



there's no worse feeling than investing heavily in something and feeling like you got less than what you paid for. Or worse. Horror stories of entrepreneurs being ripped off by web developers and online marketing scams are everywhere. And being in the web business myself for more than a decade, I've heard them all. Some business owners have been burned so badly, they hesitate to invest anything in the web despite the fact that it plays such an important role in small business marketing in our increasingly digital society.

But there's no need to fear... While there may never be a means to ensure overwhelming success in a website design project — according to ZDnet, over 30% of web projects fail — there are a LOT of simple ways you can increase your chances of success; making sure that the right things are in the contract, protecting your down payment, choosing the right hosting service, asking the right questions.

It's also important to remember that not all web designers and developers are dishonest. Sometimes projects fail for other reasons like mismanaged expectations, poor communications, poor choice in hosting providers or software solutions. Sometimes it's

even (gasp!) the client's fault. We've got tips for avoiding all these common failure points in this paper.

Our goal in compiling these tips is simple: small business owners often can't afford to make mistakes and we want to save you from some of the unnecessary stress that comes with engaging in these kinds of projects and protect you from your own inexperience if you're not used to managing web people.

If you have any questions about the information in this paper, you can email me at erik@z-gc.com.

Good luck with your project!

1 Your website is part of your business; learn the basics: Take the time to learn a little bit about how websites work. No matter how non-technical you are, you can learn this and understanding website 101 will make you a better shopper for web service providers and less likely to be taken advantage of. Terms you should be familiar with include URL, DNS, IP, Host, Server, SSL, HTML, CSS, FTP, PHP, SQL, MySQL, Linux, .NET, CMS, SEO and PPC.

This is the part where business owners typically get that “glassy” look in their eyes and say that they’re not comfortable dealing with this “techie stuff.”

That’s absolute nonsense and a very poor excuse to stay in your comfort zone. As a business owner, you probably already understand a LOT of complex concepts like the difference between your “Cash Flow” and “Income Statement” and the differences between an LLC and sole proprietorship. This is the same thing and it’s an important part of your job as the person primarily responsible for your company’s marketing. That being said though, if you have a marketing person on staff, make them learn this.

There are helpful resources online and you can also refer to the basic glossary that we are maintaining at practicesafesite.com.

2 Don’t hire just ANYONE to work on your website: If you’ve never built a website before, you may not know what to look for in a web developer, designer or agency. First, look at their portfolio and client list (if available). See if their work looks good and functions well and try to get a feel for what kinds of clients they work for. If you are a small business owner and you see work for much bigger organizations or Fortune 1000 companies, your project may not be a priority for them. Likewise if you run a mature small business with 10-20 employees and see that every client on the list is a “solopreneur” startup, they may not be able to handle a business as big as yours.

It’s also good to Google your vendors and see what’s being said about them online. Check recommendations on LinkedIn and Facebook and also see what the Better Business Bureau has to say about them. You might also ask for some client references.

If your vendor comes well recommended and appears

to be a good fit, here are some other questions you should ask before moving forward:

Do you follow W3C standards? W3C is the World Wide Web Consortium, the international organization that is charged with setting and maintaining web development standards. Hopefully they will say “yes” or “mostly” at worst. If they say “no” or “what’s the W3C?” that would be a hint to let them go.

Do you build your websites using table or CSS-based layouts? Tables are a primitive way of creating web layouts – it’s how those of us that have been in the business for more than 10 years built sites back in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Although tables still have a place in many web layouts, it should not be used to build the framework of the site design. CSS (or Cascading Style Sheets) have been used for that purpose for many years and it’s essential that CSS – not tables – govern your web design, primarily for the purposes of updating layouts easily and ensuring that your site is as scalable as possible. Despite best practices, there are still people in this business who have not kept their skills current and have not evolved with their industry to the detriment of their clients.

What programming languages do you know? Advanced knowledge of HTML and CSS is mandatory. Beyond that, your web people should probably have some experience with PHP and javascript for a small business project. The choice of PHP over Microsoft-based languages like .NET is explained later in this document.

Do you code from scratch or do you use templates? There really isn’t a right or wrong answer here... But you should know what you’re buying and what you’re paying for. We’ve seen clients pay thousands for sites that were slightly modified versions of canned templates available for \$200 or less. The price you pay should match the level of service provided and you never want to feel like you were shorted after the fact.

What portion of the work do you do yourself and what portion do you outsource? This also isn’t a red flag if they outsource part of the project. Building websites today requires deeper design skill and deeper programming skill than even just five or six years ago and it’s often difficult for one person to keep up to speed on both sides. But by the same token, you should know which part of the project your vendor really excels in and what you should expect from the process as a whole. You also have the right to know if any of the work is being done overseas, whether their freelance help are full-time freelancers or

moonlighting after hours and how much experience your vendor has working with these people.



3 Hire someone you're comfortable with: Remember, DON'T SETTLE – there are lots of web guys and gals in the sea, if you don't like someone's design work or you feel that their work is dated/clunky/poorly built, hire someone else. It isn't hard finding candidates for a web design project these days... But it can be hard finding a good fit for your needs. Don't rush yourself and don't hire anyone you have a bad feeling about.

4 Buy your own domain name! Make sure you own your domain name – buy it yourself through GoDaddy or a similar service. NEVER allow a developer, designer, consultant, hosting company or other third party to purchase it on your behalf. If someone else purchases a web domain in their name, they own it – not you – and they may or may not be willing to transfer it over to you whenever your relationship ends. Don't take this chance; good domain names are difficult to come by and no one wants to see a company asset that valuable end up in someone else's control.

Remember, you are risking your entire online equity here: your web address, your email address, your search engine rankings, EVERYTHING. Why take such a leap of faith with a third party when you can own it yourself for about \$10/year?

5 All hosting is not created equal: Research your hosting options and learn how to use the online administrator panels. Test drive customer support before buying. If you really want to have some fun, get that friend you have in the IT business to

test drive customer support for you and ask the really tough questions. Don't just buy whatever's cheapest or convenient or what your web firm offers without getting all the information.

I recommend using a hosting service that offers CPanel as an administration tool. CPanel is a web-based server management system that is easy for novices to learn and puts a lot of functionality – like the ability to add/edit/delete email and FTP accounts and manage backups – at your fingertips. Plus, it is widely used which means that the time you spend learning your way around will be transferable to another hosting provider if you ever need to switch. Plus developers love it.

It's also important that your website is hosted in a real datacenter (with staff, security, appropriate environmental controls, a 24 hour help desk, etc.) and not in your developer's office, basement, garage or bedroom. And please, do not host it yourself or through a friend or family member no matter how technically competent you believe you/they are.



6 Make sure you have access; you never know when you'll need it: Make sure that your hosting company and/or developer or designer provides you with all the necessary passwords and credentials to access your files directly should you ever need to. Note that this is not necessarily an indication of mistrust in your web people – the unexpected can happen and should your developer ever move, go on an extended vacation or become sick or hurt, you could have a problem. The items specifically you should probably have are an FTP login, a login for a web-based hosting administration panel and a login for your content management system, if you have one.



7 Get backups, LOTS of backups: Ask your web developer for all the files you would need to reproduce your website should you ever need to. Also make sure you know how to make backups of your site (including any databases) and that this happens regularly. Unless specifically outlined in a contract or service agreement, this is likely NOT being done automatically by your developers or your hosting firm. Set a recurring calendar reminder to help you ensure that this gets done.

8 You NEED a Content Management System (CMS): Times have changed and where it might have been cost prohibitive for a small business owner to have a content managed website a few years ago, now every business can and SHOULD have one of these tools built into their website. If you have never seen one, a CMS is a password-protected portion of your site where you can login and edit most of your site content – as well as add, delete and hide pages – via a simple interface not unlike Microsoft Word. Having access to a CMS does not necessarily mean that you HAVE to make all your own edits; but that you can should your developer become unavailable, unresponsive or worse.

9 “Custom” doesn’t always mean “better”: Unless there is a very compelling business case, in today’s environment we also need to recommend against small businesses building custom CMS platforms. As recently as 2008 it would have been prudent to consider otherwise... The most popular CMS platforms like Joomla and Drupal* were clunky and difficult to program for and difficult to use. WordPress also lacked some key features at that time, especially with regard to managing sites more than 20-25 pages. But today, WordPress meets all the content management requirements that the vast majority

of small business would have. Why start from scratch? And what happens if you go with the custom solution and need to fire your developer shortly after the site launches? You may be stuck with a custom solution that is never built on, never upgraded to accommodate changing technology and that other developers may or may not want (or be able to) work with.

*NOTE: While I have never found much use for Joomla, Drupal is actually a VERY powerful package with a lot of very advanced features. The problem with Drupal is that it’s too advanced for a novice-level business owner to use without regular help from a developer/agency. We recommend WordPress so highly because it is so very easy for beginners to learn.

10 There are a LOT of browsers out there: One of the most unique challenges in web development today is the number of web browsers and the very different ways they process websites. Most browsers are largely “standards compliant” in the way they read CSS; this group includes Firefox, Safari, Chrome and Opera though there are still some interesting differences in how they render websites. Internet Explorer is not standards compliant – it has its own rulebook, though version 8 is a slight bit more developer-friendly than its predecessors. Additionally, even on the same browser, a site may look different on a Mac vs. a PC. What does this mean for you? It means that in order for your website to work well on ALL of these browsers, your developer needs to do a LOT of work and, in many cases, tradeoffs need to be made. Think about your priorities and work with your developer to figure out which browsers and platforms are most important to your business.

You may also want to give special attention to whether or not your site should support Internet Explorer 6. With the release of IE8 in 2009, Microsoft declared IE6 to be “legacy software,” meaning that they would no longer support it. Given its severe limitations vs. modern browsers (as well as security concerns), many developers and firms have also abandoned support of IE6. If you believe it’s important that your site function well in IE6, be sure to discuss that specifically with your developer. If you wait until the end of the project to mention something, your developer may want to charge extra to recode the site to meet what they will likely consider to be new specifications.

11 Get it in writing: Make sure you have a written contract or service agreement. This is important for several reasons and protects both parties. First, you want to make sure that there is a clear scope of work defined which ensures that you will get everything your paid for.

Second, you need to be sure that you have something in writing that affirms your ownership of the design, code and other intellectual property that is created on your behalf (including source design files). Most web firms will request via contract the ability to use the work they do for you for self-promotion; this is standard and nothing to be afraid of. Many programmers also like to retain the rights to their code; this also is not usually something to be alarmed about. The reason coders do this is to help them build a library of useful little programs that they can leverage in other projects to reduce their cost of doing business and save their clients money. Be sure that your agreement protects anything truly proprietary, but otherwise this is fairly benign.

And when your developer or agency presents you with a contract, service agreement, or terms and conditions, be sure to read everything carefully before you agree. Don't be afraid to ask questions and request that the answers come in writing.



12 Protect your payment: If possible, pay with a credit card. Most developers will request some sort of up-front payment, which is standard operating procedure. If you pay any portion of your project fees up-front with a check and something happens, that money is likely gone forever. If you pay via credit card, however, your credit card company secures your payment and they will get you your money back should your vendor fail to deliver on their obligations to you. Ever heard the story about the

business owner that paid 50% up front to his web guy only to have said web guy stop returning his calls after three weeks and ultimately delivering nothing? Don't be that business owner. There is little to fear in making a down payment via credit card and the security it affords you is HUGE.

13 Don't leave any doors open: If you sever ties with an employee, vendor or anyone else with access to your website or admin tools, change the login credentials. This is usually easy to do, especially if you are using CPanel to manage your hosting environment and a CMS like WordPress to manage your site.



14 Your site, your responsibility: Try to remind your developers to make a backup of your site before making any changes. Your developer probably knows this is a good idea, but sometimes even the most careful people will cut a corner every now and then. Remember that your website is your property and you – not third party vendors – are ultimately responsible for its care and upkeep. If there are details like this that are important to you, don't be afraid to remind your vendors how you like things done. In doing this, you are not being pushy and you are not being a nuisance; you're just taking proper care of a valuable business asset.

15 Be a good client: We've obviously focused a lot here on the things that you can do to protect yourself from a bad vendor or vendors, but in many cases it takes two parties to create a less-than-optimal working relationship and so you should also try to protect yourself from, well, yourself. Here are some ways you can do that:

Be Honest: You need to have an open/honest and ongoing dialogue with your web people. Let them know where they stand, what they can be doing better and where they are excelling. Let them know that they need to help manage your expectations as well.

Don't ask for discounts/freebies: Odds are you don't work for free and so it's unfair to expect others to. Pay your web people well, pay them on time, be a good partner and I promise you will get your share of favors without even asking.

Be mindful of project scope: When you signed on with your developer, you agreed to a list of deliverables. While projects do tend to evolve between the time it's started and the time it's complete – try not to push the envelope too far. If your developer has agreed to build 20 pages of content on your behalf, don't send 40 without discussing how scope will be affected.

Understand your role in the process: Web development is an involved, high-touch process and requires a lot of input from you along the way. You will need to provide feedback and approvals; you may also need to provide written content, images and other assets. Your response time is CRITICAL to the timing of the project. If at any point you're not sure what is expected of you in the process, get with your developer and make sure you're both on the same page.

Get your web people FULL access to everything they need: Full access would include logins for FTP and web-based administration tools and access to your databases. Not doing this will likely result in delays and budget overages. It's also helpful if your server is being supported by someone your developer can lean on. Web developers are not usually qualified as server admins and cannot be expected to troubleshoot the hosting environment.

Test, test, test... And then test some more: It's difficult for a lone developer/freelancer or even a small firm to test their work objectively. This doesn't mean that they are being careless or neglectful, only that they aren't objective. Seeing your website live for the first time however, you can be objective and so can the other stakeholders in your business and so can your family and friends.

A partnership is a two way street and the more you

treat your web person (or people) like a teammate the more they will appreciate your business and, oftentimes, the harder they will work. If you ever wonder if you're doing all you can to be a good client, just ask – hopefully you'll get some helpful feedback.

+ **LAST BUT NOT LEAST: Always plan for "what if":** We all want to think that when we enter into a relationship with a vendor that you are entering into what is sure to be a long and productive relationship and that everything is going to go wonderfully. It's terrific when that happens, but all too often it does not. So when you're about to engage in a web design or development project, be sure to consider all the "What if..." questions:

- *What happens if I can't reach you and there's a problem?*
- *What happens if there's a problem and you can't reach me?*
- *What happens if we find a bug after launch?*
- *What happens if, after we launch, we need to part ways? Will other programmers be able to work on the site?*
- *What if I hire (or fire) an employee? What needs to change?*
- *What if there's a typo?*
- *What if someone hacks or vandalizes my site?*
- *What if the server goes down?*
- *What if my business model changes? How flexible is the platform we're using?*

If you have specific concerns or "What if..." scenarios that are of particular importance to you, make sure that you talk to your developer about them before you engage and be sure that the answers are documented in writing and preferably within your contract or service agreement with your vendor.

Thinking this way may seem bit morbid or fatalistic, but Considering the worst-case scenario ahead of time will not only help you prepare, but may also help prevent it from ever happening.

Good luck out there!
(And give me a holler if you get into trouble: erik@z-gc.com or @erikwolf on twitter)

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