

## Designing your website

When it comes to the design of your website, there are a number of pitfalls that are easy to fall into. With the help of this section, hopefully you'll be able to avoid the most common ones.

The design agencies you've approached have had a think about your brief, and now they're proposing some solutions to your needs. As you requested, they've rustled up some speculative designs for you to marvel at. They all look great and...

Stop! Let's rewind for a moment, and go back to stage where we wrote our brief. There is nothing in there about requesting a speculative design from your agency. Why not? Because it's a bad idea – it doesn't benefit you, and it doesn't benefit the design agency. Here are 3 reasons why:

- It will cost you money. You might not be paying for it right now, but you are ultimately going to end up paying for any speculative work if you accept the design agency. You'll also end up paying for speculative work the agency did on projects they failed to win!
- The agency doesn't yet know enough about your brief to be able to respond to it in a way that fulfils the needs of your business.
- They're out to impress, with pretty graphics and clever features. The speculative designs you'll see won't meet your brief, but they certainly will look nice!

What's the alternative to this? Simple:

- Look through their portfolio of existing work. They should have lots of examples of previous work, showing a range of design and technical features.
- Talk to previous clients of the agency. Ask them whether they felt the agency fulfilled the brief.

Let's assume you've selected an agency and now you're finding yourself in meetings about graphics and designs - the sort of area where it's easy to have ideas and opinions, but difficult to commit to any.

What do you do? You can start by letting the design agency do their job. You're paying them a lot of money – don't waste it by trying to micro-manage, with continual suggestions about every element of the design. You'll slow down the process, and there's a real danger the site will end up as an uneasy compromise between your vision and theirs.

Try to step back from the process. When you disagree with a part of the design, voice your opinion ("I'm not sure my male teenage audience will like the pink background"), but let the design agency figure out the solution – that's what you're paying them for.

The main key to a good design is simplicity. Homepages, in particular, are often far too overcrowded and complex. To avoid this, just follow this simple rule:

Start off with a blank screen, and 15 'points'. Every element (anything which attracts user attention) costs you one of your points. If you want to emphasise a particular element and have a user look at it more – perhaps by making it bigger - it will cost you several points. When you run out of points, you can't add any more elements.



Once you've got a prototype of your website, you can start testing the design. Show it to some real users, but don't ask them what they think of the design – they'll start making very specific comments like 'move that bit there', or 'I don't like that colour'.

Instead, give these users choices – for instance, ask them if they think the design is conservative or liberal, dynamic or static. This way, you're asking them for an emotional response rather than comments on the particular aesthetics. This sort of feedback will be much more useful.

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