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Find a Web Developer Who Fits Your Needs

By COLLEEN A. MILLER

Successful entrepreneurs know that growing a business involves a good plan, hard work, a bit of luck and knowing when to bring in the right help. When it comes to choosing a Web-development team, that means deciding whether you want to hire a Web-development firm, a marketing-communications company or the interactive division of a traditional advertising agency. All of them can likely do the job, but which is best for your business?

"I approach choosing a development team from a business angle," says Alan K'necht, a Toronto-based Internet consultant and founder of K'nechtology Inc. With his own clients, Mr. K'necht first focuses on company goals. After these are determined, then he turns his attention to the project's goals. "I establish measurable goals and then go into choosing the development team," he says. He's worked with small start-ups and companies as large as Bell Canada, Nortel Networks, and Canada Life Financial Corp.

He advises entrepreneurs to remember that all professionals have their own particular preferences and motivations. "If you go to graphic artists to develop your Web site, they are going to use your site to develop something pretty for their portfolio. If you go to programmers, they are going to use your site to learn the latest technology," he explains.

Mr. K'necht, who has both graphics and technology experience, suggests working with a firm that is focused on helping your business succeed. "Rule No. 1 is do not go

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to a company that has purely a graphics or purely a programming background," he says. "You need a strong blending of talent, and the leader of the development team has to have a broad understanding of it all."

John Stapleton, partner of Paskill & Stapleton Graphic Communications Inc. in Glenside, Pa., agrees that a broad-brush approach is best. "What we do most is to help the client do what it is they do," he explained. Paskill & Stapleton started as a marketing-communications firm 15 years ago and has since created a division called PS Interactive to handle multimedia and Web projects.

Bob Oxman, a project director at PS Interactive, advises people to ask a potential Web developer, "What is it that you do other than just build Web sites?" He said PS Interactive tries to develop a strategy that complements a company's marketing-communications plan, and includes elements such as Web promotion and site maintenance.

Mr. K'necht also recommends using a firm that can maintain your site after it's completed. It should share your philosophy as a start-up and not try to push one technology over another, he says. "I've had start-up executives say, 'I want everything.' I say, 'OK, what resources do you have and what do you actually need?' One too many start-ups take on too much."

Frequently, companies tend to use providers that cater to their industry. Mr. K'necht thinks this isn't always a good idea for choosing a Web developer. "Because they are familiar with your industry, they may make assumptions about your business that don't help you. You need to have someone ask the dumb questions." Further, if an agency works within a single industry, it can become insular and may not be able to help you differentiate yourself in the marketplace, he adds.

PS Interactive produced a Web site and CD-ROM for PAVA Inc., a company that wholesales stone to landscaping firms. "We found out who the people are, what their goals are, and what they want to accomplish with a Web site," Mr. Stapleton said. "I think a marketing-communications company is more in tune with that."

"We looked at their samples and their demo, and their work was really wonderful, a lot better than we had expected," says Arlene Mansley, general manager of PAVA in Pipersville, Pa. She says her company wanted a simple site, without music or multimedia, just photos of its products and information about them. The team at PS Interactive "asked us exactly what we were looking for, and they didn't try to sell us anything," she says. And PAVA is very pleased with the result. "Our customers say it's the best thing we ever did. They can see our stone immediately on the Web," Ms. Mansley says.

Companies shopping for a Web-development team should not select a firm solely on its marketing skills. "A firm that has marketing savvy also needs the technical wherewithal to get the project done," says Mr. Oxman. "The core issue of choosing your Web development team is credibility. What's a firm's core competency?"

When Denver-based technical writer and consultant Elizabeth Yarnell was looking to develop her Web site, she knew exactly what she wanted. She wanted a well-designed, yet simple site that would prevent her from "lugging around a big portfolio."

Ms. Yarnell turned to Emily Cotler, of Waxcreative Design in Oakland, Calif., who is also the author of "Web Redesign: Workflow That Works" (New Riders Publishing, 2001). "She does high-end design work. She doesn't do back-end programming or databases or e-commerce," says Ms. Yarnell.

The two collaborated, with Ms. Yarnell supplying the content and Ms. Cotler developing the site's "look and feel." Ms. Yarnell went through the designer's usual process, completing a long survey, which asked questions such as what she was trying to accomplish with her site and what emotions she wanted to evoke from site visitors.

"It's valuable to me that people are impressed with the look of my site. It's very important to project a professional image, especially as a woman in the high-tech industry," Ms. Yarnell adds. "I have friends who are technical writers, and they use templates that are available in software packages. There's a huge difference on how that looks as opposed to a site that's done by a professional designer. Image is everything."

-- Ms. Miller is editor of Small Business Web Update, a publication of Tramp Steamer Media, a publishing company based in Trenton, N.J.

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