



Building & Managing Your On-Line Office ***Are you working with a web hobbyist or a web biz pro?***

In my consulting work, I often have to review really bad web sites, from all sizes and types of companies and organizations. Some of the largest and most expensive sites are often the most broken (lots of style, very little substance with no consideration given to customer service). And, small businesses often make the “penny wise, pound foolish” mistake of going with a web hobbyist. But, how do you *know* whether you’re working with a hobbyist or a pro? Here are five quick tips.

1. You get what you pay for. Sure, dollars are often tight, particularly if you’re in a start-up mode. However - as with anything in life - you get what you pay for. A web hobbyist will likely be *very* cheap, offering to do a full custom site for far less than a professional web business developer. But, let’s face it - cheap almost always looks - well - cheap. And, if a hobbyist *is* a great artistic designer - your site will look great while being technically broken - search engines can’t find you; downloads take too long; visitors can’t easily and quickly navigate; and you can’t easily make changes. (And, with a hobbyist, clients frequently have a lot of problems down the road; problems the hobbyist - no matter how nice or well intentioned - likely caused by their lack of business and technical knowledge.)

A Web biz pro will cost more because they know technology, design, *and* business - and are focused on business results, not just building a pretty site. You wouldn’t expect to pay Yugo prices for a Mercedes, would you? Vast differences in the engineering, quality, functionality and - yes - looks.

Of course, you can also spend a lot and end up with very little. That’s why it’s important you get several bids, check reference sites and ask questions based on the next four tips. And, be up front about your budget. Don’t send out a six-page RFP with tons of customization requirements when you only have \$500 to spend. You’ll just be wasting your and the bidder’s time.



Here's a quick rule of thumb for you: A basic, yet *professional*, web site, including hosting, *should* cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000. Note that at these prices, you can't expect things like a custom shopping cart or on-line custom forms.

2. What's the strategy? The web hobbyist doesn't think in terms of overall strategy. This means they typically design sites without any plans for growth or upgrades. This will force you to start from scratch (and spend a lot more money) to upgrade your site as you change and grow.

The Web Biz Pro will talk with you about your strategy, review your business plans and make recommendations so you can get the most from your "on-line office." Before designing anything, they'll ask a lot "why" questions to ensure that what you're asking for fulfills your business goals - and you don't spend money on technical things you just don't need. That's much more than just a web site.

3. The Professional Look. The web hobbyist often overlooks the details that give your site a professional finish. You might see pages that have many different (and messy looking) fonts; pages that are still named "Default" in the search engine title bar; links that are broken; or images that are sized or processed poorly.

The Web Biz Pro creates search-engine friendly titles to every page, double checks links (and adds special code for users with disabilities), and uses professional graphics software to prepare images that are high quality and low file size for faster page loading!

4. The Right Tools for Right Now. The web hobbyist has a limited set of tools and uses them for all sites, regardless of whether they're the best for the job. This is one reason why you still see so many sites done in, for example, frames. The hobbyist learned some basic software years ago and is still using it, even though both the market and technologies have long moved on to much better things.

The Web Biz Pro has a jam-packed tool bag, so they can design each site with a balance between performance and cost. They'll frequently be able to come up with



creative ways to do what you need, without having to spend a lot more money. And, the Web Biz Pro is constantly learning about and adding more things to their tool bag.

5. Search Engine Snake Oil. The web hobbyist may try to sell you “Search Engine Optimization” (SEO) that consists solely of submitting your site to “over 50,000 search engines!” They’ll also likely still be talking about things like meta tags which are now largely passé. Google, for example, is looking for other things - fresh content, key words, and quality links to your site. And, the search engines are constantly changing their methods, so what worked yesterday may not work tomorrow. That’s why *effective* SEO help gets very expensive, very fast.

The Web Biz Pro knows there is much more to SEO than making submissions (free or fee) to search engines. Good search engine rankings take patience and work. 50,000? Forget about it! There are only four search engines that account for nearly 100% of the market - Google, Yahoo, MSN, and - a very distant fourth - Ask Jeeves. A Web Biz Pro will work with you to prepare a strategy that combines the best technology tools, the right key words, quality content *and* target marketing (after all, popularity and visibility doesn’t automatically translate into quality prospects and revenues.)

So, before you hire your nephew “who really wants to try web site design” or fall for some glitzy (and intimidating) tech design talk - think about the above, and don’t be afraid to ask lots and lots of “why” and “how” questions of your own!

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