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10 Questions Every Web Designer Should Ask Their Client

(Before you start designing their Web site...)

By Bob Rios

For me, the most exciting but sometimes difficult part of developing for the Web is the very beginning, when a site is still in the planning stage. Every client and job is unique at this stage.

Sometimes you will have a client who already has a detailed proposal outlining exactly what they need and what they expect. They can supply you with so much information it takes you a week to go through it, and by the end you feel like you've been working at the company for years.

Other times the client may simply say to you "How much for a Web site? Just do it." I usually try to avoid those clients—it's much too painful.

What I'm getting at is that features make each site unique, and these features will all have a cost associated with them. Agreeing on the deliverables and cost involved before you do a site covers you for the inevitable moment when "something else" is added to the list.

The best way to make sure that everyone is on the same page prior to getting started is to have the client answer a few key questions. Ideally, the client should know the answers to these questions before the meeting ever takes place, or at least be prepared to go over the topics.

Here are ten questions you should ask your client before you start work on their Web site.

1. Why do you want a Web site?

"Because everyone else has one."

No, that doesn't cut it ... your client needs to give it more thought than that.

Is it to reduce cost? The client may want to reduce mail/fax cost by having an archive of print material on



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the site that users can download in PDF format.

Perhaps the client wants to create awareness. They may simply want to have a site that they can refer their customers to, use to display the latest news on the company or market, etc.

Do they want to create an online store? The client may want to think locally but grow globally.

This is how a customer of mine answered the above question: "to sell our products". Not too descriptive, huh? If I feel that I haven't been given enough information to work with, I need to be more direct and ask the client "What kind of product?" I'll ask to see a brochure or list of the items.

2. Who is your intended audience?

Will the site be driven by consumers or other businesses?

If the answer is "both", then you could either think of doing two sites (one for the customer and one for business), or build the home page in such a way that is divided up for both markets (which is tricky, because you don't want it looking like everything's competing for your eyes).

Are we selling to the user? Or just providing a service? Depending on who the audience is, we need to consider what hardware they have on their end. If they're engineers, they don't care for flashy graphics; they're probably coming to site for a particular reason and won't want to click and wait.

On the other hand, if your visitors will primarily be home users you need to consider the resolution, Internet connection speed and browser versions that you can expect them to use.

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3. Why will people come to your site?

Will someone come to the site to order a product? Catch up on the latest company news? There has to be a reason that someone will go to your site, and that reason will not simply be because you're online and the graphics look pretty.

4. What types of tasks should users be able to perform?

Should the user be able to download the latest newsletter in PDF format? Should the user be able to make a secure online transaction? Play a game?

Now might be a great time to go through the various experiences a user might have during a visit to the site.

5. What types of content should and should not be part of the site?

You won't want to place your 250-page brochure online for users to read, but you may want to have an area that outlines the brochure, leaving it up to the user to download it for more information.

Does the user just want to go to the site and place an order within a few clicks? If so, keep away from large images and a lot of copy. Definitely keep your text lines no more than two thirds going across the screen—any longer is just way too hard on the eyes.

6. Do you have recent print materials, advertising or a graphics standards manual available?

I like to see any recent print materials or advertising pieces to help me develop a theme. I also take this opportunity to ask for a graphics standard manual. Usually larger companies have standards for their logo, slogans, fonts and which colors can be use.

This is helpful when presenting black and white sketches in the early stages of the job. Remember: nobody likes to have the company logo butchered!

Many clients have turned into "logo cops" and then want to throw you against the wall (or out of the building) for altering a piece of the corporate identity. At that point, you can forget trying to sell them your wonderful layout



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ideas.

You might even want to ask them if they have a list of sites that they like, and why they like them. Gathering these materials saves you time spent trying to reinvent the wheel. It can only help you to know what they've done and what they've liked.

7. What are your short-term and long-term goals for the site?

For now, maybe you simply want to have a site that's informative, and in three months you'll want people to come to your site to download company materials, buy products online, or maybe even search a database online just as they would in the printed company directory.

I like to ask this question because I tell the client that we need to think about the future. I build scalable Web sites, ones that are prepared to handle growth. If you want to be successful in Web development universe and save the client money (and a lot of hassle), build scalable sites.

Later down the road the global navigation may change; did you lay out the home page in such a way that it can handle it? Or will the addition of extra buttons and links mean you have to take the time to do a full redesign?

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8. Will there be an area that needs updates? Or an area that may grow?

If there are going to be areas that may grow or an area that may be added later, now is the time to find out. This gives you the opportunity to lay out your sketches of the site, knowing that you will have to add an article here or some icons there.

It may also be that you're not staffed at the moment to handle what the client needs in the second phase of the site, but don't want them to know that. This question can give you the advance notice you need to prepare and hire some full-time help (or outsource).

9. What is the timeline?

Designers know the answer to this one: "I need it yesterday!"

Let's face it, if the client wants to have their huge site done in three months, and you want the job, you'll find a way to do it. So break the project into phases: sketches, gathering content, pictures, copy, etc.

Agree on deadlines for each of the phases. Discuss your process, and agree on the deliverables. Once a timeline is settled on, save your notes and e-mails to cover your you-know-what.

10. What is the budget?

This is a hard question to ask, especially when you may not know what all of the client's needs are. You may find out how little they know about the Web... or that they've done this before and have already been pricing around.

This can be the fun part. As a designer and part salesman, I like to find out what the client knows. If the client gives you a figure that seems too low, take the opportunity to ask them if this is a figure that another Web developing company is offering to do the job for. How did they come up with this price?

Of course, you might get lucky and get the budget you've been dreaming of. We all love those.

A final word ...



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When dealing with clients in this still new and exciting media, you are working with both technology and art. But clients will often think of the first as a science, the latter as pretty pictures.

That means that while clients will often take a hands-off approach to technology (if it works when you click it, they're happy), the artistic aspect can turn anyone into a critic.

I like to think that technology and art are both a science, and I consider myself a Visual Strategist. There are reasons why I put the navigation next to the logo and along with a picture to add some value to the headline.

The point I'm trying to make here is that you will run into clients who don't like your layout because you used a color that they hated as a kid. This may spell trouble, because when a client only focuses on one insignificant detail, they may miss the point of the rest of the site.

Keep in mind that the politics of designing on the Web can be tough. You have to satisfy the client, your team, your boss and the client's market, and the first step towards that goal is to make sure everyone is on the same page before you get started.

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