Don't Get Taken for a Ride!

Questions to ask a church website design company before you sign any contract

A website is more than just the end result of an investment of money and a trade of cash for services rendered. It's also an investment of time. Not just the developer's time… but your time too. Think about it. You (or your co-workers or staff members) have the job of providing the web developer with content curation (a cool word that means the "organization and integration of data collected from various sources." Even if you are not using a developer and choose to somehow build a website from scratch, someone has to get all those pictures, audio sermons, downloads, text documents, calendar events, ministry listing, history documents, and videos put together in an order that makes sense to the flow of the finished church website.

But not every hour spent is productive. There's also an investment of time that doesn't actually end up with a productive result … like when you repeatedly email and call your developer for a status report on the site's progress only to find he simply refuses to get back with you. Or time that is lost due to website work having to be redone because it was not done according to your written requests.

The website build process can be a lot like the buying of an expensive piece of software. After you've decided exactly the problems you need to solve and the features you need to employ, you then come up with a list of possible software programs that will meet your needs followed by an email or phone call to one or more of the companies to get further info … but it is only AFTER you purchase the software and begin to work through that wild learning curve that you come to realize whether the decision you made was the right one.

Case in point: I have personally migrated accounting systems a total of 4 times … and I know exactly what it feels like to come to the point when everything is in place: deposits are being made, checks are being written… and then to realize that after all of that time and money there is one insurmountable obstacle that stops you in your tracks!! You failed to remember a vitally needed element … or you didn't take into account that their process doesn't match yours … Whatever the case, I have come to the point where I knew that I DIDN'T make the right choice after all! Now what am I going to do with software worth thousands of dollars that is NOT a good fit?

Before you decide on a company to work with for your next church website design, here are some focused questions to ask before you sign up for their services:

1. Who will own the domain? **(The absolute #1 most important question).** You will come up with the domain that, hopefully, best matches your church name. You might end up spending hours locating one that is available and at a price you can afford. Since you have no plans on giving it to someone else, you better make sure that no matter how your site gets built that you own the domain you have chosen.

2. Where will the finished website be hosted? There are two options when it comes to the issue of hosting – you can hire someone to build a site on a hosting account that YOU have located and paid for, or you can host with a company where part of their package is the hosting as well as the website. Why is this question important? Because it has everything to do with who bears the risk should something go wrong. Let's say that your site is hacked (yes, this can happen.) If you located/paid for a hosting account not owned by your website developer, then you would be responsible to contact the hosting company, see if they have maintained backups that you can use to restore the site, etc.   Or if the hosting company doesn't keep its servers up-to-date and there is a problem with your site going down for hours on end, it isn't the site developer's responsibility to handle this problem, it's yours. Now, if you purchased your site and monthly hosting from the developer, then much of this responsibility will fall on him.

3. What is the monthly cost of hosting and how is it billed? If you are considering purchasing hosting from your developer, it's a good idea to ask the monthly cost and whether it is billed monthly or (as is usual) once per year. Typically, no matter who you go with for hosting, you would pay yearly. Should you happen to cancel mid-year, it is not customary to receive a credit for any un-used months in that year.

4. Can I move the site to a different hosting company if I choose? **(The #2 most important question.)** This question reveals who really owns your church's website and/or whether the software that the site was created with is proprietary. A site that can be moved is a site that is portable; it is not locked into any one hosting company. This is not to say that a hosting company that allows you to take your site to another company won't charge to help you do this. It does entail work on their behalf. The point is that the answer to this question says much about who really owns the site.

5. How long will it take, from the time we provide all of the needed content to you, for the site to be (draft) finished so we can look it over before it goes live? The number one reason sites take longer than anticipated is that site owners do not have the entire content ready when the

developers need it.   You do want to know, however, the amount of time the developer thinks it will take AFTER they have everything they need from you.

6. Do you provide me with a list of what content that you will place on the site, or do we come up with that list? A developer who fails to review the content needs with you early in the process will end up wasting valuable time during the site-build process. This is because they will have to stop building each time they request more content from you. Then they will end up working on a different part of the site while you actively put together what was asked for. The best-case-scenario is for you to know up-front exactly what you need to provide. They will work on building the frame of the site, and you will at the same time be putting content together. Oncee the "frame" is done, they are ready for your content.

7. We are a new church without a logo. Do you do graphic design work as a separate service? A church without a website may not have a logo. Quite possibly they are a new church and lack early on any materials that would typically require a logo (i.e. letterhead, business cards, etc.) A logo should look good on the new website, the colors of each accenting the other. Churches that have been around a while and are looking to purchase a new, updated website may also be in the "market" for a new, updated logo. Having a single source puts the solution of these two needs in one place.

8. We would like to maintain our own content after the site is finished. Do you offer training materials? **(The #3 most important question.)** A church that wants its website to remain relevant and current has to plan to be adding new website content on a regular basis. Unless you plan to pay someone to do this for you, getting a website tutorial is an absolute must. When you are pricing website design companies/packages, realize that when a company provides you with training they are saving you considerable money.   This should have a bearing on your calculated price for website packages you are reviewing.

Asking the right questions and getting solid answers can make all the different in hiring the top-notch website design company or a mediocre one.