

**How to commission a website**

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web design and consultancy

This document covers the stages in a typical website commission. For further information contact [ihd-solutions.com](http://ihd-solutions.com)

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# How to Commission a website

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## Introduction

Often I meet clients (and potential clients) who have had their fingers burnt in commissioning a website for their business. The market for design services is huge, and there are a lot of companies out there who are happy to take your money and then leave you with a site that is either useless, overpriced, or both. This guide will hopefully explain the steps I take with my clients, give you a better idea about how to select your web design company, and get the website that - firstly you paid for, and secondly represents your business on the internet. My work covers website design, website promotion, branding and business and web consultancy, so I view sites from all types of designers, some brilliant, some terrible, and I am always interested in the route that these sites took in their development. When I design websites for my clients, I provide information and support as a consultant as well as a designer and justify all of my decisions or recommendations as appropriate, the information within this document are a brief summary of the more generic ones.

Building or commissioning a website for your business is a very emotive process. It is often seen as a panacea to all the business requirements, however in six months time, all of the little points that were so huge in its development will be small – you will either love it or hate it!

I hope that the tips in this document help in your quest for a new site. If you have any questions or would like further information, please contact ihd-solutions either via email [contact@ihd-solutions.com](mailto:contact@ihd-solutions.com) or via the website [www.ihd-solutions.com](http://www.ihd-solutions.com)

## The Process

### Step one - Research, Research, Research!!!

We are all users of the internet, we know what we like, and we can all find sites that agree with our personal tastes. In the majority of cases your competitors will already have sites up and running (that's why you need one right?). Look at all their sites and see what works and what doesn't. Look at how your business differs from theirs and where you can make that differentiation from them that will cause your potential clients to choose you over them. A website is a reflection of you and the quality of your work. We may not like to admit it, but when we see a cheap website, how often do we just hit the back button and move onto the next one in the search list? Websites are very much like food vendors, if we want something cheap and fast, then we will go to a fast food restaurant, if we want something nicer a restaurant, each building will be differently decorated, and the service levels and product hopefully appropriate to what we are paying. Quality brands and services demand higher quality support, and your website should follow that ethos. They are often the first contact that clients will have with you and your brand, either as validation after receiving some form of marketing (business card, mail out, online posting) or via a search engine when researching products and services that you offer - Cheap and nasty, your business is tarred with the same brush – High quality and well designed, your website will keep your visitors reading and create a good impression before you have even spoken to them.

Keep a list of sites that you love, and those that you hate. I personally recommend this to all of my clients when they first come to me. If you have a clear idea of design structures, layouts, and functions (both required in the initial setup, and in future development) it really helps to start off on the right foot. The websites you love can be from anywhere on the internet and represent any business sector. If you want your brand to emulate that style then a good designer can always take the key design structures and make them your own without "copying".

Good website design is part computer programming, part graphic design and a lot of business research. In order to get the website you want, you need to know what you want. If you want to look professional and to have your brand stand out, you need to know what your brand is (or what you want it to be).

## Step two – Find a Designer that works for you

Now you have your portfolio of sites, start to look for a designer. Many of the sites you love will have the designers details on the bottom of the page, they are a good place to start. Equally, email the companies that own those sites, find out how the process went, whether they would recommend the designer to you, and how they feel about the website now it is up and running – did it serve the purpose of the initial brief? Did the designer exceed their expectations? Do they feel it was good value for money? How were the relationship and support after the work was completed? Did they feel any points were oversold or added to the project unnecessarily?

Often once a site is commissioned, the money invested in its creation or long term maintenance contracts prevent a company from moving to a different supplier. Find out if this is the case too, and if the company would go through the same process again if given the choice.

## Pricing

Unless you budget demands it, I would seriously discourage any business from taking on one of the “Get a website for £250” companies. This is not sour grapes on my part, but a serious warning. For £250 you will get about £100 worth of website, and that doesn’t buy you a lot. If your budget is that tight, I would recommend going to the library, getting a book on web design and trying yourself first. A lot of the web hosting companies will give you template sites for free as part of their setup. This will enable you to get a web presence without breaking the bank. Chances are you might still need to employ a web designer to finish off some of the coding for you, but it will still probably look better than a site built out of a box for a set fee. I see a lot of websites done this way, and usually it works well, sometimes if only to reinforce that fact that a quality web designer does a lot more work that is seen in the end result.

As a guide to pricing, I would recommend that a branded brochure website (around five to six pages) with search engine inclusion, email and basic search engine optimisation would cost around £1000. For that you should get a quality site that doesn’t need much maintenance, and will be a good representation of your brand (including branding development if required). This is an example of a site that falls within that category [www.decordivainteriors.co.uk](http://www.decordivainteriors.co.uk) that I produced for a client. You don’t always get what you pay for so be careful. E-Commerce sites can vary in price based on the software used and the level of customisation you need, always best to ask around first and once again, find a designer that you are comfortable with.

Websites can be charged on a whole scale of structures. I have seen sites for £2000 that look like they cost £500 and sites that cost £300 that look like they cost twice that. It really is important that you hire the right designer from the outset, so take your time and don’t base your choices solely on cost. A common trick in under pricing web design is to provide a low first quote and inflate it as the project develops, once you are committed to that company, often you have no choice but to accept unless you want to write off your initial investment. My ethos is always that if it is included within the initial requirements specification, then there is no further charge. The only things that will cost more are those that were added after the quote was signed off.

Another typical up-sell to look out for are content management systems (CMS). These pieces of software allow you to change the content of your website yourself without returning to the webdesigner. This is fine if you have a site that requires regular updates, however for a standard brochure website, ask yourself how often in reality the site will get changed, if the designer charges £40 an hour for changes, you can buy a lot of his professional time when compared to a CMS that can cost you up to £3,000. These systems are not intrinsically bad and in high maintenance sites can often work out saving you money. However make sure you need one before paying good money out for it.

For dynamic database sites (see [www.highflyersnetwork.com](http://www.highflyersnetwork.com)) your pricing will vary a lot more. However this is an area where you need to be very careful. If your business is based around a web application, make sure that the designer knows how to build it, how to customise it, and that they are not just putting together a lot of cheap modules within a content management system that cannot be tailored exactly to your needs. Sites that seem a lot cheaper at the outset will normally end up costing a lot more to get “right” if the basic structure of the website is flawed. Designers commissioned to do this work should have a grounding and experience in at least one of the major programming languages (php, asp, asp.net etc). Without this knowledge, you can

often arrive at a site that has cost you lots of money and doesn't even do what you wanted it to at the outset. It is your business, and it is important that the tools you use are actually fit for purpose.

### Step three – Copy

You have found your designer and are ready to move ahead with the site. This is the point where you will usually be asked for copy to put within in. Except in rare circumstances it is up to you to provide all of the words to put in your site. You know your business better than anyone (except maybe your clients), and you cannot expect the designer to write this successfully and for you to be happy with it. Consider the pages you are commissioning, and write something for each of them. Once again, return to your competitors' sites and look at what they have written. Do not under any circumstances copy their site exactly, this is as much plagiarism as if you had taken one of their paper brochures and photocopied it with your name on the top.

Waiting for copy from my clients is usually the biggest delay in setting up any website, if you are prepared, your site will be up on the internet and bringing you business a lot quicker.

A normal brochure website will contain the following pages

**Home** – the landing page, this is what your potential clients will see the most. The copy should be succinct, and describe in clear terms what your business represents. When building client sites I will offer the following suggestions in writing home page copy (*courtesy of owen morris consulting [www.owenmorrisconsulting.com](http://www.owenmorrisconsulting.com)*)

1. Who are your target customers? *Define and engage those customers within the first line*
2. What type of problems or needs for you aim to help those customers with? *Instead of a list of what you do, describe what you help solve. Once again this will engage your potential clients if they can relate to the problems listed*
3. How exactly do you solve those needs/problems? *Offer a brief and clear explanation of how your business will assist them*
4. What is special about what you are offering? *Why should they choose you over your competitors?*
5. Why should I believe you? *What is your experience in the field? How have you helped similar companies with similar problems?*

**About** – This page gives a clear description of who you are and where you come from (figuratively and literally). It allows you to expand on the points listed on your home page, and provides further validation of your business to your potential clients.

**Services** – What do you offer? Provide your visitors with a description of your services, if possible with case studies to further validate how good you are at what you do.

**News** – Boast about the good work you have done, what you are going to do, and anything important happening within your industry relevant to your business. If your visitors view you as an “expert” within your field, they are more likely to trust you with their hard earned cash!

**Contact** – Provide all of the ways you think your customers will want to contact you, this could be by phone, email, contact form, skype, social media (such as facebook, linkedIn, twitter). The internet is an integral part of most peoples' lives, and it is important that you offer them a way to contact you convenient to them.

Depending on what your business offers, you should also consider putting examples of your work, photo stories and case studies, or just blogs and other feeds to try and engage your customer into your brand.

This is your first impression, and it is important that it counts for you in the right way.

## Step Four – Pick a design

Hopefully as you have been writing your content, your designer has been building some example sites to your specifications. These will normally be fast deployment prototypes such as pictures or powerpoint slides. Look through them carefully and pick out the attributes that you like, don't like, and where you would like changes.

This process of refinement may take anything from a few hours to days, once thing I would recommend at this point is don't be too precious. As long as you have hired a good designer, their eye for layout etc will generally be better than yours, I have often gone around in circles with clients debating colour theory and why a certain element of a page should not be in bright red to match the business cards. If you are a small business, it is quite often more appropriate to change the business card to match your new website than it is the other way around. If you have a professional designer working for you, let them work. If you really don't agree, then ask them to fully justify their choices. As a designer I will often back down on client decisions as it is your website after all, but often they will come back at a later date and implement the changes I suggested at further costs!

## Step five – Getting your site online

Once you have chosen a design and provided your copy, the designers will then go off and put it all together for you. This stage can sometimes seem like it takes ages, but if everything is provided in the right format usually a brochure website will take around a week to provide. It is at this point that a web designer really earns their money. The site design (graphics, logos, branding) should make you feel comfortable and try using stooges that are not internet knowledgeable to try to navigate through your new site to find the things you want them to. If they can find them, then so can the casual visitor to your site.

A well structured website will provide you with customers through validation and search engines. This may mean that your copy is "tweaked" to meet the needs of that process. If you find that the words used do not exactly match those that you provided, there is normally a very good reason for that. Ask your designer to explain this all to you, all changes should be for search engine optimisation purposes. If they have done their research properly, they should know how potential clients will search for your company, and re-word your copy to meet those search terms. As with the design stage, don't be too precious, the average visitor to your website will take around 4 seconds to evaluate whether or not they like the website and therefore your company. Your key messages must be clearly defined and the navigation simple for the visitor to find exactly what they want. The conversations between you and the designer at this stage should highlight those points and you should feel completely at ease before you sign off the site as complete.

One thing I would point out is that you should ask your designer to include Google Analytics within your site. This is an entirely free service (so don't pay someone to use it for you), and available to anyone just by signing up. It will provide detailed analysis of visitors to your site, what pages they visited, how long they spent there etc. As a free resource it is one of the best available, make the most of it.

At this point, once you are entirely happy, you can sign off the site and start the promotion.

## Step six – Promotion

I will not go into great detail about promoting sites within this paper as there are lots of resources available on the internet describing the various methods, some good, some bad. If you have an ongoing search engine optimisation/optimization (SEO) contract with your designer then they should describe exactly what they are going to do, where and how. Don't pay for a service if you think you can do it yourself, saying no at the commissioning stage does not prevent you from finding someone to do it for you at a later date.

## **And Finally...**

I hope that this paper helps you in your quest to get a website. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me or look through my website for more information. I believe strongly that the internet should be a simple place for users and customers alike. Nothing annoys me more at networking events when I see people who have had a bad experience in commissioning a site, over pricing, bad designs, up selling where it is not necessary, all leave a bad taste in the mouth. Your website is important to your business for a lot longer than the design stage, so take your time, do your research, and find a designer you trust to support your business over the long term.

Kind Regards

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