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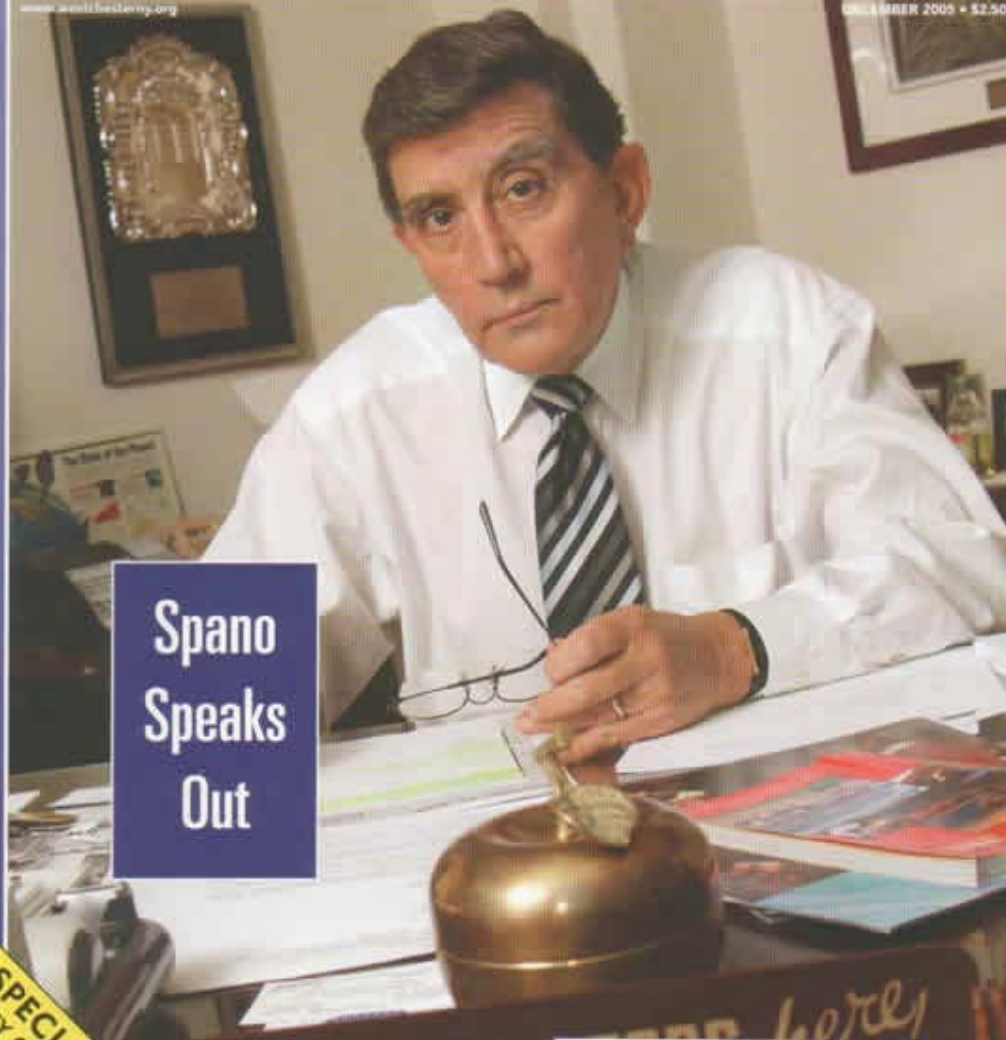
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Five Questions Web Designers Don't Want You to Ask

By Kristi Stangeland

It's obvious. Every time you search the Internet you see it for yourself: the huge difference in the designs of the sites you visit. Some look like they were created by million-dollar Madison Avenue agencies, while others look like your 12-year-old nephew did it for his school project. And those are the visible elements. Look deeper, and you'll find other aspects of web design that affect everything from search engine optimization to visitor experience.

When it comes to "your" site, take the time to ensure your business will be well represented on the web. Sure, referrals from friends are great, and you should definitely get several referrals when you start your search. But, you should also be armed with some carefully thought out questions to ask as well. When interviewing web designers, ask the following:

How Do You Incorporate Search Engine Techniques When Creating Web Sites?

Why You Care: It has recently been reported that only 30 percent of web sites are listed in the search engines. All web designers state that they care about search engine optimization when creating sites, but few really incorporate the techniques when your site is actually built.

Most Wanted Response: You want your web design firm to tell you they plan to determine key phrases for your site at the beginning of the project and incorporate them into the title, content and meta tags of your site. You

also want them to create your site without the use of frames or 100 percent Flash pages.

Bottom Line: There are other factors (besides web design) that impact search engine optimization, but these design elements will give you a giant boost up with your rankings. Oftentimes, high rankings are as much about what you don't include as what you do include.

What is Your Turnaround Time?

Why You Care: You'll want your site finished in a reasonable amount of time. Unfortunately, I've come across many businesses that have waited over a year for their site to be completed.

Most Wanted Response: You'll want to hear your web designer offer a specific timeframe for site completion. While the website designer will be dependent upon you for delivery of graphics and content, the designer should be able to discuss a typical schedule and the turnaround time, once you have provided the appropriate materials.

Bottom Line: Don't get stuck for months without a site while you wait for your designer. Make sure you feel comfortable with the designer's response.

Do You Use Cascading Style Sheets?

Why You Care: A cascading style sheet (CSS) works behind the scenes to create the look of your entire site.

This is preferred to regular HTML formatting for three reasons:

1. Your site loads much faster because file sizes are smaller.
2. Lower maintenance fees. Your designer can update the look of your entire site with one single change to the style sheet.
3. It's the wave of the future. Embedded styles on your site could soon be obsolete.

Most Wanted Response: Yes!

Bottom Line: You work hard for your money. Don't waste it on unnecessary maintenance fees or risk having to recreate your site in the next year or two.

Will My Site be Viewable by All Users on All Browsers?

Why You Care: Unfortunately, you cannot control what browser (Internet Explorer, Netscape, Firefox, Mozilla, Opera, WebTV, etc) a visitor to your site will use. Some sites look great in one browser and horrible in another. A good web designer, however, can make sure your site looks the way it should when viewed in a variety of browsers.

Most Wanted Response: Your designer should use necessary techniques to ensure your site will appear, as it should, in several different browsers. This means your site should actually be viewed in several different browsers as well as several different versions of these browsers. In addition, the site should be checked to ensure that the code is correct. (Dr. HTML)

and W3C Validator are popular services.)

Bottom Line: Don't push visitors away with a website that only looks good in one version of Internet Explorer!

How Will My Business/Organization Benefit From a Website?

Why You Care: If you're reading this article, you probably already know many of the benefits of having a site. In case you don't, I'll tell you that websites can fulfill many different needs for a business or organization. For example, service professionals may want a site to generate qualified leads. Retail companies might want an online sales outlet to further increase revenues. Other businesses may not care about Internet traffic at all and just want a site for their existing customers.

Most Wanted Response: Your designer should explain her/his process to learn about your business and business model so she or he can create a site specifically to meet the needs of your organization.

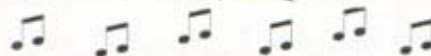
Bottom Line: Your designer has to fully understand your business, or your site won't function in the capacity you intend for it to function.

In addition to asking these questions, get references and actually follow up with them. Creating a website is a major investment, and you'll want to be sure you're working with someone who is as devoted to the success of your site as you are. Finding a good, competent web designer takes effort on your part, but will be well worth the time you spend.

Kristi Stangeland is president of Mustang Web Designs (mustangwebdesigns.com) of Hastings on Hudson and has been creating website designs for her clients since 2001. She can be reached at (914) 478-5869. Visit her online for her "Free Guide to Creating Effective Web Sites."

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