

# 10 Web-Designer Red Flags (That Nobody Warned You About)

BY MATT HANDAL

**W**hen I take my car to a mechanic, I'm a turkey ready to be plucked. With just a short conversation, the mechanic can quickly figure out that I know absolutely nothing about cars. Now and forever, I'm at the mercy of the mechanics.

So when people ask for my opinion on cost proposals they receive from Web designers, I know exactly how they feel. They know nothing about Web design and programming, and find themselves at a loss when faced with pages of technobabble.

It just so happens there is knowledge that you possess and can leverage to even the playing field, namely your knowledge of proposals and contracts. Yes, the very thing you know like the back of your hand. That, added to some friendly advice, will go a long way in your quest for an updated or new Web site.

Let's look at some real-world red flags you may encounter when dealing with Web designers, learn why you should be concerned, and discuss how you can best address them.

## **Red Flag #1: They don't ask the most important question.**

Let's say you are writing a proposal for the design of a pharmaceutical research building. One of the questions you are going to ask yourself is, "What are they trying to accomplish?" If the answer to this question is that the company is trying to build a facility that will entice the best researchers to come work for them, you would make that the centerpiece of your proposal. Wouldn't you?

So why doesn't every designer ask why you want to develop or redesign your Web site? What are you really trying to accomplish with this Web site? Do people see your Web site and hire you based on that? Why do people come to your site and what are they looking for? What message do you want to get across?

You need a designer who sees the whole forest and not just the trees. Make sure your designer asks the most important question: What are you trying to accomplish?

## **Red Flag #2: The proposal contains ambiguous language.**

One thing that should never appear in a proposal is ambiguous language. Ambiguous language is language that can be interpreted in more than one way. Let's look at an example from a real Web design proposal:

**"Add Services Pages.** Currently, the services offered by ABC Architects are limited to small bullet points. Each service (or a core group of major services) should be given its own full page, with a minimum of 2–4 large paragraphs of text used to describe each service."

This language is ambiguous because it does not state exactly what the designer is doing versus what they expect ABC Architects to do. Who is writing these paragraphs and adding these pages? ABC Architects or the designer? With proposals, you just can't assume. That's how you run into problems.

At a minimum, the language should read more like this:

**"Add Services Pages.** Currently, the services offered by ABC Architects are displayed on one page in bullet-point format. We will create and integrate into your Web site a section that contains a separate page for each of these services. ABC Architects will be required to provide us with 2–4 large paragraphs of text used to describe each service."

## **Red Flag #3: The scope is not clearly defined.**

Scope items in proposals should outline exactly what the proposing firm is going to do. Some Web design proposals are written to confuse what they are actually doing. For example:

"Google, Yahoo!, and MSN have verification programs which help those search engines properly index and rank a Web site.

This is an essential process for SEO, and also (especially in the case of Google) allows for additional reporting and metrics via the Webmaster Tools package.”

This says nothing about what the designer will actually do. Here is how this should be written:

“We will create free accounts and sign your Web site up with the Google, Yahoo!, and MSN Web site verification systems. Each of these will provide us with a line of code to add to your Web site. We will add this code to your site, confirm that your site is verified with each of the services, and provide you with the account information. This will help these search engines index your site properly and may improve your placement in search results. The Google account will allow you to track data about your site (via Google Webmaster tools and analytics).”

This description gives you a much better idea of the task and how complex it is.

#### **Red Flag #4: They should have done it the first time around.**

Let’s say your architectural firm designed a school and forgot to include the doors and windows. Since it’s safe to say that the average architect would have drawn in some doors and windows, that’s what we call in the business an “error or omission.” The architect did not display the professional standard of care that would be expected.

Right now, search engine optimization (SEO) is a nice little buzz phrase. If your designer says that your site needs keyword and description metatags for SEO optimization, it sounds like a nice enhancement to your site, right? But before you write a purchase order, talk to your fellow SMPS members about their sites. Did they get those fancy metatags the first time around? Or was it something they had to add later? Most likely, they got it the first time around. That’s because designing a site without metatags is like designing a school without doors or windows. It’s less than the industry standard. (Now I realize that keyword metatags are not as important as they used to be. But description metatags, and metatags in general, are still recognized as an essential piece to any Web site.) So ask your fellow SMPS members about their sites and experiences. It will give you a reference point when trying to figure out if your designer is up to par. Why rehire a designer that gives you errors and omissions?

#### **Red Flag #5: They ask you to pay for something that has already been developed.**

Let’s say you are a home builder who builds houses based on a “cookie-cutter” design. Would you charge each customer for the original design of that house? You may charge them something but probably not the full cost of the design. And you wouldn’t charge them monthly for the privilege of being in a house with that design, would you? To me, it would seem like a pretty crooked thing for you to do.

Some designers will develop your site to work on their custom content management system (CMS). This CMS is usually developed initially to address the needs of one of their clients. Once it’s developed, it’s developed. More than likely, the initial client paid that development cost. So why would a designer charge you \$100 a month for the privilege of using it to manage your site? I fear that this practice is not uncommon. Do you feel it is unethical to charge a reoccurring monthly fee for something that already has been developed?

#### **Red Flag #6: You don’t have or own the work product.**

When a building is designed, who owns the architectural drawings? Based on my extremely limited legal knowledge, it is my understanding that copyright of those drawings defaults to the architect. It’s also my understanding that the same applies for Web design. But shouldn’t you own the rights to your firm’s site? You probably should. I would say that most of us would want to execute a written assignment of copyright that transfers all those rights from the designer of your site to your firm (something you may want to address with your firm’s legal counsel).

**“Put everything into perspective before making decisions. Apply what you know when evaluating a Web designer’s proposal.”**

Further complicating this issue, many developers can host your site as well. But now you also are giving them control of the physical computer files (including database) that make up your site. That puts you in a potentially risky situation where they own the copyright to your Web site and have your files in their hands. Furthermore, they may push you to host your site on their servers, even though they will charge you much more than a typical Web site host. They may explain that their “hosting is a little more expensive because hosting a database-driven site is more complicated.” If you hear something like this, call up some hosting providers and ask whether that sounds right. It might be in your best interest to investigate claims like that. Because, in reality, no hosting service worth a dime would ever ask you to pay more for having a database-driven site or claim to be more expensive because they let you.

Again, please understand some of these are legal questions that can be answered only by someone authorized and qualified to practice law in your state. That’s not me.

#### **Red Flag #7: Your site is not W3C standards compliant.**

Let’s say you are proposing to provide sustainable design to your client without using the standards that the U.S. Green Building Council has set forth. Would you tell the client that the building would be comparable to a LEED Platinum building?

I'm guessing that's something you wouldn't do. That's because people in the A/E/C industry have adopted the U.S. Green Building Council's standards.

Did you know the Web also has recognized standards known as 'W3C'?

The benefit of requiring that your site be W3C compliant is quite simple. You'll know that your Web site includes today's bare necessities. For example, your Web site will keep all the layout features in well-defined CSS style sheets. That may mean absolutely nothing to you right now. But when you decide to redesign your site, the look of your entire site can be redesigned completely by changing one single file (or small set of files). And the cost of redesigning your site in this manner is significantly less.

In addition, the site would be required to have accessibility features that not only allow people with disabilities to experience it but also make your site much more findable. Requiring that your site validate as W3C compliant may be a good thing for you to do if you have very little technical Web site knowledge.

You can go to <http://validator.w3.org/> to see if your current site is W3C compliant.

#### **Red Flag #8: The procurement method is sole source.**

We all know the market is the best indicator of price. Just look at what's happening in the A/E/C industry. There are fewer jobs, the competition is getting stiffer, and prices are going down. You may think your firm has a lot of competitors, but it's nothing compared to the number of competitors Web designers have. So why let them dictate the price and not the market? Why wouldn't you bid out your Web work to multiple design firms? Yes, it takes longer, and it won't always simply be a matter of choosing the cheapest price. But if you have thought it through and have a clearly defined RFP, you most likely will end up with a better and cheaper result.

#### **Red Flag #9: There is no content management system.**

These days, a content management system (CMS) is a must for every new Web site. If a designer is not going to provide you with one, tell them to get lost. A CMS allows you to make updates to your Web site without knowing any HTML. It should allow you to change the people, projects, and news on your Web site easily. Our corporate Web site was built in the '90s for \$2,000, and it has a content management system. Both ConstructionNetcast.com and HelpEverybodyEveryday.com are built with an open source content management system called Joomla.

#### **Red Flag #10: They tell you, "You get what you pay for."**

Somewhere along the line, the phrase "You get what you pay for" has turned into Expensive = Good. That's what behavioral

researchers refer to as an example of the *representativeness heuristic*. The representativeness heuristic is when people assume commonality between objects of similar appearance, or between an object and a group into which it appears to fit. For example, if you placed two identical diamonds on a table and priced one at \$100 and one at \$1,000, people would automatically assume the \$1,000 diamond is a better diamond. But if you know your diamonds, it is pretty easy to determine the two are identical. If you don't know your diamonds, you are at the mercy of the salesperson.

When you buy Web site design services, you are buying people's time. Just like when someone buys a design for a building. We base our price on the level of effort and hours needed. We also base the price on who is doing the work. If we have only our most senior people on the project, it probably will cost the client more. In your experience, have you met a construction manager, architect, or engineer who does better work but does not get paid as much as others? Yes, because that is fairly common in the world of professional services. So is it safe to say that there may be Web designers out there who do better work but charge less than other Web designers? Yes, because the same principle applies.

Don't automatically assume a higher price is higher quality. "You get what you pay for" should mean that you are getting more work or better service. Don't be afraid to ask for the details. On how many hours is their estimate based? What are the designer's rates? We live in a society where we look at the ingredients and nutritional details when buying a loaf of bread, but when buying Web site design services, we don't even bother to ask about the details.

#### **Conclusion**

Don't let this article make you paranoid when dealing with Web designers. What I'm recommending is to put everything into perspective before making decisions. Apply what you know about proposals and contracts when evaluating a Web designer's proposal.

If you are happy with the results of your Web site and have a warm and fuzzy feeling about the designer, then it might not be necessary to go all CSI on them. And if your Web site directly brings in \$1 million of revenue for your firm, then maybe it's a no-brainer to invest \$100,000 for a new or updated Web site. But if you feel like a turkey ready to be plucked, keep these 10 red flags in mind when dealing with Web designers. ■

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