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What to Look for in a Web Developer: 6 Tips on Choosing the Team to Make or Manage Your Website

The cost of creating a website can be tough on small businesses, but there are ways to minimize the price tag. When Kellee Johnson launched the website for The Ballast Group, her Chicago-based communications business, she says, “I looked for a very economical choice—a small Web development firm that could build a template.” That meant they delegated while she dropped in text and graphics herself.

But if you run a B2B or e-commerce business that requires a website with a database or lots of links, spending more upfront will pay off in the long run. Either way, take steps to help ensure that the team you select matches your business needs:

Step 1. Get to know the team

Start by familiarizing yourself with the different roles of each team member. Who’s writing the **code**, who’s doing **layout** and who’s

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- watching the **budget**? You'll get a sense of how they work together by asking for examples of the firm's success in solving business problems.
- Some sample questions:
- Do you handle search engine optimization and [marketing](#)?
 - What social media do you recommend building into the site, and can you guide me through that [process](#)?
 - Is your application development done in-house?
- Also, find out how updates to the site will be made and what content management you can do yourself.
- Step 2. Check out portfolio and references**
- Who have they worked with? A range of experience with clients of varying sizes is ideal. Since their work is visual, many developers include links to previous work on their site. When you visit those sites, check out their **page load times, search engine indexing** or other signs of the firm's work.
- Also, Johnson suggests asking references questions that will tell you about their experience working with the firm. "Start with the low-hanging fruit," she says:
- Do they give good creative advice?
 - Do they tell you about best practices in the industry?
 - Do they keep confidentiality?
- Step 3. Hold multiple meetings**
- Now Johnson selects developers for her clients, starting with a 30-minute needs assessment to discuss the basics of the project. "I'd want to see their work, meet them in person and talk to a few clients," she says. "It's probably three meetings and a couple phone calls before hiring."
- As you go more into depth, ask what programming and scripting languages they've used. Find out how they'd handle any applications, plug-ins or databases. Even if you're not a tech expert, their answers could give you more confidence—or less—about their abilities.
- Step 4. Discuss milestones**
- Some Web developers offer to build sites in six weeks or less, but Johnson advises clients to allow several months at least. To set a realistic timeline, discuss important milestones in the development of the site. You'll want to check in after the preliminary design stage, view internal pages and test any features or application

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- [Lawyers & Legal Aid](#) Consider building financial penalties for not getting the job done on time into your contract, as well as incentives as motivation to expedite the project. “It’s also important to have an exit clause that says both parties can back out of the project” if things aren’t working out, says Johnson.
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Step 5. Work protective language into the contract

Step 6. Think long-term

Remember, this could be a lasting relationship. After all, your site will need to be updated regularly and might require occasional problem-solving.

“The chemistry in any relationship has to be there,” says Johnson, who advises seeking tenure in their client base, as well. If they tend to keep clients for 18 months or longer, they’re probably doing something right.

The more you understand each firm’s approach to building websites, the better your chances of finding the perfect match.

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