The little-known secret of how to actually choose a web designer (in 5 easy steps)

If you're thinking of designing—or redesigning—a website, then picking a designer is obviously a very important decision. And a big investment.

Sadly, nearly *all* the advice you'll read about it is complete garbage—all about finding someone experienced who has the right style or process. These issues are trivial compared to the important stuff. They're questions to ask the designer himself, after you've identified him (or her) as a likely candidate.

Here, in five simple steps, is how to *actually* choose a web designer:—

1. Draw a line down a piece of paper. Write "Good" and "Bad" at the top.

2. Go to the designer's homepage.

3. Read the page. Put a tick in the *Good* column every time you see a term like "business objectives", "return on investment (ROI)", "your revenue goals", "lead generation", "increase sales" etc. Award six million bonus points if the designer overtly talks about working with a copywriter to make your site a worthwhile investment. Award 12 million points if he argues the case or draws some kind of useful analogy, like how trying to convert customers using a pretty site with lousy copy is similar to getting a date by dressing well but babbling like a retard.

4. Put a cross in the *Bad* column every time you see a term like "branding", "beautiful", "passion", "making a difference", "modern", "clean", or any other puff phrase that doesn't convey a clear benefit to you.

5. Tally up your ticks and crosses. Hire anyone with more of the former than the latter. Good luck! (Turn the page for an explanation.)

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Designers who don't understand that websites are business assets—assets which must achieve specific business objectives, which in turn are tied to revenue goals—are not actually *designers* at all. They are *artists.* Giving them your money is not an investment in creating a business asset—it's a divestment of capital that is never going to come back (let alone with friends).

Warning signs

Beware "designers" who use industry buzz-words and faddish terms they obviously believe convey benefits, but which you can't relate to any discernible value. How does your designer's "passion for branding", for example, correlate to a return on investment for you? If anything, it just indicates one of two things:—

➜ He knows so little about his field that he thinks calling attention to the importance of branding makes him sound knowledgeable. But *of course* your website should reflect your brand.

➜ He knows so little about his field that he believes brand recognition is important for companies not competing in a broad consumer market, where recognition is everything. But if you're a small b2b company with a limited audience—smaller than Amazon and Google and Apple—brand recognition is of little to no consequence. And focusing on branding, instead of on real, measurable customer-generation strategies, will drive you into the ground.

Some designers have taken umbrage at these comments. They say these are issues of marketing, and not of design. For example, it is not *their* business to know the intricacies of how branding works (or doesn't) after it leaves their hands. Their job is simply to cater to a perceived need and create a great brand.

I think this is singularly insulting both to their customers and to real design-

ers. If they do not understand the channel in which the design is to be used, or the objective it is supposed to achieve, then in what sense are they qualified to be on the job in the first place? They are not doing *design* at all. They are doing *art.* In design, aesthetics are a *means* to a greater end. In art, aesthetics *are* the end. It is very much the business of a brand designer—for example—to understand the *end* for which his design will be used.

Further examples

Similarly, if a designer talks about creating "clean" or "usable" websites, leave immediately and look elsewhere. Imagine if a caterer advertised like that:

"We provide clean, edible food."

Some designers haven't liked it when I've said this, either. They've suggested that since so many websites have poor design, it is not really unreasonable to advertise clean and usable design. If most caterers provided rotten food, it would not be unreasonable to advertise clean and edible meals would it?

But the fact that most websites are neither clean nor usable can be chalked up to two factors: Firstly, that most websites are not professionally designed. Secondly, that the rest are.

Those that are are typically at least "clean". Many designers don't have the firmest grasp of aesthetics, but even the mediocre ones know enough to create clean designs—just as even mediocre caterers provide clean food.

On the other hand, amazingly few designers provide *usable* websites—even the ones who advertise that they do. For example, the majority set body text at a size of 12 or 13 pixels. Usability research shows that nearly everyone finds this too small to read. In a survey of web design problems conducted by usability expert Jakob Nielsen, bad fonts got nearly *twice* as many votes as the next contender—with two thirds of voters complaining about small font sizes. 99.9% of designers don't know this. They think whatever looks good to them is good design.

So what *is* good design?

To understand what makes "good" web design—which will tell us what makes a good web design*er*—we have to know the purpose of the site being designed.

And the primary purpose of a business website is not to be pretty, or clean, or even usable. **It is to *sell*.** It must capture the reader's attention, engage him, and elicit a direct response of some kind. The web is a direct-response medium.

> Thus, the purpose of a web designer is to create a website that will elicit a direct response from its users, so as to achieve certain revenue goals.

The problem should be obvious: virtually no web designers know the first thing about this process. They don't know what captures readers' attentions. They don't know how to set text, images, and other elements to ensure maximum read-ership. They don't even think to to answer the question, "Why should I pick you instead of your competitors?" And they don't know what elicits a response—let alone the *correct* response.

Look no further than their own websites for proof. I don't believe I have seen even a single designer's website that follows *half* the basic tenets of direct-re-sponse selling. Things like having a compelling headline, conversational copy, and value-laden call to action. Creating a logical sequence of thought. Using a sec-ondary CTA with diminished weighting to gradualize. Setting body copy in a single column. Only including images that convey value more forcibly than copy can. Offering a "monkey's fist" to ensure maximum long-term sales. Presenting a differ-entiating value proposition or motif.

In fact, in a survey I did of around 200 freelance web designers' sites, 7 in 20 used exactly the same formula for their "headlines"—what I call a Big Generic Wel-come. Here's an actual example:—

> *Hello! I'm a graphic designer who is passionate for creating modern &*
> *functional design that provokes feelings.*

Not only is this obviously an *artist* speaking—design is about achieving objectives; art is about provoking feelings—but 35% of his competitors are saying almost exactly the same thing on their homepages. Anyone who advertises his services in this way understands nothing of importance about marketing or business.

The proof is in the pudding

He, like most, does not understand setting his own business apart—that most basic element of selling. He does not understand direct-response design in general. And so he certainly does not understand the things that matter to your business on the web. He is just an amateur for whom the low barrier of entry online has presented a unique opportunity. As Renaissance swordsmanship instructor George Silver warned:—the world is full of dangerous amateurs.

Sadly, most designers don't realize they're amateurs. A lot of them have been in business for years, surviving off witless business owners who believe, as they do, that aesthetics are the key to profits. The world's foremost expert on direct-response marketing, Drayton Bird, observes:—some people have 20 years of experience...and some have one year of experience, repeated 20 times.

Since your website is a marketing platform and a business tool, why would you hire an amateur with no understanding of marketing or business to create it?

Alternatives

Fortunately you do have options. If you need more than a couple of webpages (or if you find my style too brusque) there are design firms that employ direct-response experts. And there are optimization firms that can improve an existing design.

But believe me: in the long term you'll spot—and be able to exploit—*far more* opportunities only if *you* understand the principles of direct web marketing. That's why I've created a simple training program. To get started FREE, visit:—

> **Attention-Thievery 101—free direct web marketing training:**
> http://attentionthievery.info

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Howdy, I'm Bnonn. The "B" is silent. I'm known in the boroughs as the Information Highwayman—the scoundrelous author of conversion-rate optimization course *Attention-Thievery 101*. I'm self-trained in direct marketing, and spend my days helping small businesses get more out of their websites by improving both their copy and design. When I'm not knee-deep in the guts of someone's homepage, I'm writing, speaking, or reading about how to turn more visitors into customers—and when I'm not doing *that* I'm teaching my kids about steampunk, Nathan Fillion, and how to grapple a zombie without getting bit.

If you haven't already, how would you like to get hold of my free video training in which I cover the basics of direct-response design? Yeah? Just click here:—

Attention-Thievery 101—free training in direct web marketing:
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