

Essential Steps to Take Prior to Hiring a Web Developer

There are 3 questionnaires you should fill out before the website development begins.

1. Needs Assessment
2. Customer Assessment
3. Website Goals Assessment
4. Developer Assessment

Needs Assessment

The goal of this questionnaire is to provide a clear understanding to the potential developer (and sometimes to yourself) about your business. It's divided into 3 sections: Company, Customers, and Competition.

I. Company

1. What's the background (history) of your company?
2. What's your company's most critical business need?
3. What is the main goal of the new website?
4. What are your top products and/or services that you feel are critical to the success of your business?
5. What is the geographical segmentation of your business?
6. What is your differentiation/competitive advantage/selling proposition?

II. Customer

7. What are your customer segments?
8. Where are your customers, geographically?
9. Describe your typical sales cycle?

III. Competition

11. List your top 3 brick-and-mortar competitors
12. List your top 3 online competitors
13. Which competitors do people mention when they talk about your industry?
15. How would you characterize the power of your company's image in comparison to your competitors?
16. How do your competitors differentiate in the market?
17. Where are your competitors going?
18. Where is the industry going?

Customer Assessment

The goal of this questionnaire is to understand the needs and customer behavior of each of your customer segments. Try to answer these questions in terms of an actual person. Imagine your customer segment, and pick a typical customer (perhaps a current customer), and answer the questions as if you were referring to that particular individual (this is called creating a “persona”). You should fill these questions out per each customer segment (or persona) you want to target. Typically, a business has 3 or so main customer segments.

I. Background

1. Name of this customer: _____
2. What is the background of this persona?
3. Demographics: (age; gender; education level etc)
4. Psychographics: (personality; values; lifestyle etc)
5. What is this persona’s purchase behavior and how do they come in contact with you?
6. What are the sales steps of this persona?

II. Needs

7. What information does this persona need to know before making a purchase decision?
8. What questions arise during the sales cycle?

III. Wants

9. What does this persona want? While Jim needs product sizing information, he may also want an extended warrantee – but doesn’t necessarily need it.

IV. Demands

10. What does this persona demand? A demand is an unstated need that the customer expects. While a need is important to a persona, a demand is a deal closer. E.g. Jim demands detailed product information and photos.

V. Limitations

11. What limitations does this persona have? Is there anything that could prevent them from making a purchase?
12. What information does this persona need to be persuaded?

Website Goals Assessment

Although the answer to the prior questions will really define the goals of the future website, there are always some basic elements that must be included the majority of websites. Here's a list, but we've left some blank items for you to fill out that might be particular to your business.

	Must Have	Nice to Have	Not Needed at this point
1. Directions, locations, hours, etc. for brick-and-mortar location	✓		
2. Product and service information	✓		
3. Calls to action above the fold	✓		
4. Contact Form	✓		
5. Media (pictures, audio, video) available for viewing/downloading	✓		
6. Blog postings and reader comments	✓	✓	
7. Customer Testimonials	✓		
8. Methods for your users to help promote your site (email a friend, RSS Feed, Facebook Like, etc.)	✓		
9. Email subscription form	✓		
10. Phone number on all pages	✓		
11. Trust Marks (awards, affiliations, certifications)	✓		
12. Executive biographies	✓		
13. Online request for information (RFI) forms	✓		
14. Information specifically for geographically local visitors	✓		
15. Site map	✓		
16. Online purchasing	✓		
17. Corporate history, news, and press releases			
18. Support for existing customers			
19. News and current events			
20. Articles, white papers			
21. Login for restricted information			
22. Instructions for making contact offline or via e-mail			
23. Ways for community to connect with each other on the site (forums, etc.)			
24. Educational materials			
25. Links to other resources			
26. Fun, games, or entertainment			
27. A strong brand identity			
28. Educational materials			
29. Software or documents available for download			
30. Site search function			
31. Live help/live contact function			

Developer Assessment

Sometimes assessing the quality of a developer can be difficult because it's an area that most people are not familiar with. Just like with anything, there are inexpensive developers and expensive ones. And unfortunately sometimes there is no correlation between price and website effectiveness for a small business. However, I will tell you this: WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT IS NOT GRAPHIC DESIGN. So do not make a decision about hiring a developer solely on the fact that they showed you a mock up that looks beautiful and that you fell in love with. The graphic design of a website can be the most beautiful thing you've even seen, and yet your site can tank when it comes to delivering a positive ROI for your business.

Having said that, here are important elements you must consider regarding the developer you hire.

1. Cost

Consider cost, but realize that cost does not equate to quality. You can have a low cost website that is extremely effective, or vice versa, a very expensive website that is extremely ineffective.

2. Platform

Unless you are a very large corporation or have very unique needs (meaning if you are a doctor, lawyer, nail salon, dentist, pizza place, haircut place, daycare, etc) you DO NOT NEED a proprietary system.

Insist on coding your website using common platforms like WordPress. In fact, for small businesses we absolutely recommend the use of WordPress. This is a well known platform and if things go sour with your developer, you can find a replacement easily. This platform is inexpensive and works great for small businesses.

3. Domain and Hosting

Buy your own domain and hosting package independently of the developer. Many times the developer wants to also act as the host. This generally is NOT a good idea. Again, if things go wrong with your developer, you do not want your website to reside in the developer's computers. If you don't feel comfortable buying your own domain and hosting package, then ask the developer to buy it for you but insist that it's bought under your name with your own credit card information. Buying a domain and a hosting package is not that difficult, and many of the larger hosts (Godaddy, Network Solutions) can help you if you call in to make the purchase.

4. SEO

Make sure your developer is familiar with SEO. But remember, your developer is a contractor, not a realtor. SEO is a marketing activity and few developers have both strong technical skills and strong marketing skills. Although your developer must have SEO in mind when developing your site, the SEO process is long and will continue for many months after the launch of your website.

5. Content

Hire a professional content writer to write your content. If you are going to leave the content up to the developer ensure the content is UNIQUE. Many times we've seen sites that have been populated with plagiarized content. Not only is this a bad SEO practice, but it might trigger a C&D letter from the original writer of the content – who often is your competitor.

When using stock photography also ensure the developer purchase the images under your name. Do not go online and take any picture that you like, this is against copyright laws.

6. Graphic Design

Of course make sure your site looks professional. Many developers will use a template and this is not necessarily a bad thing. As long as the elements for conversion are present (calls to action, company contact information, etc) and above the fold, using a template can save you money when it comes to graphic design. Just like it does when you buy a home from a planned community, the architects use a template and pretty much the homes in the community look the same with minor tweaks.

7. References

Like in any other professional services, it pays to do a bit of research and get references. You're looking for references regarding on-time, on-budget.

If you follow these steps and do your homework prior to hiring a developer you should have not only a much better experience, but also a much better website in the end!