

## You do get what you pay for... but what are you paying for?

If you're in the market for a new blog or website, of course you want to know how much the finished product will cost. So when you get the inevitable answer, "It depends," it's understandable if you're frustrated and maybe even suspicious. If you're like me, whenever you start getting a long or convoluted response to the question "How much will this cost me?" you think, "Uh oh. Am I being set up for the mother of all inflated quotes?"

What is with these creative people, anyway? Why can't they just send you a rate sheet and stop beating around the bush?

It's not necessarily that anyone is trying to trick you or evade the question. To most people, the cost of blog or website design often comes across as a somewhat arbitrary decision. How do you quantify talent, skill, and experience? Most creative professionals base their fees on hourly rates. The tricky part is that websites come in all forms and sizes, so the time involved will depend on the complexity and quality you're after.

This article will help you get a better idea of where those cost numbers come from and how the process works. The more prepared you are going into this, the more likely you are to get what you're looking for at a price that suits your budget.

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### What does a website (or blog) cost?

A professionally designed website can range in price from \$2700 - \$7000. Many blog designers are hesitant to tell you that up front because they've encountered some extreme cases of "sticker shock." They've all heard numerous variations on this protest: "Are you kidding me? But my nephew could create a site for \$50!"

This is usually the result of the client and the designer having wildly different expectations. The designer understands the difference in actual value between the \$50 site and the site they would build for the client. The client, on the other hand, honestly doesn't know what they're paying for, so it's a very logical objection.

Many designers don't publish their prices on their websites for two reasons:

1. They don't want to lose potential clients to the sticker shock effect noted above. Many visitors would look at the price, not understand what's included, and head for the hills (or the \$50 nephew site).
2. They can't predict the inherent differences from project to project. Web design is definitely not a one-size-fits-all proposition. One of the biggest variables is the amount of the designer's time it will take to get the results you want.

Some websites take much more work than others. So do some clients.

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One client may come in knowing exactly what features she needs. She's able to clearly communicate the look-and-feel she wants and has already determined her budget range. The designer makes sure that he understands what the client wants before getting started. The first draft is almost exactly "there," the client approves, and after only a few minor tweaks and corrections, the job is done.

Another client might have no idea what he wants or needs and will therefore have to go through several prototypes and many changes of mind before narrowing down the concept. Obviously, this second client will require much more of the designer's resources, materials, and time just to reach the point where the first client started.

The thing to keep in mind about website design is that it's a creative process and that you, as client, play a starring role in how things go and how long things take. It's perfectly normal to think you know what you want at first, then see the first draft and develop new, better ideas as you learn what's possible. You'll be making some far-reaching decisions, some of which will be harder than others, so it's important to figure in extra time to give yourself some flexibility.

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### Why a website instead of a billboard?

One of the other things that make website pricing hard to grasp is the lack of a frame of reference. Websites and blogs are still relatively new, so it helps to be able to compare them to other conventional marketing vehicles businesses typically use. All other things being equal, a website provides a much better return on your investment.

For instance, look at these average costs:

- **Billboard and Newspaper Ads:** According to [Gaebler Ventures](#), a business incubator and venture capital fund with many good articles on business marketing, "The cost of billboard advertising ranges from about \$700 to \$2,500 a month. At that rate, ten billboards could run as much as \$25,000 per month. That sounds like a lot of money, until you realize that a full-page ad running for one day in a major newspaper costs about the same."
- **Trade Shows:** Gaebler Ventures states that, "[B]ooth space is generally inexpensive (\$13 per square foot on average, with the typical small booth covering 100 square feet)." But, when you add in the costs of transportation, lodging, and meals for booth staffers, mandatory charges for set up and tear down of the booth, shipping of materials, and insurance, the costs of exhibiting at a trade show can be astronomical.
- **Yellow Pages:** In most regions, phone book Yellow Pages ads are less expensive than either of the above options, often in the range of \$1500/year or so for a small ad. But ask yourself when was the last

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time you reached for the phone book instead of Google?

It's important to note here that none of these figures include the cost of designing the ads or materials, while the quote you'll get for a website does.

So the next question is: how do websites compare in efficiency to traditional marketing options? What do websites offer that conventional advertising doesn't?

- **Reach:** A website, unlike the options above, is available to interested customers anywhere in the world, any time of day or night. Even if you're a local company and only interested in reaching a local market, your website can reach that local market for a fixed cost, regardless of the number of people you are targeting. Because it's so easy to reach millions of people with a website, many local companies end up expanding certain services or products to a regional or national market.
- **Content:** How much information can you reasonably present on a billboard, a newspaper or phone book ad, or even at a trade show exhibit? It's pretty limited (and should be, if your audience is going to have any chance of absorbing the info). But what happens when they want to know more? A website is a very efficient way of presenting the information that people are looking for, without requiring employees to answer the same routine questions over and over.

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- **Interaction:** A website allows you to collect information from your prospects (in a way that is respectful to them) and track where that information came from more accurately than other forms of marketing. If you're not actively using a website for this purpose, you're missing out on a huge source of relevant data.
- **Flexibility:** What happens when you add a new service or product line? With traditional marketing, you have to take out new billboard or print ads, create new marketing collateral for the trade show booth, or even wait until next year to update your phone book ad. With modern websites, you can update your information as easily as editing a document. Talk about flexibility!

### How can I get the most for my money?

It really helps a designer give you the best "bang for your buck" if you can tell them what you want your site to accomplish for your business.

Would you go to a car dealership and say, "I want a vehicle but I don't really know what I'll use it for, and I don't really have a budget in mind. Why don't you just tell me what it will cost me?" Of course not! But that's effectively what many people do with their websites. They know that the Internet is the new thing and that they "should have a website" but don't have any specific goals for the site beyond having one.

Now that you're not one of them, you're ready to take control.



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### Spell it out

The first step is to determine why you want a website in the first place. Do you want it to entice people to contact you for appointments? Or do you want it to be so self-contained that visitors can do business with you online while you're sleeping? Maybe you're only looking for a "splash page" that contains your contact information, logo, and tagline. Or maybe you need a shopping cart, interactive forms, and access to in-depth content. Unless you figure out what you want the site to do, you won't have any way to know whether it's doing its job once it's up and running.

A spelled-out goal to generate 50 more calls per month is much easier to execute – and to measure later – than a vague one like "make me more successful."

### Have a plan

It also helps to do some research on your own about the other websites out there before you start looking for a designer. Visit a wide variety of sites and note what appeals to you and what doesn't. Sketch out some ideas, visit competitors' sites, start a list of functions and features you're interested in, and decide how many pages you'll need. Start brainstorming ideas for your domain name if you don't have one already. The more homework you can do on your own time in advance, the less trial-and-error time you'll spend while the designer's meter is running.

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### Ask around

Next, interview several designers and ask every question you can think of –and don't hesitate to ask detailed questions about pricing, like "What does that include?" and "How will that feature help my business accomplish this goal?" Any reputable professional designer or firm will be happy to explain. They love to work with thinking clients, and questions are an indication that you're thinking! In the process, you'll not only learn more about website design and costs, you'll also get a good idea of which designers you're most comfortable with. Finding the one you can trust and communicate with easily is just as important as finding the one with the right experience and credentials.

### The More You Ask, the More You Get

The bottom line here is that the more you know before you buy, the more likely you are to be happy with the results. The time you spend getting clear about your goals and preferences up front will more than pay for itself in saved trial-and-error time later on. And don't forget that in web design, as in any service with so many variables, the fact that there are few hard and fast costs means that there is plenty of room for negotiation.

If "how much?" is only one of many questions on your list to ask potential designers, you're on the right track toward negotiating a blog or website that works for you, your customers, and even your accountant.