The Client - Web Designer Relationship
What Both Need
What Both Should Expect From Each Other

by
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During my 40 year career in the Audio Recording and Post Production end of the Communications industry, I had the good fortune to work closely with many fascinating and influential clients. Among them were Marcy and Sy Syms, who built their extremely successful clothing business on the belief that, "An Educated Consumer Is Our Best Customer".

Since becoming semi retired, I've designed of a number of web sites, both to support my own projects, and for projects that I found interesting and challenging.

Along the way, I realized that, just as with the audio projects that I had been involved with during my career, web design was more about communications than about impressive design elements.

I also realized that, as with those audio projects, many of my "clients" were turning to me not only for my technical expertise, but for the education that I could offer them about communications in an area that was new to them.

I want to pass on some of what I've learned, in the hope that it will make the road just a bit easier for some of you who are delving into web based communications for the first time.

One of the similarities between audio post production and web site design is that there is an expectation on the part of many new clients that the engineer or designer understands the client's industry. Although this may be true in a rare number of situations, it is not the norm. It's the designer's job to help clients to understand this new paradigm, help them to determine their web communications needs, and to design products that meet or exceed those needs.

The flip side of this is also true. I found that the majority of web designers and audio professionals alike mistakenly believe that their clients understand the medium that they're working in, and the language of that medium. This mutual clash of expectations and understanding can be a recipe for disaster.

SO, WHY ARE <u>YOU</u> INTERESTED IN WORKING WITH A WEB DESIGNER?
Part of the answer might be because you already have a web site andt you're interested in expanding it's functionality to serve new needs. Or, you may not have a site but think that every business in the 21st century should have a web presence. You might want to use the web to attract new customers, or to give existing customers more information about your business or your products. Or, you might want to sell your products on the web.

While all of these are valid reasons to create, or re-create a web site, there's a broader point of view on a web site called http://www.webpagesthatsuck.com. This web site, in spite of it's less than PC name, has become required reading in the IT department of many Fortune 500 companies. The folks who created this web site feel that the only reason a company web site exists is to solve its customers's problems. If you agree, as I do, that this concept is basically valid, then it follows that one of the first things that a designer should be asking a client is, "What problems does the page I'm designing have to solve?".

Of course, your web site should reflect your company's image and goals, utilizing a combination of graphics and content that will turn surfers into both first time and repeat customers.

I believe that visitors should be able to look at your home page and figure out what the site is about within a few seconds. If they can't do that, then your site isn't working for you the way it should.

I'm sure you've heard the old saying, "Build it and they will come." Well, a person who visits your site should want to return to your web site, often. A web site is an ongoing communications channel between you and your visitors.

Surfers are fickle. Don't meet their needs once or twice and they'll look elsewhere. Maintaining your site, and adding new information to it, is going to be an important part of the process, and probably the most time consuming .

THE ANATOMY OF A WEB SITE

As I mentioned earlier, in order to work effectively with your web designer, it's important that you speak the same basic language. So, let's take a look at some of the major components of the average web site and how they work together to create an effective problem solving communications tool.

The major components of a web site package are:

Your Domain name(s).

A Web Hosting Service Provider.

A set of web pages.

A secure method of collecting funds (if you're planning to sell products on your site) .

A plan for keeping the information on the site current and fresh.

YOUR DOMAIN NAME

A primary component in your web presence package is youe domain name. Actually, I should say domain names. The most recognizable ones are ,com, .net, and .org.

Every domain name is unique, and is composed of a text name before the "dot" and a TLD or Top Level Domain designator after the "dot".

Although some of the newer Top Level Domains are "cool", like .info, .tv, .mobi, and .us, unless there's a compelling reason to decide otherwise, I suggest that most of you stick to .com, .org, or .net, because those are the ones that, at least for now, most folks will remember.

Since you can have any number of domain names automatically take visitors to your web site, I would strongly suggest that you register all three of these TLDs. If only one or two of them are available, make sure that you check the others out before you decide to register the ones that are left. Your TLD neighbor could turn out to be a competitor, or even a porn site, and you might not want visitors to your site stumbling on one of those by mistake. You also wouldn't want your competitors to be able to register a similar domain name after yours becomes well known.

While we're on the subject of domain names, I'd suggest that whatever names you choose, they should be easy to type, easy to remember, and closely resemble your company name.

You can easily determine which domains are available by searching for them, free of charge, at http://www.godaddy.com. (this is also a good place to register the ones that you decide on) You can find out more information about a domain name that has already been registered at http://www.betterwhois.com.

Many domain names are registered by speculators in order to auction or resell them at a profit. If you MUST have a particular domain name that has already been reserved, you may be still able to obtain it from one of the companies that trades in domain names.

Domain names are registered in a central database by a large number of authorized agents, called "registrars". Registrations are valid for at least one year, but with most registrars, they can automatically be renewed each year. They can also be purchased with a duration of up to 10 years, but that represents a much larger cash outlay. Depending on the TLD, some domain names can be registered for as little as $8.95 each, per year. It's important to understand that **all domain name registrations are identical**, regardless of the price paid for the registration service.

Once you've decided on a set of names, you can register them yourself, or your web designer can take care of that for you. The important thing here is that you, and not your web designer, should be listed as the owner of the domain names, and you should have full access to the user names and passwords. You should also be the only party authorized to make changes to your domain name account.

THE WEB HOSTING SERVICE PROVIDER
A web hosting service provider offers "server" space on a computer that is connected directly to the internet. This where all the pages, pictures, audio, video and other information that make up your web site are stored. Even though you've got all the web pages that you've designed stored "locally" on your computer, they must be "uploaded" to a "server" or host computer that has a constant, high speed connection to the Internet, before they can be seen by the rest of the world.

Professional grade hosting services, like the one that I use, IXWebhosting.com, are extremely inexpensive, with fees in the range of $7.95 a month for virtually unlimited storage space and data transfer allowances. That's not a typo, I did say $7.95.

As an added incentive, many reputable web hosting service providers will include multiple domain registrations as part of their service fee, and will offer free Google ad words and other marketing incentives with their hosting plans.

Professional hosting services also offer a number of important advantages to their clients in the areas of security, back up data systems, and technical support.

As with your domain names, you, and not your web designer, should be the party in control of your web hosting account. You should pay for these services directly, have all the current user names and passwords, and be the only party who can make changes to your web hosting account.

Vendors and supplier relationships tend to change over time. It's critical that your business tools always be under your control.

YOUR WEB PAGES
Unless you already have a web design that you want to keep, what your web site actually looks like will be the result of a collaboration between you and your web designer. However, there are some basic rules and caveats involved.

My 10 (or so) "commandments" of effective web design are:

1.
Your design must be appropriate for your audience. Using a Space Invaders theme because you really like it does not help your visitors understand that your site is promoting the best rates for auto insurance.

2.
Your site must look professional. Poor quality graphics, spelling errors, grammatical errors, broken links,

and under construction signs are all things that can cause you to loose credibility with your visitors. And, given the tools available today, there's no excuse for these types of issues.

3.
Your site should use standard design practices and be designed with a relatively current version of one of the major design programs, such as Dreamweaver. If your web designer uses a program that's less well known, you'll have a more difficult time finding someone to maintain your web site in the future. The less design "magic" that's incorporated, the greater the chances are that the site will continue to look good on newer versions of browsers, and that the people in charge of updating your site design will have the appropriate skill set.

4.
Your site should load quickly. Most web surfers are used to a site loading almost instantly. If your pages are filled with large graphics or complex flash presentations and your pages don't load quickly enough, they'll soon tire of the wait and look elsewhere. If you must require your visitors to wait for a page to download, make sure that the information that it offers them is really important.

5.
Your site must be readable. The lack of legibility caused by dark text against dark backgrounds, or light text against a light background, really tiny text or strange fonts won't make your visitors very happy.

6.
Your website should not play music, use a flash intro, or use scrolling marquees or flashing banners, unless these elements are absolutely necessary to the successful communication of your core message. If not, they will only annoy your visitors and cause them to want to quickly surf away from your site. Your first clue that any of these elements are superfluous or are distracting surfers from focusing on your core message is if you can include a "skip intro" or an "audio on/off" button in your design.

7.
Your site should be easy to navigate. Although it may seem very "cool" to have navigation buttons with no descriptive text, unlabeled active areas and disappearing menus on your site, they"re more likely to frustrate your visitors and cause them to lose interest.

Before your site goes "live", you should test it with small groups of people who represent the type of visitors who will utilize your web site. Choose people who will be honest about the difficulties and frustrations that they encounter with your site's navigational design and layout. And don't wait until the entire site is finished to conduct these tests. There are bound to be changes, and the more complete the design, the more costly those changes will be.

8.
You must have full rights to the fonts, design and images used on your site. Although plagiarism may be the sincerest form of flattery, the last thing that you want is a law suit, or even the bad publicity that can arise from using materials that are not legally yours to use.

9.
Use colors sparingly and harmoniously unless you're selling clown costumes. The same goes for the amount of fonts that you use on your site.

10.
Your pages must look good on the most popular web browsers. There are many organizations, like http://www.webstandards.org, that are working to develop and maintain web design and browser display standards. However, because of the large number of companies involved, the implementation process is far from perfect.

There are still major inconsistencies in what a site will look like when displayed on the many different web browsers used today. While you'll never be able to get your site to look perfect on all of them, it should look good on the major browsers: Internet Explorer 7 and 8, and Firefox 3+. Together, these account for almost 90% of browser use. Designing a compatible website is a combination of experience and trial and error, but it's a critical component in web design.

11.
Your page layouts and navigation designs should be consistent throughout your site. There are few things that are more frustrating to a visitor than not being able to find a navigation link on one page of your site that they could easily find on another page. Or to find the link they're looking for, (a way to contact you perhaps), in a completely different location on the new page.

12.
Understand that your web site will never be "finished". You need to give visitors a reason for bookmarking your site and for checking it regularly. Keeping your site fresh encourages people to return. Out of date information, broken links, and a lack of new content is a sure way of losing visitors, and customers, perhaps permanently.

E-COMMERCE
Many of you will have products that you want to sell on your web site, and may be selling to people who only know of your company through your presence on the web. With the ongoing security concerns, you'll need to reassure your prospective buyers that their transaction is safe, or you probably won't be able to convince them to complete a transaction on your site.

An easy way to reassure them is by using PayPal to process their transactions. In some cases PayPal may charge a little more than some other merchant account/shopping cart arrangements, but with almost universal acceptance and their reputation for security, they more than make up for the small extra cost, by insuring both your customer's peace of mind, and yours. PayPal's solutions are scalable from single purchases to complex shopping cart based sites, and all are extremely easy for your web designer, and you, to implement. You can get more information about opening a free PayPal account and transaction fees on their website at http://www.paypal.com.

MAINTAINING YOUR WEB SITE CONTENT
"Client Controlled Content Management, represents a major change in web design and has become, "The Web Design Paradigm for the Cyber Century". What this catchy marketing slogan really means is that whether you maintain your web site content yourself, or hire someone to keep the information up to date, by incorporating "Client Controlled Content management" into your web site design you'll be able to accomplish the updates instantly, through a simple browser interface. If you can type an e-mail message, you have all the technical skills required maintain even an extremely complex website.

"Client Controlled Content Management" separates the task of web design and the technical knowledge required from the task of updating the information that appears on the web pages.

You won't ever have to rely on a web designer's availability, or pay for their technical expertise again, just to change the text or images on your web pages.

Until recently, content management was a very expensive option only found on major corporate web sites. Advances in programming techniques have made this technology available to web sites with even the smallest of budgets. As an example, the program that I use, CMS Builder, from Interactive Tools, charges only $199.95 for a one time license fee to incorporate their sophisticated content management system into a web site's design. After that all the files and databases necessary for the system's operation are housed on the web site's server.

I'm so convinced that this approach is a win, win formula for both the designer and their clients, that I

won't design a site without it.

You can read more about how Client Controlled Content Management works in my companion article at:
http://www.jkwebdesigns.com/CMSB/content_management.php

HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE FIRST MEETING WITH YOUR DESIGNER

Most of us use the world wide web every day, and we each have our favorite web sites. We may regularly visit our competitors' sites, but don't normally examine the experience with an eye towards our specific likes or dislikes, those things we feel are most effective, or those design elements that we find particularly annoying.

Now that you're planning to develop your own web presence, your project will benefit from this type of examination. Keep a record of the URLs of the sites that you visit. Make a list of the elements that you like on those sites and those that you don't like, and try to understand why you feel the way you do about them. See how these web sites change over time.

In addition, think about the answers to some of the following questions:

Your company

How would you categorize your company? Is it basically a service company, a professional practice, a cultural organization, an e-store, an information resource or something else?
What company image do you want your web site to project?
What do you want the web site to do for your company?
What problems do you want it to solve for your customers?

Components you already own

Do you currently own your domain name(s)?
Do you already have an account with a web hosting service provider?
Do you have an existing web site that you would like to expand?

Functionality

Considering what you've seen on other web sites serving your field, approximately how many web pages will need to be created for your web site? A page can be any reasonable length, but each should be devoted to a specific purpose, like contacts, about us, links, news, e-commerce, home, etc. Many of these basic sections will be broken into sub sections for organizational clarity.
Will your web site need to provide forms, a method for collecting e-mail addresses, password protected areas, or other special features?
Will you need a database that will store, or allow you to retrieve and display information?

E-commerce

Will you be selling products on your web site?
If so, approximately how many products will you be selling?
Does your catalog, or product line stay the same for a period of time (a month, a season, a year) or will it need to be changed often.
Will you be supplying your own product images?
Do suitable images already exist, or will they need to be created?
Do you already have your own merchant account or will you be using PayPal or some other service?

Creative

Does artwork for company logos exist or must it be created? If it needs to be created, what icons, fonts, etc. do you feel best represent your company?
Are there any elements that must be incorporated into the design of your website?
What colors do you feel would be most effective on your site?

Are there any colors that you dislike?

Tools

Are you a PC or a Mac user, or do you use both?
What software tools do you currently use to create graphics, images, etc.?
Which browsers do you have installed on your computer?
Do you have web design software?

Ongoing maintenance

Will you be updating your own web site design, using an employee for that purpose, or using your web designer's services?
Do you expect your designer to train your staff or will you perform that function?

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR WEB DESIGNER

There are a number of things that I feel are important for both client and designer to understand if they are to work together effectively.

First and foremost, you should consider your designer as a partner in growing your business, and not just someone who will be creating a "cool" web design for you. Your relationship with them should be similar to the one that you have with your accountant or your lawyer, and they should be chosen and treated accordingly.

Before your web designer begins the design process, he or she needs to give you a written assessment of your initial startup expenses, your design expenses, the cost of revisions, your ongoing maintenance expenses, the cost of documentation and training, and the estimated time required to complete each step.

In order to do that, a designer needs to find out your needs and your expectations. There should be a series of frank discussions that lead to a detailed picture of your project. If, during the discussions, your designer suggests that something you want to do is a bad idea, be prepared to consider those suggestions seriously.

Once you've developed a plan that you agree on, a simple contract should be drawn up between you and your designer. The contract should cover the basic areas of responsibility, schedule, costs and remedies. You can find many sample contracts on the web to use as a guide.

You should anticipate that your budget and your expectations may not match. You may discover that your initial concept left out some important functionality that should be included. You may find out that your initial budget is insufficient to meet your expectations or that you've budgeted more than is necessary. Be prepared to make adjustments accordingly. You can always phase in certain components or functionality over time.

WHAT SHOULD A GOOD WEB DESIGN COST?

There is no definitive formula that I know of that can give you a cost per page, or per site for an original design. However, here are a few thoughts that may help you determine what kind of budget you should plan on.

Even the simplest web design will take 3 to 4 days to implement. This schedule includes the time spent on your meetings with the designer, the investigation and registration of domain names, the setup of a web hosting service provider account, the initial site design, the input and layout of your graphics and information into the basic layout, the approval and revision process, and necessary documentation and training.

Assuming 24 hours of work at a nominal rate of $50 per hour, the minimum fee for a web site will probably be about $1200 plus some out of pocket expenses for domain names, hosting and content management program licensing. Although this cost will rise with the complexity of your web design, except for the inclusion of complex database or e-commerce components, adding functionality will not necessarily add major increments to the cost of the project. If you already have a web design, the creative time saved will probably be offset by the time it takes to understand and de-construct the original programming.

Even if your web designer utilizes one of the pre-built web templates from www.templatemonster.com or others, this may not reduce your costs. The initial template licensing costs and the work required to customize the design to fit your needs could, in fact, end up increasing your costs.

One way to keep your costs in check is to make sure that you supply any required graphics, text and other content in a timely fashion. Although you may ultimately utilize content management to maintain the content on your site, your designer will need those elements to create your web site's design and functionality.

Ask your designer what format and dimensions he or she prefers for delivery of the images, logos, headers and other graphic elements. If rotating or changing graphics or images need to be a certain size or aspect ratio to fit an allotted design space, make sure that you stick to those requirements. (Content Management automatically resizes your images to fit the space allotted when publishing them, but it will not change an aspect ratio)

Your web designer should help you to identify your responsibilities. That includes graphics, images, and content requirements. I know it sounds obvious, but without your input, your designer has nothing to work with. You are the only one who can supply the content for your web site. You are also responsible for your logo design and the design of the other graphic elements to be included on your site. Make sure that you discuss what areas you will each be responsible for. There are many web design checklists available on the web, and it will help both of you if you utilize these resources.

You should expect that your basic web design will be accomplished in a matter of a days, or a few weeks at most. The time required to refine this basic design and make it ready to go "live" will depend on the complexity of the project, but expected completion dates for the web site and its component parts should be outlined before work begins.

If you are the "keeper of the keys" so to speak, make sure that your designer has the necessary passwords and other authorizations to do his or her job. And make sure that you change those passwords after the design tasks are accomplished, or in the event that you change designers.

JUST BECAUSE A WEB PAGE LOOKS GOOD DOESN'T MEAN THAT IT'S READY TO GO LIVE.
Be sure you proofread and test your site and make any necessary changes. Then proofread your site again. Everyone will miss something, so have someone else who understands your industry proofread and test it as well. Find the problems before your visitors find them. Make sure that you test your design on different computers and with different web browsers. If you find things that are an issue, discuss them with you designer before your site goes "live".

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE
If you're going to have to update particular areas of your web site on a regular basis, make sure that your designer is aware of those areas and of any specific requirements for them so that the content management design will meet those needs. If you are going to sell things on your web site, make sure that the solution that you choose has the ability to grow as your business needs grow.

Any third party software that you utilize on your web site should be from a reputable vendor and offer adequate tech support. Before you allow your designer to make any final decisions, you may want to call the support desks at his or her top choices, and get a feel for their ability to answer your questions. If the

company maintains a users forum, that's even better.

If others will be updating your web site design in the years to come, they will need to understand the various software packages that your web site depends on. If it's difficult to bring them up to speed, your business may suffer.

CONCLUSION
Your web presence will no doubt change over time. Advancements in technology, your competitors evolving on-line offerings, and the needs of increasingly tech savvy customers, are sure to keep you on your business toes.

Working effectively with web designers is really no different than working with any of the other professionals who supply your company with support services, and how well your web site performs the tasks for which it was designed is ultimately your responsibility.

Learning to work effectively with your web designer will help you to anticipate your customer's needs and keep you ahead of the competition. One of the easiest ways that I know of to accomplish this is to adopt the Syms family motto, "An Educated Consumer Is Our Best Customer."