# 2015 Insider's Website Buyer's Guide:

✔ Checklist    ✔ Red Flags    ✔ Glossary    ✔ And More

# Contents

# Letter from the CEO

## Welcome

I would like to thank you for taking the time to download the Insider's Website Buyer's Guide. We created this guide in order to educate and empower your decisions in the website creation process. Creating a website is a serious investment. If a website is designed correctly--taking into consideration your brand, sales cycle, and target audience--it can lay the foundation for your online brand.  Not only that, but your website can be an investment that brings you new clients, establishes new sales funnels, reinforces your reputation, educates your user base and ultimately becomes your best salesperson. The money that you initially invest in a website is an opportunity for business growth and will pay dividends for years to come.

## Our Goal

With this guide we aim to educate you and your business, assisting you so that you're able to differentiate a quality agency from one that cuts corners and delivers subpar products. My hope is that this resource will guide your buying decision, allowing you to make informed decisions up front and help you to choose the most qualified team for your project. When your website is done right the first time there is no need to spend money correcting mistakes in the future--saving you tens of thousands of dollars. If you follow the guidelines set out below and keep an eye out for the designated red flags, you will have the knowledge to decipher whether or not you are choosing an experienced, qualified agency or snake oil salesmen. A digital agency should be your partner, a member of your team, dedicated to presenting you with a website modeled after your vision and optimized to grow your business.



I hope you find the following guide helpful and I wish you the best with your website design project,

*Ryan Flannagan and the Nuanced Media Team*

# How Important is Your Website?

Return

Search

Design

Explore

Purchase

Read
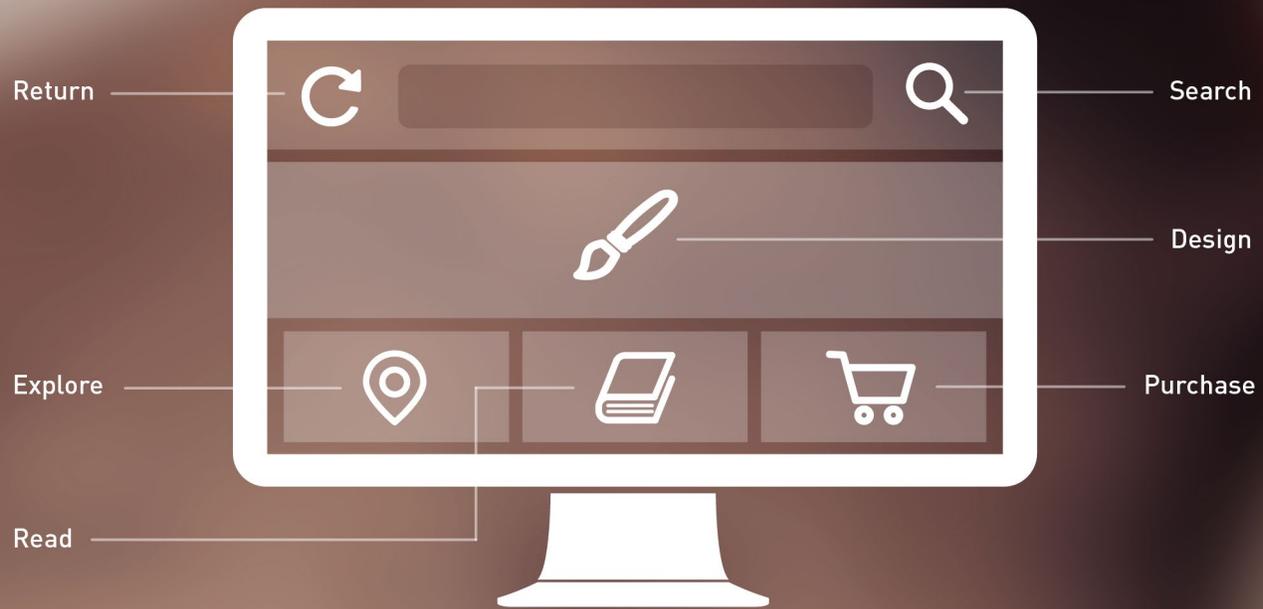
**88** **Return:**
88% of users are less likely to return to your site if they had a bad experience there the first time

**97** **Search:**
97% of all consumers search for local businesses online

**81** **Explore:**
81% of internet users research online before making big purchases

**75** **Design:**
75% of people admit to making a judgement about the credibility of a business by the design of their website

**60** **Read:**
60% of buyers are inspired to seek out a product after reading content about it on a website

**89** **Purchase:**
89% of US internet users search online before they make a purchase

## Your Website is a Serious Investment

### Curb Appeal of the 21st Century
- Immediately captures your visitors attention
- Effectively guides them to sales portals within the site
- Exudes a high-level of credibility
- Easily accessible, readable, navigable on all types of devices

### Your Best Salesperson
- Brings you new clients
- Establishes new sales funnels
- Reinforces your reputation
- Educates your user base

Sources:
http://www.forbes.com/sites/capitalonespark/2013/04/16/your-business-needs-to-get-social-local-and-mobile-fast/
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http://www.retailingtoday.com/article/study-81-research-online-making-big-purchases
http://www.demandmetric.com/content/content-marketing-infographic

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# Agency Questions

Authors Note: We have included a glossary of technological terms and The Website Playing Field Breakdown document, both of which provide further explanation of the current state of website design, content management systems, proprietary, open source, as well as build from scratch websites. We encourage you to read this supplemental information before diving into the subsequent questions as it can provide vital additional information.

## Questions to ask your agency before beginning on your project:

1. Will my website be designed off of a template? Or have a custom design?
2. Will my website design be responsive?
3. What is your agency's web design process? Will I be kept up to date on where you are in the process?
4. Does your agency have enough staff members to take on my project to ensure that it is done properly and in a timely manner?
5. Does your agency offer content creation and editing services? For what price?
6. Does your agency offer photography services? For what price?
7. Will my website be set up with Search Engine Optimization in mind?
8. Can your agency provide a portfolio highlighting projects similar to this one?
9. Can your agency offer resumes for each member of the team that will be working on my project to ensure their credibility?
10. Do you employ subcontractors? If so, have you worked with them before? Is subcontracting their full time job? Where are they located?
11. Can I see a copy of the contract?
12. What is the timeline for my project's completion?
13. What do I need to provide for the website's creation?
14. Can I make revisions or suggestions if I am unhappy with something that your agency provides me?
15. What are the continuing costs for the website's upkeep and maintenance?
16. Will I be able to update the website without the help of your agency? If not, will training be provided? Will there be a cost?
17. Does your agency offer digital marketing? If so, what type of digital marketing services does your agency offer and which will be most beneficial for my business/website?
18. Can I see reviews from some of your existing clients?
19. Will I receive brand guide once you have completed the website?
20. Have you ever not completed a project, gone over budget or had an unsatisfied client?

## Know the Why:

### 1. Will my website be designed off of a template? Or have a custom design?

**Theme -** A theme is a set of files that determine the look and feel of your website. Themes include information about the general layout of the site, and other content such as graphics, headers, logos and footers. Simply put, the theme determines websites brand, user interface and visual functionality.

**94** 94% of people cite design as a reason that they do not trust a website/company.

Websites deliver the curb-appeal of the 21st century. If you want a website that stands out and emphasizes your brand, you need to know whether or not you're working with a company that has a team with digital expertise–one that doesn't only plan for the short run but keeps the long term in mind as well.

Custom development of a theme is the midway point between a built from scratch website and templated CMS. By leveraging a custom theme, your team can work with a graphic designer and user interface specialist to layout the blueprint for your website based on research, industry expertise, brand, user interface and–most importantly–your feedback.

→ **Our Recommendation:** A custom template is the way to go. It will establish your brand and lay the foundation for your brand's online growth without making compromises. Ultimately, a custom theme is a larger investment. If your budget is under $10,000 a templated website or proprietary CMS might be a good place to start, but expect to compromise.

### 2. Will my website design be responsive?

**Responsive web design -** An approach to web design aimed at crafting sites to provide an optimal viewing experience—easy reading and navigation minimizing resizing, panning, and scrolling—across a

wide range of devices (from desktop computer monitors to mobile phones).
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Responsive_web_design

People are using their phones, tablets, and other devices to search for services and conduct research at an ever increasing rate. If your company doesn't look good on across all devices consumers may perceive it as unprofessional or indifferent, which leads to missed business opportunities. It's your digital agency's job to make sure your company looks good no matter what platform the consumer uses.  If the digital agency doesn't offer responsive design or charge extra for the feature, be wary.

→ **Our Recommendation:**  If it isn't responsive, don't buy it.

*DID YOU KNOW?*

**48**     48% of users say that if they arrive on a mobile site that isn't accessible, they attribute it to the business "simply not caring"

**31**     31% of website traffic is from a mobile or tablet device

**48**     48% of smartphone & tablet users complain if the website isn't optimized for mobile devices

### 3. What is your agency's web design process? Will I be kept up to date on where you are in the process?

As a client, it is important to know what's going on behind the scenes. You need to know what exactly you're investing in, not to mention what's expected on your end. By defining the procedure the digital agency is establishing that they do have expertise and that they have an established process for website development which works. Building a website which conveys your brand in a professional manner and achieves your businesses goal is an extensive process–make sure your digital partner has a tested procedure which has demonstrated proven results.

→ **Our Recommendation:**  If the company doesn't have a defined process then keep looking. In order to build a successful website you need a plan, and this process should lay out the expectations and timeline for the project. Without a defined process miscommunication will occur and the likelihood that you are dissatisfied with the end product will increase.

## 4. Does your agency have enough staff members to take on my project to ensure that it is done properly and in a timely manner?

What's going to happen to your project if someone on the team behind it falls ill or gets fired? Your team should consist of multiple group members in order to give the assurance that the project will get done–even if one or two people don't show up.

If you're working with a smaller agency, be sure that they have trusted companies that they are able to outsource or refer you to. The small agency may be able to handle one aspect of your site, while outsourcing some of the work to a different company.

→ **Our Recommendation:**  When you are selecting a digital agency to work with make sure that they are stable enough to complete the project.  Ultimately, we recommend that the digital agency you work with has a minimum of two individuals at any position that is critical to the success of the project.

## 5. Does your agency offer content creation and editing services? For what price?

The content that populates your website is incredibly important. It establishes the voice of your brand, draws in and engages visitors, and ultimately influences your customers' buying decisions. If you have unedited and sloppily assembled content on your website there will be a direct effect on your perceived level of professionalism. Beyond that, if your copy is compiled by an experienced content strategist they should be able to easily integrate keywords that will improve your search engine optimization and ultimately your website's digital visibility.

→ **Our Recommendation:**  Work with a professional. A strong digital agency should be able to create content for your company via a simple interview process. Another option is to write the majority of the content for the website yourself and have the digital agency review and edit for you. The latter method can save you money and while still guarantee a quality product.

## 6. Does your agency offer photography services? For what price?

If the website has interesting and compelling visuals visitors are more likely to spend time engaging with your brand. If you are planning on hiring a photographer it's a good idea to consult your digital design agency on recommendations. Your design agency and the photographer will have to work together to make sure the images are the correct ratios, convey the correct mood and brand.

Conversely, be wary about digital agencies trying to sell you photography services if your website is not heavily reliant on images. For example, a business for IT services may not be in need of a lot of original photography on its site and should be mindful of persuasive agencies attempting to sell photography services.

→ **Our Recommendation:** Unless you have the correct professional photography equipment and skill set, don't attempt taking your own photos. Consult your design agency to see if they have recommendations or provide the service. The most important thing is that your company, the photographer, and the design agency are all on the same page.

## 7. Will my website be set up with Search Engine Optimization in mind?

Showing up naturally on search engines when someone searches for a service you provide is the like the notion of being on main street in small town America. It is all about location, location, location. 60% of all organic clicks from search engine users go to the top three search results. That means that you need your business to be one of those three top results, and to get there you need to have someone with search engine optimization expertise on your team. This all begins with the website and whether or not it follows best practices for communicating with search engines–something you can't afford to have your team overlooking.

→ **Our Recommendation:** Request that the digital design agency optimizes your website for at least 3 keyword or phrases. These keywords or phrases should be determined by how hard they are to rank for and number of searches conducted for the term. Moz.com is a great resource for conducting SEO research, we particularly like the on page grader and the key word difficulty tools.

## 8. Can your agency provide a portfolio highlighting projects similar to this one?

The easiest way to see what a digital design agency has to offer is by checking out the work that they have already completed. If they are not displaying a visual portfolio on their public website, don't hesitate to ask for examples of their previous work. If you can see what they have done before, you will have the foundation to tell them what you do and don't like about the sites and that will ultimately give them better insight for the creation of your website.

*TIP*

You can also use this as a test of the digital design agency. Make sure all of the websites that they've worked on are up and running, that they load quickly, and are available on your phone and tablet. Be certain that the site that they have advertised as something that they've constructed is the same as the live website for that particular company.

→ **Our Recommendation:**  Do your research. Make sure that the digital agency has completed projects similar in scope to your project expectations and that the live websites are responsive, load quickly, and are fully functional.

## 9. Can your agency offer resumes for each member of the team that will be working on my project to ensure their credibility?

You wouldn't hire a new employee without looking over their resume first. The same idea applies when you are hiring a team to work on your website design project. Bottom line is that it allows you some peace of mind to know that those working on your project are experienced and knowledgable.

→ **Our Recommendation:**  Look at the digital design agency's About Us page and see if there are bios/resumes of the individual members. If you would still like to know more information, request the resumes. Make sure the the company is doing the work themselves and not offshoring the project.

## 10. Do you employ subcontractors? If so, have you worked with them before? Is subcontracting their full time job? Where are they located?

It is important to know what expertise you are paying for and where it is coming from. If the company employs subcontractors, make sure they have worked with the subcontractors before.

You are contracting a digital agency so they will be responsive to your needs and can prioritize your project. It's important to consider the numerous issues that may occur when working with subcontractors–not to mention subcontractors from a different culture in a different timezone.

Ideally, the digital agency you decide to work with will be capable of providing all of the services that your project requires by in-house staff; therefore, if any issues do occur the agency can be responsive to the issues and resolve them quickly.

→ **Our Recommendation:** Select the digital agency that can complete your project with its in-house staff. If you don't mind the company using subcontractors, at least make sure you know who is doing the work, if they have worked together before, and that you understand why subcontractors are involved.

## 11. Can I see a copy of the contract?

Be sure to read all of the fine print that goes into the contract. This goes for any sort of agreement that your business makes with a third party, but is especially important when taking on a lengthy and important endeavor like website creation.

*TIP*

One of the main reasons that you need to look into the contract is so that you can ensure the ownership of your code. When you own your code, you hold the keys to your website. It will ensure that your web design agency cannot lock you out in the future or attempt to charge you for ownership later. Owning your code is not something that is guaranteed, so verify ownership is laid out in the contract.

The contract is also where you weed out any miscellaneous charges, work extensions and the like. A quality website design agency should lay out the timeline and deliverables as well as all of the costs associated with their work in the contract.

→ **Our Recommendation:**  Review the contract–plain and simple.

## 12. What is the timeline for my project's completion?

A timeline provides a set of rules both you and the digital agency need to meet in order to keep your project running smoothly and on time. If there is not a provided timeline with designated milestones and a set-in-stone completion date, you may be giving the agency–and possibly your company–too much wiggle room for the project to stay on schedule.

> Hint: Make sure that if your timeline encompasses holidays that you as a client are aware of how that will affect the end date of your project.

→ **Our Recommendation:**  Make sure you have a timeline before committing to an agency. It provides a framework for your project and helps ensure that your project will be completed on time.

## 13. What do I need to provide for the website's creation?

Your digital agency is going to need to gather a lot of information from you in order to create a site for your business. If you don't provide the agency with all of the content, pictures, statistics, forms, addresses, phone numbers, and everything else that needs to be integrated into the site they simply can't complete the project for you.

There may also be the option of having your digital agency create content and provide photography services etc. in order to minimize what it asked of your company. Just be sure that these services are fully outlined in the contract.

→ **Our Recommendation:** Discuss with your digital agency what they will be providing and what is required from your team to provide. A good website needs a strong team effort and open

communication, make sure you will get this from the agency you decide to work with.

## 14. Can I make revisions or suggestions if I am unhappy with something that your agency provides me?

Having the ability to make revisions and suggestions on your project is a luxury that you can't afford to be without. At a bare minimum you should be allowed at least two revisions on the wireframes and mockup of your website before development begins. Ensure your opinion isn't overlooked by confirming the right to revisions is noted in the contract.

At the end of the day, professional service contracts are very hard to enforce from the client's perspective. If an agency builds a website for your company and there was no outlined approval process the digital agency can argue the project was completed and take you to court for payment.

Generally, making changes to a finalized website costs money and will be difficult for your team, especially if your changes have to do with the back-end structure of the website. Confirming that a review and approval process is in place is a great way to make sure everyone is on the same page and that your project will be successful.

→ **Our Recommendation:** If you can't review and approve your website's wireframe and mockup before the website is developed, don't sign the contract.

## 15. What are the continuing costs for the website's upkeep and maintenance?

Creating a website is an investment and as such there's necessary maintenance to make sure the investment pays dividends. Make sure that you understand what the costs are for hosting, updates and—if you opt to have them—digital marketing services. Knowing the continual costs will both help your company plan for the future and have a better understanding of the overall financial scope of the project.

→ **Our Recommendation:** Request the cost of maintenance, updates, hosting and digital marketing services from digital agency. Knowing is half the battle.

## 16. Will I be able to update the website without the help of your agency? If not, will training be provided? Will there be a cost?

The team that created your website knows how to access it to make changes and download updates, but will you have that knowledge? It's important to know what kind of accessibility you will have to your website. Make sure your team has administrative access to the website and will be allowed to make changes. Unfortunately, some digital agencies don't allow client access to their own website. As a result it can cost your team hundreds of dollars to make very simple text changes to your website.

Many digital agencies will provide training for you and members of your staff to ensure that you have the tools you need to be able to maintain your website without their help in the future. In the world of open source CMS, there is no reason why your company shouldn't be able to make 95% of the needed updates to your website with little to no technological knowledge.

→ **Our Recommendation:** Make sure that you will be able to update your website and the agency provides training.

## 17. Does your agency offer digital marketing? If so, what type of digital marketing services does your agency offer and which will be most beneficial for my business/website?

*DID YOU KNOW?*

In 2014, businesses will allocate a collective **$135 billion** for digital marketing brand collateral. Digital marketing is one of the fastest growing sectors and most imperative services offered today and your website is the core element of any digital marketing campaign.

If your company is investing the time in a digital agency make sure they can do digital marketing as well. This will enable your brand to lay a strong foundation for both your website and future marketing funnels. Using one company for your web design and another company for your digital marketing can easily lead to decreased efficiency, brand inconsistency, and reduced campaign effectiveness. Finding an agency that offers these services on top of website design and development should be a priority.

It was touched on previously, but SEO is incredibly important for the success of your website. But SEO is not the only digital marketing service that can benefit your business. There is social media marketing, retargeting and pay per click campaigns, direct response marketing, and many other services that can aid in the growth of your business.

→ **Our Recommendation:** Look for a one stop shop. A digital agency that offers both website design and digital marketing will build a website so it succeeds in the digital marketing arena. Additionally, your company will have brand consistency in future marketing campaigns since there will be no need to educate an outside vendor.

## 18. Can I see reviews from some of your existing clients?

Reviews are important and if you are making a large investment your potential digital design agency should be touting their reviews at every given chance. *Please see Reviews Red Flag

→ **Our Recommendation:** No reviews, no business.

## 19. Will I receive a brand guide once you have completed the website?

With your new website it's important to make sure you can sustain consistent brand standards. When designing a new website or redesigning an old website, the current brand image should be discussed. Typically this is also a period of evolution for the brand. This means that, at the bare minimum, you will need a style tile with the fonts, colors and logo (in multiple formats) in order to keep brand consistency. You may opt for a more extensive brand guide, which will give your team a complete guide for when, where, and how to you your brand. Whatever level of brand guide you select, the key is making sure you have one to reference.

→ **Our Recommendation:** During the website design process you should be reexamining your brand. Make certain you get some form of brand guide that will aid you in the process and create a lasting brand for your business.

### 20. Have you ever not completed a project, gone over budget or had an unsatisfied client?

This is a question to gauge the reaction of the representative that you are working with. People have a very hard time admitting mistakes or a difficult situation that they have had to deal with. If a digital design representative says that they have never not completed a project, gone over budget or had an unsatisfied client then they are most likely being dishonest. Like it or not you are starting a relationship with your digital design agency and it should be based on trust.

→ **Our Recommendation:** Trust your gut. This is more about honesty than anything else.

# Red Flags
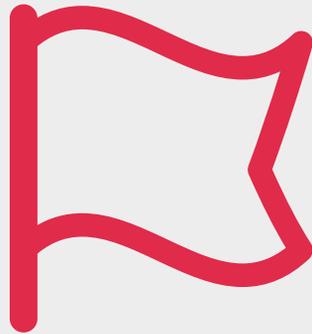
Through our experience working with hundreds of clients here at Nuanced Media, we have identified a few particularly concerning red flags. If any of the following occur while interviewing a digital design agency, we urge you to make sure you are absolutely confident with them before you sign on the dotted line.

## 1. One Man Show/New Company

If your digital design agency is comprised of just one/two people or has less than a year in business, be wary. If something happens to one of them or they decide they need another day job it's possible your website's creation will come to a halt or never get completed.

Make sure that there is a solid team working specifically on the design and development of your website.

## 2. Long-Term Contract

Any reputable agency will provide your business with a contract that lays out an exit clause and relatively short terms in order to ensure that you are satisfied with your project. That way if you aren't satisfied, you have the ability to take your business elsewhere. If an agency provides you with a long-term contract, anything 12 months or more, read the fine print. Occasionally, digital design agencies will try to lock clients into long term contracts with subpar service.  There is no reason that your business needs to commit to an agency for longer than 12 months upfront.

## 3. Lack of Digital Marketing Knowledge

In this case, what you don't know CAN hurt you. When the digital agency that is creating your website does not also have a good understanding of digital marketing, mistakes are made and opportunities are lost that can cost you later.

For example, one of our clients originally had their website made by an agency that didn't have the requisite digital marketing expertise.  When they launched the new client's website they removed the "www" prefix from the url. This normally isn't a big deal; however, in this case the client had a large

amount of historical links going to their website with the "www" prefix. The website needed to redirect to the url without the "www" prefix, which devalued the existing links by over 70%.

In other words, the website became 70% less effective for search engine and the client lost a large amount of their organic positioning, which cost them hundreds of thousands of dollars in potential sales.

## 4. Cold Calls / High-Pressure Sales

It is more than likely that your business will have to set aside a significant sum of money to create your website. When making an investment, you should not be pressured into making a decision about committing to an agency. Choosing an agency should be solely based on whether you feel the teams at the agency have the expertise to take on your project, if you can trust them as your partner, and if it is easy to envision yourself working with them on the long term.

There are no circumstances where it is okay for an agency to bombard you with calls and pressure you to sign a contract with them.

## 5. Bad Reviews or Lack of Reviews

Existing customer reviews may be the most important aspect to examine when deciding on a digital design agency. This will tell you what it is like to be a client of theirs. Are their clients happy? Upset? Are there no reviews at all?

**DID YOU KNOW?**

**88** 88% have read reviews to determine the quality of a local business

**72** 72% of consumers say that positive reviews make them trust a local business more

All websites aren't created equal. If a company doesn't take the time to speak with you or do a discovery, but still gives you an estimate on a website then keep looking. This would be akin to telling you what a house will cost without knowing how many bedrooms, what part of town it is in, if it has a pool or acreage. A quick quote is a recipe for disaster.

You will know you have found the right company when the digital agency gives you a starting figure and then suggests doing a discovery. Typically, a design agency will do a basic discovery with a client to layout the blueprint for the website and based on this discovery, can provide you a detailed quote. Measure twice and cut once is more than a saying, it can determine the success of your project.

## 7. Off Shoring the Work

Theoretically, there is nothing wrong with offshoring development; however, you are paying your digital company for their digital expertise and not to be the middleman between you and an offshore company. Numerous issues can occur when working with subcontractors–not to mention subcontractors from a different culture in a different timezone.

Ideally, the digital agency you decide to work with will be able to provide you all of the services that your project requires by their in house staff; therefore, if any issues occur the agency can be responsive to the issues and resolve them quickly.

## 8. No Training

In the beginning, you will be dependent upon your digital design agency for creating your website. This dependence should only be temporary. Eventually, it is imperative that you and your employees are able to access and update your site. In order to control your site and make small changes, you must have the knowledge and training to do so, which should be provided by the digital agency.

## 9. Leasing the Website

Leasing a website is always a bad deal. If you contract with a digital agency to design and develop your website you should own the website after the project is completed. There have been many horror

stories about clients contracting with a digital agency to find out months later that they own monthly payments for their website and don't have any rights to website.

## 10. No Process

At the end of the day, you are coming to a digital agency for their expertise and ability to produce results. If the company doesn't have a process established for developing the website, a timeline for deliverables, then their expertise should be in question. All websites are distinct and unique, but they all follow a similar process for creation.  The process is the foundation of your project and without a solid foundation your project runs the risk of being unsuccessful.

# Websites: The Playing Field

In order to understand the development process of your website, it is important to have substantial knowledge about how websites work. We have broken up the basics into the following 3 pages which should give you enough knowledge to determine what is real and what is not. Basically, websites are broken into two main categories: pre-built content management systems and hand-coded systems. There is much depending on which type of system is used, including maintenance, easy of use, search engine optimization, the ease of third party software integration and overall cost.

## Content Management Systems

**Content Management System:** A system used to manage the content of a website. A CMS allows the content manager or author, who may not know Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), to manage the creation, modification, and removal of content from a website without needing the expertise of a webmaster.

Content management systems break into two fundamental categories, open source and proprietary, which represent over 38% of the websites on the internet. Some popular examples of CMS's are WordPress, Drupal, Squarespace, Joomla, Wix etc.

*1. Open Sourced CMS:* A system used to manage the content of a website that is available to all for use, copy, edit, and redistribute. These systems are open to public iterations, meaning that anyone can develop and manipulate the system in anyway that they like. These systems receive input from hundreds of thousands of people, which results in an improved and diverse system.

The open source movement has been alive and well since '97. WordPress is the juggernaut of open source CMS representing over 23.2% of all websites on the internet, with over 34 thousand plugins*, 774 million downloads, and hundreds of active developers. Other notable open source CMS are Joomla and Drupal with 3% and 1.9% of the website market share, respectively.

*\* A plugin is similar to an application which you can install on your phone. It enables additional functionality for your website such as calendars, forms, etc.*

The primary benefit of using an open source CMS is that there is an active community working behind

it, so it evolves as the internet evolves. This enables companies utilising these CMS's to integrate advanced functionality, customize/optimize their websites and reduce costs by leveraging the work that the open source community has already completed. Additionally, the open source nature of these systems means that they are battle-hardened, and since anyone can see their source code they cannot use any "tricks" to enhance or pad their security - their systems must be completely sound and secure at all points.

## PROS

- More Cost Effective
- Easier to Customize
- Integrates with 3rd Party Systems
- Evolves as Internet evolves
- Advanced Functionality

Open source CMS's do have their drawbacks. They are like a free puppy. Yes, the puppy is free, but you have to train it, feed it and make sure it is taken care of. This is one of the side effects of a system constantly evolving. Your website needs to be updated at least every 6 months. Typically, updating the website is a simple process; however, if the theme or plugins that you are using aren't being maintained this can cause problems.

This leads to the next problem: agencies that advertise themselves as CMS experts when they are clearly not. If they do not have all of this imperative CMS knowledge, then the final product that they produce could potentially be insecure and ineffective.

## CONS

- Upkeep
- Expertise level highly varies. Easy to choose the wrong company
- Security

Open source CMS's work well for all styles and sizes of businesses and are built to grow your company. By using an open source CMS, companies empower themselves with the flexibility for the future as one can easily change systems or add functionality while maximizing the present impact of their website.

→ **Our Recommendation:** We recommend WordPress. WordPress has the largest development community, which translates to flexibility for your project including features, third party integration, stunning design and customization.  Additionally, WordPress adoption rate is 7 times larger than its closest open source CMS competitor and 45 times larger than any proprietary CMS.

Do you think your project is too big for WordPress?

Think again, there are many Fortune 500 companies that take advantage of WordPress.  If something were to happen to WordPress 1 out of every 5 companies on the internet would be affected. WordPress is here to stay.

*2. Proprietary CMS:*  A system used to manage the content of a website that is built on a code owned privately, so that only the owner of the code can maintain and distribute it. This type of CMS is generally developed by an agency to be used specifically for their own clients. The owner of the agency can charge monthly fees in order to provide maintenance on the website.

Proprietary CMS's typically fall into one of three categories: budget solution, low competition or vertical specific. Some proprietary CMS examples are Squarespace 0.5%, SimpleView, Weebly 0.4%, Blackbaud and Wix 0.3%

*PROS*

• Ease of setup
• Basic initial features
• Decreases initial cost of setup
• Decreases time to market
• No need to work with an outside agency*
• Streamlined for your industry**

*Budget Solution/Low Competition

**Vertical CMS

**Budget Solution/Low Competition:**

The budget solution or low competition business owner is looking for more of a billboard than a website. The primary benefit to the Proprietary CMS is that it is very easy to setup without working with an outside agency: this reduces cost to a monthly subscription, offers great initial features, and decreases time to market.

Sidenote: Be wary of any agency charging over $5,000 for setup of a Squarespace or any similar website. We have heard of some agencies hiring interns to develop these websites for clients. Bottom line is if you just want your website to act as a billboard, this is a good way to go.  Just don't spend too much money on it.

**Vertical Specific:**

There are many design agencies which have aligned themselves with a particular industry vertical. The primary benefit to the vertical specific CMS model is that it identifies unique features for your industry, streamlines the development process, and typically integrates with leading industry CMS's.

If a proprietary system is made for your industry or is very easy to setup then there is a high likelihood that your competitors are using the same system. This can lead to a competitive standstill or a competitive disadvantage if the competition invest more heavily.

*CONS*

- May not work with third party systems
- Slower to evolve
- Locked into system
- Costs**
- Lack of competitive advantage

*Budget Solution/Low Competition

**Vertical CMS

Proprietary CMS's are primarily made for three types of business: new companies, companies with little online competition or industry specific solution.  For companies with little competition or are on a budget, the do it yourself option is a great first move. It will reduce costs in the short run and let you continue with your core business. However, it can cost in the long run via a competitive standstill or disadvantage.

→ **Our Recommendation:** If you are a small business, a do it yourselfer, or in a non-competitive online market looking for a billboard website that will simply represent your business online without advanced functionality, then a proprietary CMS could be the way to go.  There may some drawbacks, but it is an easy more inexpensive solution.

As for our vertical CMS recommendation, consult with a credible digital agency before making a decision. There is a lot of variation in the vertical CMS market and you need to assess the pros and cons on a case by case basis.

## Hand Coded or Built From Scratch Websites

Built from scratch systems represent the other 62% of websites on the internet. These systems range from custom HTML-only websites built by high school students, to very complex systems built by financial giants. In this guide we will not cover built from scratch websites on an in-depth level, as 98% of the time we do not recommend using this type of system.  It is possible that your business is part of that 2% that needs a built from scratch website, if you are looking for very customized functionality.

The reason we generally advise against built from scratch systems is it that they can be risky. When your website is built from scratch you are normally locked in and dependent on the digital agency that built your code for as long as your website is up and running. Unfortunately, there is no set standard for the company who is coding the original project and therefore any subsequent company who works on the project must research and learn the previous company's coding style. Typically, the new company will say that they need to start the project from scratch.

There is also the potential for there to be problems with the SEO capabilities of the site. Search engines prefer when websites adhere to WC3 standards. Unfortunately, built from scratch websites

don't always follow these standards and if they do you may have to pay for it.

→ **Our Recommendation:** Contact your desired digital design agency if you have any questions regarding whether or not you would need a website built from scratch or a CMS.

# Web Design Glossary

**API -** *Application Programming Interfaces*

A method that describes when a programmer writing an application program makes requests for (use of info from) a computer, operating system, or another application.

**Browser**

A program that provides a way to look at and interact with all the information on the internet. Examples: Firefox, Google Chrome, Safari

**CMS -** *Content Management System*

A system used to manage the content of a website. A CMS allows the content manager or author, who may not know Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), to manage the creation, modification, and removal of content from a website without needing the expertise of a webmaster.

**Cross Browser Compatibility (Browser Agnostic)**

The process of ensuring that a website is coded in such a way that it is displayed correctly across multiple browsers.

**CSS -** *Cascading Style Sheet*

Code used to format the layout of a web page by defining how to display HTML elements, such as headers and links. These style sheets can then be applied to any web page or an entire website.

**Encryption**

Encryption is the process of encoding messages or information in such a way that only authorized parties can read it

**E-Commerce**

The buying and selling of products and services by businesses and consumers through an electronic medium, without using any paper documents. E-commerce is subdivided into three categories: business to business or B2B (e.g. Cisco), business to consumer or B2C (e.g. Amazon), and consumer to consumer or C2C (e.g. eBay).

**Framework (Web Development Framework**)

A set of resources and tools for software developers to build and manage web applications, web services, and websites. A framework includes templating capabilities within a browser, the

programming environment for scripting the flow of information, and the application programming interfaces (APIs) for accessing underlying data resources.

**FTP -** *File Transfer Protocol*

An internet protocol that allows a computer to send files to or receive files from another computer. Like many Internet resources, FTP works by means of a client-server architecture; the user runs client software to connect to a server on the Internet.

**Hosting/Hosting Service**

Hosting is an arrangement in which a web host (often an internet service provider) maintains clients' websites on its computers and provides related services. These services may include leasing of hard disk space, maintenance of hardware and software, provision of backup and security, content integrity, credit card processing, email boxes and high-speed internet connection.

**HTML -** *Hypertext Markup Language*

The set of markup symbols or codes inserted in a file intended for display on a World Wide Web browser page. This tells the Web browser how to display a Web page's words and images for the user.

**ISP-** *Internet Service Provider*

An ISP is an organization that provides services and infrastructure for accessing the Internet. Those services may include Internet access, domain name registration, Web hosting, and more.

**Permalink Structure**

A permanent link (permalink) is a URL that always points to and directs readers to the same web page, blog post or any online digital media.

**Platform**

Any base of technologies on which other technologies or processes are built. An application can be a platform if it is a base for other programs.

**Responsive (Web Design)**

Formatting a website design so that the Website automatically adjusts itself most for the optimal for viewing and navigation across a wide range of devices, including traditional PCs, smartphones and tablet devices.

**SEO - *Search Engine Optimization***

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of affecting the visibility of a website or web page in a search engine's "natural" or un-paid ("organic") search results.

**Sitemap**

A list of pages of a website that are accessible to users. It can be either a document in any form used as a planning tool for web design, or a Web page that lists the pages on a website, typically organized in hierarchical fashion.

**Theme**

A template designed specifically for use to enhance the visual appearance and usability of a website. Many web development providers offer a selection of themes for their clients to choose from for their sites. Alternatively, predesigned blog themes can be found through a variety of websites, and many web designers offer custom themes for sites.

**Template**

A website template is a pre-designed web page, or set of web pages, that anyone can modify with their own content and images to set up a website.

**UI - *User Interface***

The junction between a user and a computer program. An interface commands or menus through which a user communicates with a program.

**Wordpress**

An example of a Content Management System.

# About

## The Author

Ryan's experience in business has been vast and varied, drawing on 10+ years of marketing and business experience including founding and operating a software development company. After receiving his MBA from Washburn University, Ryan went on to found Nuanced Media in 2010, a digital marketing agency which focuses on website design, digital marketing, and brand identity. Ryan is passionate about thought leadership, experience sharing and collaboration in the digital space. He utilizes his in-depth market analysis capabilities and understanding of complex technologies to provide optimum service for Nuanced Media's clients. He is well-known in the community for strong involvement, candor and leadership, as well as for his commitment to generously contributing in-kind services to nonprofits.

## Nuanced Media

Nuanced Media is a digital marketing, web development and graphic design agency that has more than 25 years of expertise in the digital arena. The agency specializes in strategic, multilayer marketing campaigns and efficiently crafted, user-friendly websites. Based in Tucson, Nuanced Media has 100+ clients internationally. Nuanced websites excel because they are based on deep research, due diligence, client collaboration and most importantly, innovative thinking. The Nuanced designers, writers, strategists, and developers follow various market trends and technological advancements to learn how to subtly differentiate our clients from the rest. For more information, please visit Nuanced Media.