quickly evolved into a Digital Media Solutions leader.

As an Online Marketing company with over 16 years experience, our products and services now include: Full Web design, database integration, social media, blogging, e-commerce, e-mail marketing, hosting, custom application development, full inbound marketing solutions, audio production, and video Production.

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