



# The Smart Way to Choose a Company to Build Your Lead Generation Website



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**BECOME SMARTER THAN THE WEB DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT COMPANIES YOU ARE INTERVIEWING!**

MANY ORGANIZATIONS ARE INTIMIDATED WHEN SEARCHING FOR A COMPANY TO BUILD THEIR WEBSITES, BECAUSE THESE COMPANIES KNOW SO MUCH MORE — OR APPEAR TO — ABOUT THE INTRICACIES OF CREATING AN ATTRACTIVE AND EFFECTIVE WEBSITE.

HOWEVER, IF YOU UNDERSTAND THE KEY ELEMENTS OF BUILDING A WEBSITE AND LEARN THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO ASK, YOU WILL GAIN CONFIDENCE AND ACQUIRE THE ABILITY TO IDENTIFY THE COMPANY THAT BEST FITS YOUR NEEDS. YOU'LL BE ABLE TO DISTINGUISH COMPANIES THAT ONLY APPEAR TO KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING FROM ONES THAT *ACTUALLY* DO.

THE RESULT: YOUR NEW WEBSITE WILL BE BUILT PROPERLY AND GET OUTSTANDING RESULTS.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** THIS ARTICLE CONCERNS THE CREATION OF LEAD GENERATION WEBSITES. IF THE PURPOSE OF YOUR NEW WEBSITE IS TO GENERATE SALES LEADS, TO TURN VISITORS AT VARIOUS POINTS IN THE BUYING CYCLE INTO PROSPECTS, *READ THIS*.



## STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

When interviewing Web design companies, organizations tend to focus on design. While design is important, other vital aspects of building a website must also be reviewed, specifically:

- **Staffing** – Does the company have the breadth and depth of *resources* you need?
- **Expertise** – Does the company have the breadth and depth of *knowledge* you need?
- **Focus** – Does the company have the organizational *commitment* you need?

Read this article to avoid the mistake of hiring a Web design company that looks good in terms of design, but cannot do the other 101 things necessary to make your website a robust, lead-generating machine.

# Part 1: Staffing

*The key elements of a staffing review are breadth, depth and location. Let's take a deep dive.*

## Smart Question 1:

**How many full-time employees does your company have?** As you will see, building a website requires a number of people with a variety of talents. A Web design company with only a handful of full-time employees relies on outside contractors to execute various aspects of the work and lacks control over the project. In contrast, a Web design company with a full in-house staff has redundancy in all key positions, ensuring that the outcome of the project never hinges on the availability of a single person.

## Smart Question 2:

**What does your content team look like?** While perhaps not as glamorous as design, content is just as important to the success of a lead generation website. At the same time, content is typically a project bottleneck and a weak component of the website because Web design companies lack breadth and depth in content-creation resources. An adequate content staff should include some, or preferably all, of the following

- **Copywriters.** If the company relies completely on outside contractors — run! If it employs only one, will he or she have enough time to focus on your project? What if the one-and-only-one writer has no experience in or affinity for your business? Copywriting bench depth — two writers or more — should be a project requirement.
- **Editors.** The editor is responsible for communicating your project objectives, brand voice and conversion strategy to the writer, as well as reviewing the copy for style, cohesiveness, persuasive power and SEO effectiveness. These are all crucial content functions that should never be overlooked.
- **Proofreaders.** A misplaced comma or incorrect word can convey the wrong message, shake the confidence of a website visitor or even prevent him or her from making an inquiry. Best-of-class content creation puts a priority on technical accuracy.



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### Smart Question 3:

**How many full-time employees are dedicated project managers?** Website projects have a lot of moving parts. They require a careful and detailed project management process to keep these parts in sync and prevent costly delays, communication breakdowns and errors. When asking questions in this area, look for the following:

- Verify the company's project managers are really **dedicated** project managers and not also playing the roles of designer, developer, copywriter, etc. Many small companies lack truly dedicated project managers.
- Since the project manager is the person with whom you spend most of your time, evaluating the professional backgrounds of the company's project management staff is helpful.



### Smart Question 4:

**Beyond content and project management, what does the rest of your staff look like?** For lead generation websites, on-site personnel with the following expertise are the bare minimum required for high-caliber execution:

- **Two or more designers.** Only one designer means no bench depth. In addition, multiple designers multiplies the odds that one designer will be a great creative match for your organization.
- **Two or more front-end developers.** A great design doesn't become a great, highly functional, user-friendly Web page without the work of talented front-end developers. Without them, the value of your site's design will never be fully realized.
- **Two or more back-end developers.** If your site's "plumbing" is shoddily built, it will leak sales leads. Back-end developers make sure all the elements of your site, such as contact forms, page loading and lead tracking, perform properly and seamlessly.
- **Two or more SEO specialists.** Virtually every lead generation website should strive to maximize organic search visibility, as it is a rich source of highly qualified website traffic. Without experienced SEO specialists, a Web design company cannot build a search engine-friendly website for you.



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### Smart Question 5:

**Where is your staff physically located?** A picture is worth a 1,000 words ... and a visit is worth a 1,000 pictures! Besides scrutinizing job roles and bench depth, give attention to where and how staff members work — this makes a real difference in timeliness, communication and cost. Things to consider:

- A “one man show” that handles the project manager function but outsources everything else is a risky choice. Not only will your project team lack depth, but team members may also be scattered across the world.
- For a small group of full-time employees without an office, similar problems exist. In-person meetings with the company’s project team become difficult, and the company’s internal communication is probably less than optimal as well.
- Since website projects have lots of moving parts and complications can arise at any point, in-person meetings are often necessary. For this reason, a Web design company with an onsite staff nearby is preferable to one far away, all other things being equal.

As mentioned above, visiting a Web design company’s office is an excellent practice. In addition to helping you evaluate the composition of the team, an onsite visit provides an understanding of the company’s style, work ethic and professionalism in a way that cannot be duplicated using the phone or email.



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# Part 2: Expertise

*The key elements to review in the area of expertise are responsive design skills, project management skills and SEO skills. Let's take a deep dive.*

### Smart Question 6:

**Do you build non-responsive websites?** Best practices for Web design demand that ALL websites be responsive. If a Web design company offers to build you a non-responsive website, you know that the Web design company is living in the past and has an outdated process that will result in a poor experience for your website visitors.

Responsive websites have enormous benefits over the websites of the past:



- **SEO.** Google recommends responsive Web design as the best way to target mobile users and also favors mobile-optimized websites when presenting results for searches made on mobile devices. This is especially true when mobile users search for local services.
- **One website, one URL.** Putting all of your efforts into a single website versus two websites (a desktop website and a mobile site) greatly reduces your time and cost for website management. It also consolidates and simplifies your analytics and reporting.
- **Popularity.** Mobile Internet usage continues to increase daily, and at a rapid rate. Your website must cater to the mobile audience or it will completely overlook a large and growing source of sales leads.
- **User experience.** A desktop website that delivers a poor mobile-user experience frustrates users, increases bounce rate, and can potentially undermine your brand image.
- **Competitive advantage.** Many businesses have not yet upgraded their websites to be responsive. By getting there first, you will increase leads at the same time competitors are losing them.



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### Smart Question 7:

**What is your process for building a responsive website?** Any reputable Web design company should be able to build you a responsive website. However, there are good processes for building responsive websites, and bad ones. Below are critical items to listen for to help distinguish one from the other:

- **“Copywriting not included.”** This is a big danger sign; content is an integral and vital component of your site.
- **“SEO keyword research not included.”** Another serious danger sign; SEO is also integral and vital.
- **Design comps.** When reviewing your website’s design, all graphic design files (PSD, PDF, JPG, etc.) are inadequate and misleading. Design and functionality presented in a live Web browser is the best method to properly evaluate the effectiveness of your design.
- **Collaboration meetings.** A good responsive website process is incremental. The company should meet with you at key milestones to review work and make adjustments.
- **Content inventory.** A properly constructed content inventory is an important tool that directly supports the user experience. The inventory document itemizes each discrete block of content that will appear on each page template of your new site.
- **Style tiles.** These are used to help guide initial design selections. You should expect to review at least two different options.
- **Sketches.** Hand-drawn sketches are created to help you visualize page presentation early in the project.
- **Content reference wireframe.** These wireframes are created to further help you visualize the look and feel of your new site.
- **Cross-browser and device testing.** Your website **MUST** display and function properly on all popular browsers, as well as on different types of mobile devices.



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### Smart Question 8:

**How do you manage multiple concurrent website projects?** A responsive design project must be supported with a robust project management system; otherwise, the project will be like trying to build a house without blueprints. Separate the bad Web design companies from the good ones by listening to them explain their approaches to project management. The approach should include:

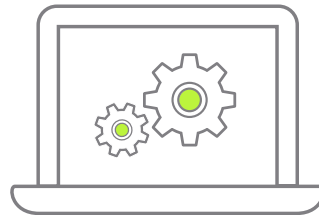


- **A documented process.** Most Web design companies follow 5-10 basic steps (site map, design, content, etc.), but lack procedural steps to track and manage how these project components are actually created and implemented. A sophisticated methodology documents all steps required to complete each project component.
- **A managed process.** Having a process is a good thing — but making sure people follow the process is even more important! Without systematic execution, steps are mishandled or missed entirely. Effective project managers make sure the process is working, which is why they need tremendous communication skills as well as tremendous project management skills.
- **An enterprise workflow and task management platform.** To effectively manage tasks and resources across multiple projects requires a sophisticated software platform. Most Web design companies rely on collaboration software tools, which are inadequate.



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### Smart Question 9:

**Can you explain how and when SEO elements are incorporated into your process for building a responsive website?** Many Web design companies say they include SEO or create a “search engine friendly” website. The sad truth is that the huge majority of these companies have no idea how to truly build a website for SEO. You can spot these companies by listening for the ones that cannot provide a clear and concise answer to this question.

The response you hear should include each of the following elements:

- **SEO keyword research.** Selecting the right phrases to optimize website content is more than half the battle for lead generation. This should occur at the very beginning of your project.
- **SEO keyword strategy.** Following keyword research, an SEO keyword strategy is created. This ensures the selected keywords are incorporated into the website map and body content on the appropriate pages.
- **SEO site map.** Next, a comprehensive site map is created that includes pages targeted for SEO. The pages marked for SEO have the primary goals of organic search traffic and sales lead generation.
- **SEO internal link text and structure.** Using the SEO site map, an optimized internal linking system is created, which adds SEO power to the site.
- **SEO copywriting.** The content for each SEO page of the website needs to be written to include a specific set of keywords as identified in the keyword strategy. Special skills are required to write keyword-optimized content that sounds natural and drives traffic that converts into sales leads.
- **SEO title tags.** Next, the title tags are written for each SEO page of the site. Tremendously important for SEO, title tags cannot be written without underlying keyword research and strategy.
- **SEO meta description tags.** Finally, the SEO meta description tags are written. These pieces of content appear in organic search results and must be written persuasively, and with SEO in mind.





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# Part 3: Focus

*The key to a review of focus is to evaluate the relative importance of Web design/development to the company under consideration. Let's take a deep dive.*

### Smart Question 10:

**How strongly is your firm focused on building websites, and what other areas of focus do you have?** In terms of focus, a Web design company probably falls into one of four categories:

1. Focuses only on Web design/development
2. Focuses primarily on Web design/development and provides Internet marketing as a secondary service
3. Focuses primarily on Internet marketing services and provides Web design/development as a secondary service
4. Focuses on branding, advertising and marketing and does Web design/development as an even smaller secondary service

While option 1 may seem best, option 3 is actually far better for a lead generation website. Here is why:

- The **creative skills** an Internet marketing company acquires through the execution of marketing campaigns (e.g., SEO, paid search, email marketing) enhance the lead generation performance of your website when applied to its construction.
- The **technical skills** an Internet marketing company acquires through the execution of marketing campaigns allows it to maximize the lead tracking and reporting characteristics of your website. This is tremendously important because if and when you elect to actively market your site, you will have the information you need to assess the effectiveness of your campaigns and continuously improve them.
- The **relationship** stays in place and continues to evolve when an Internet marketing company builds and markets your website. The relationship with a Web design/development-only partner ends when your website is launched; when the time comes to market your site, you will have to start a relationship with a new vendor, slowing down the implementation and ramp-up of the campaigns. The business model for Web design and development companies is to always be going after the next project, rather than focusing on what they already have and serving those clients with everything they've got. An Internet marketing agency business model is not project-based; it's recurring. As a result, the Internet marketing agency has a truly vested interest to make you happy and help you succeed.



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To ascertain a Web design company's focus, probe these areas:

- What percentage of your revenue comes from Web design/development projects? What are the other areas of your business, and what percentage of revenue comes from each?
- What percentage of your staff is dedicated only to Web design/development projects? What percentage of your staff is dedicated only to other projects/campaigns?
- Is your Web design/development team cross-trained in Internet marketing disciplines, and if so, which ones?
- What percentage of your Web design/development clients have continued to work with you on Internet marketing? What is your retention rate for those clients?



## Conclusion: Trust ... And Verify

As we mentioned earlier, visiting a potential Web design company's office is an excellent practice.

Beyond a visit, be sure to obtain a list of references and then *contact them*. Did the Web design company perform as advertised? How would you describe your experience during the project? Would you work with that company again? If so, why? If not, why not? How has your website performed specifically in terms of lead generation?

A best-of-class Web design company has many references and is eager for you to contact them. If the response is hesitant, congratulations! Your selection process has averted a disaster.

With these 10 questions at hand, along with a comprehensive reference check, you will find yourself on equal footing with the Web design companies you are vetting. You will also obtain the information and insight you need to select a partner that can create a website for you that looks good, functions properly and delivers sales leads. Many great firms are out there. Don't settle for less than the best.



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# About Straight North

STRAIGHT NORTH IS AN INTERNET MARKETING AGENCY THAT HELPS GROWTH-MINDED, MIDDLE-MARKET FIRMS GENERATE ONLINE SALES LEADS AND E-COMMERCE REVENUE. WITH AN IN-HOUSE TEAM OF OVER 60 FULL-TIME MARKETERS, WE HAVE THE DEPTH AND BREADTH TO MANAGE COMPLEX, MULTI-FRONT CAMPAIGNS THAT DELIVER CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVING RESULTS.

OUR SERVICES INCLUDE RESPONSIVE WEBSITE DESIGN, SEO, PPC, DISPLAY ADVERTISING AND EMAIL MARKETING.

WE ARE THE ONLY ONLINE AGENCY THAT VALIDATES AND REPORTS SALES LEADS IN REAL TIME. THIS UNIQUE CAPABILITY GIVES CLIENTS THE ABILITY TO EVALUATE CAMPAIGNS WITH UNMATCHED ACCURACY, AS WELL AS MONITOR THEIR LEADS WITH UNMATCHED SPEED.

WITH CLIENTS THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES, WE HAVE OFFICES IN DOWNERS GROVE, IL (HEADQUARTERS), BALTIMORE, MD, CHARLOTTE, NC, CHICAGO, IL, AND WASHINGTON, DC.



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