# School's Out

### How to be treated like a grown-up when buying internet design services

**By Ian Lurie**

Hiring a web design firm or an individual designer can be frustrating. Go to five design firms and ask for proposals, and you will likely get five wildly different results. It can leave the most seasoned professional feeling like a kid lost in a department store — who can you trust?

Over the past five years, I've developed the Mad Prophet's Four Rules for Potential Clients. These rules can help you choose the web designer that's best for you, and insure that you get treated like a grown-up.

The gist of these rules is simple: Hire a web consultant just as you would hire any other professional. Do not let technology and glitz distract you from what's important: Professionalism, execution and value.

The rules are simple:

- Provide information
- Be a grown-up
- Just because you can afford a web site, doesn't mean you should
- Any idiot can be a web designer, and usually is

**1. PROVIDE INFORMATION**

Insure value. Before you contact any designers or design firms, be sure you know the following:

**What is my goal for this web site?** What would be a 'success'? Selling lots of stuff? Ten thousand visitors? Something that just looks good? If you know the answer to this question, and you tell potential designers, then you know what your designer must do to make you happy, and so do they.

**What will my site do?** E-commerce? Streaming media? Just a nice-looking site for your brand? You do not need to know *how* your web site will work, but it helps to know what it is going to do. And, combined with the next item, it helps the designer you are speaking to determine whether your project is possible, or whether adjustments are necessary.

**What is my budget?** If you know, tell potential designers what you want to spend, both on the initial project and to maintain the site. This may seem backwards, but think about it — don't you have a price in mind? Why hide it? Bottom line, you have two choices: Know exactly how you want your web site to work, or know what you want to spend, and let a designer determine how the site can work within that budget constraint. A reputable designer will use the budget number you give her to judge what is possible, and what's not, and insure that you get the maximum value for your money. If you don't trust the person you're speaking to enough to give them a number, find another designer.

**How fast?** Do you have a deadline? Make sure you make this clear, right away. Just as a printer or video production house will charge a rush fee, a web design firm may have to charge extra to allow them to meet an extremely tight time frame.

Notice that I did not include anything involving the look, structure or underlying technology of your future site. That is because, at this point in the project, *they don't matter*. This information helps your potential designer determine how much they think the job will cost, how long it will take, and what they will use to make your web site work.

Of course, if you have a particular design or technology in mind, let the designer know, and they can take that into account. But in most cases, a good web consultant will take your goals, budget, feature requests and timeline and use that to determine what the site will cost, how it will look, and what special technologies might be necessary. They're the experts. Why not let them do the work?

**2. BE A GROWN-UP**

Measure professionalism. You are the customer. As such, you deserve a certain level of respect and service from the moment you first meet with a potential designer, including:

- A mature, professional point of contact with your design firm.
- Replies to your questions, be they via email, in person, or by phone.
- A well-prepared proposal/estimate
- Timely delivery of that proposal.
- Honesty

If, after you first meet with a designer or firm, you don't feel you are going to get these five simple things, walk away or voice your concerns. There are plenty of top-notch, professional web designers and design firms in the Northwest, and there is absolutely no reason to put up with anything less than exemplary service.

**3. JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN AFFORD A WEB SITE, DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD**

Demand value. You really can get a web site practically for free, if you are willing to design it yourself. And you can always find an individual to build you a basic, three-page web site for $300. The question is, is that $300 well spent?

No.

You can certainly hire someone to build you something for a small amount of money. But will it actually help your business? An effective web site needs to be up-to-date, effectively communicate your brand via the Internet, look good, and work well. There is a minimum cost for meeting these criteria. If your site doesn't meet them, you are better off spending the money on something — anything — else.

Think carefully about the *value* your web site will produce for you. Be honest with yourself — with millions of new web sites on the web every week, what will make yours an effective tool? If you can't answer this, consider waiting a while longer before hiring a designer. Or, talk to a designer about ways to get the value you need at a reasonable price.

**4. ANY IDIOT CAN BE A WEB DESIGNER, AND USUALLY IS**

Finally, judge execution. I'm sure I'll get a hail of emails for this, but nothing smarts more than the truth. There are plenty of great designers and firms with long lists of clients. What separates the good from the bad is their ability to complete your project without giving you an ulcer.

Make sure that the designer or firm you talk to can coherently describe their process for planning, designing and building a web site. If they have to call you back later to tell you, move on.

Does your designer have to have an office? No. Do they have to wear a suit, or have references from Fortune 500 companies? Of course not. But your designer or firm should be as concious of the *process* of building a web site as they are of the artistry.

**COROLLARY**

At its heart, the Internet works the same as any other medium — a decent concept, well-executed, will kick the tar out of a great concept that is poorly executed. Every time. *Do not* try to teach yourself about the Internet just so you can hire a consultant — that's the equivalentof learning to build a house as preparation to hiring an architect. *Do* demand good communications and responsiveness from your web designer.

Follow the four rules, and you will have a better chance of finding a designer who is professional, who can complete your project on time, and who can help you get the most value from your investment.

**ABOUT PORTENT**

Portent Interactive is a unique full-service web communications consultancy building powerful, compelling web sites for your whole head. Portent's attention to process, design and content gives them the breadth of vision and depth of knowledge to insure complete, compelling web sites that help improve, rather than complicate, your business. Visit them on the web at www.portentinteractive.com, or call them at 206.575.3740.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**  Dubbed 'The Mad Prophet of Information' by his staff, Ian Lurie has worked as an information architect and web designer since 1993. He started Portent Interactive, a web and information design consultancy, in 1995.