



How To Choose An Ecommerce Web Designer

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If you are looking to have an e-commerce web site built there are lots of things that you should find out about an e-commerce web design company before you make your decision and commit a large amount of money to the project.

As there's such a large variation in the quality of services and prices offered by web designers, we have compiled this free report to bring you up to speed so that you can make an informed decision as to which Web designer is best for you.

What features your website absolutely must have

There are some features your e-commerce website must have -- and there are some that you may need in the future . By looking at them carefully and getting it right first time you will save yourself a lot of money further down the line

Unlimited products and unlimited categories

You want to be able to easily add your own products and menu categories to your website without having to call your Web designer every the time you need something changed. Check there aren't any restrictions on the number of products you can add too, as there may be hidden costs if you go over the maximum number – or worse, the system may not be able to handle it and you may need an expensive upgrade.

Content management

Ideally you want to be able to change text on your website -- such as information about shipping charges, terms of business etc -- without having to rely on your Web designer to do it, who will probably charge you each time.

For this, you need a built-in content management system to change the text based pages yourself.

Easy-to-use admin area

An easy-to-use admin area is a must as you will be using it every day. You need to easily be able to see new orders, view customer details, add new stock etc and this should all be easy to do via your admin area or control panel.

Comprehensive reporting

You need to see reports on visitor information such as what products have been viewed etc so that you can make informed decisions on new product to stock, what products you should drop etc. Comprehensive reporting gives you valuable market intelligence that you can use to really grow your business.

Newsletter and e-mail functions

With e-commerce it is absolutely vital that you can keep in touch with existing customers in order to encourage them to purchase from you again in the future, by sending out special offers, product updates, newsletters etc. Look for an e-commerce system that has email list functions built in to it.

Link manager

The ability to add links to other websites with out having to rely on your Web designer is crucial, as building link partnerships is a vital tool in order to obtain good search engine rankings. Look for a system that includes a links manager.

Search engine optimisation

Having mentioned search engines, another valuable feature is the ability to specify Meta tags for each product page you create. Meta tags are the "hidden code" that search engines use to determine what your page is about, so by making sure you can put the relevant keywords in for each product, you will give your site a huge advantage.

Other features

There are many other features that you can get in an e-commerce website, such as specials, bestsellers section, recommended items etc, so think ahead as to what you may need in the future and ask any web designer to include it now as it will be a lot cheaper than to get it put in at a later date.

Ownership of website

Your e-commerce website is a vital part of your business and you need to be the one who owns it. While this may seem obvious, many web designers don't actually pass ownership to you. So if you have any problems with your Web designer further down the line, you may find yourself inextricably tied in and in the worst case scenario your business could be left high and dry and without a website.

This is a particular disadvantage of the low cost, monthly paid packages and you may find you never actually own your website and are tied into

them for life which can be a problem when they suddenly put the prices up in future. The low monthly prices are low for a reason – either the service is minimal or you are tied in for life so they claw back costs over the long term, a bit like a never ending finance deal! Buy your website outright if you can.

So, make sure that you will be the owner of the site and that you have the freedom to move the site to which ever web host you may want to in the future. If you are tied in contractually on any of these items think very, very carefully. What may seem a very cheap deal now, may cost you a small fortune further down the line.

How to choose a reputable web design company

Prices vary tremendously, so first you need to shortlist companies that are clearly reliable and reputable. So how do you do this?

Check how long they have been established as Web designers as the industry is known for it's "here today, gone tomorrow" operations.

A company that has been around for a few years is much likely to be a safer bet than the one man start up that is offering discount prices. Who would you trust more - the car dealership there has been established 10 years or the new one that has just sprouted up last week?

While their website may tell you how long they have been established, this may not necessarily be the correct information. Of course, limited companies will file records at Companies House which you can check to see how long they had been established. However, a far easier and quicker option is to check how long their website domain name has been registered .

You can do this by going to www.nominet.org.uk and typing in their Web address into the Whois lookup search box. This gives you information on the registrant, their address and the date the domain was first registered. While this is not entirely foolproof, it does give a good an indication and you should be wary of any company where a domain name is only a year or two old.

Look at their track record. They should have a good portfolio of the sites they have built available to see via their website, as well as customer testimonials. Their portfolio is a good indication of their design skill -- if you like the websites in their portfolio, then they are likely to satisfy you on the design side.

Check the company works from an office. Web design is an industry with a multitude of different operators -- from freelance work at home designers to large new media agencies. If the company works from an office, it is more likely to be still here next year than the guy who just does it from home.

Does the company have online marketing expertise? Look for a company that is experienced in marketing websites online as they can give you a lot of free information to help market your website. Not all designers know about online marketing.

Do they have the experience in integrating your chosen payment provider? If you already know who will be processing your credit card payments then ask them if they have integrated with that payment provider previously. Some payment providers -- such as HSBC -- are tricky to integrate and if the designer doesn't have experience of them you may encounter problems and delays in getting your site completed and live.

How long should it take?

A straightforward ecommerce website should take no longer than a month, maybe two if they're busy. If they quote you 3 or 4 months or more then choose carefully as it sounds like they are very busy in which case you may get delays further down the line if other projects overrun (as is inevitable) and find yourself waiting six months or more for your site. It is false economy to save money and wait longer for your site, because the sooner you can get it live the sooner you can be making sales, earning profits and establishing market share.

How much should it cost?

The million dollar question! For a start there is such a wide variation in charges for e-commerce websites and this is in large part due to the different operators in the market. As we said before it ranges from one-man work at home types up to large new media agencies so there is likely to be a big cost variation depending on who you contact.

However, if you have followed our instructions so far, you will have shortlisted companies that meet the necessary criteria so now it is almost invariably a case of who can offer the best price, combined with fastest delivery as well as who seems to be an approachable company that you can get on with.

In terms of likely prices you may be quoted anything from £300 up to £10,000 depending on how complicated your website is and who you call for a quote. We did say there is quite a variation in prices!

As a rough idea, and getting the best balance of quality of design and quality of service, for an e-commerce website that includes all the features listed previously, you should be paying around £1000 to £2000. Remember, you don't necessarily get more just because you pay more -- do your due diligence above, talk to potential designers, see who you get on with and go from there.

You should not need to pay all of it up front -- while it is reasonable to pay a deposit of up to 50% with the balance paid on completion, be wary of anyone who asks for the full amount up front.

Summary Checklist

- ✓ **Features:** Check the Web designer can offer all the features that are listed here and any others that you feel you may need either now or in the near future.
- ✓ **Ownership:** Check that you will be the owner of the website and are free to switch hosting if you need to.
- ✓ **Established:** Check designer is established and has a office address.
- ✓ **Track record:** Check the designer has a decent sized portfolio and customer.
- ✓ **Payment processor:** Check the designer has experience integrating your chosen payment processor
- ✓ **Marketing:** Check the designer has marketing expertise if you feel you need some help in this area
- ✓ **Timescale:** Check how long it will take to build the site -- it can be more economically viable to pay a little more and have it done sooner and start making sales sooner.

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