

# Internet projects: a buyers' guide



**About to commission a new website, web application or digital marketing campaign? Then take care not to repeat the mistakes many others have made and which can result in Internet projects costing too much or failing to deliver their full potential**

Some businesses and government bodies don't often have a full understanding of what it is they are buying or whether they are getting good value. Take web development as an example. A new website can cost as little as €70 or can cost hundreds of thousands, indeed millions. It's often not easy to understand why the costs vary so much.

At its simplest, a €70 website might be a limited "out of the box" template-driven site or a blog theme that gives a site a slightly more polished look than you get from using a blogging platform. Sites where costs run into hundreds of thousands are a different beast – they tend to involve applications, such as online payment systems or booking engines or databases that have to be custom developed for the client. They often have more complex content management and other software. Some may have to integrate with back-end systems.

Scoping the project and setting the right budget are not always easy tasks. Buying web, IT and online communications services is something of a black art. It requires a mix of IT, marketing, Internet and procurement know-how – as well as a lot of market knowledge.

AMAS works with business and government clients to procure Internet and technology services. Here are our top tips on how to be a smart buyer:

## **1. Do your homework**

Under-specification cripples Internet projects and often means that they cost more than expected or don't deliver on the objectives. Be clear about what the project is about and what is within and out of scope. Do your research, online and offline, to inform what technologies and services you need and the type of budget you need to set.

What some call a "web design project" is more than much more than the "look and feel". It's about coding, deployment of technologies, search engine optimisation (SEO), content, online marketing in all its guises, social media tie-ins, site management and measurement. And that's not everything!

## **2. Get expert help**

It is often more cost-effective to commission a strategy and planning project before going out to market to build a new site or application. In one recent case, this resulted in a saving of about 50% of web development costs.

### 3. Use free stuff

Don't assume that you need to pay a licence fee for the software that powers your website or drives your campaign. Free tools, like Google Analytics and WordPress, have made life difficult for other analytics and content management providers whose paid products are not as feature-rich.

Social media platforms, like YouTube and Facebook, are also free though you may need specialist help to drive your campaign through those sites.

### 4. Seek competitive quotes

Get at least three quotes based on a written brief. You need to ensure that project requirements are fully scoped so that you can make valid comparisons between proposals. Pre-qualify the companies or individual developers or marketers by finding out more about what they do, from their websites, their broader online footprint and from conversations with contacts – or contacts of contacts. Ensure that vendors' experience, services and IT solutions are a good match for your requirements.

The market for web development and online marketing services in Ireland is fragmented. While many companies claim to offer an end-to-end service, this is not always the case. Sometimes it is best to work with two or more companies which offer specialist expertise and experience in their particular areas to get the best result. While that might sound troublesome, it can run very smoothly with good project management.

### 5. Don't assume that cheapest is best

Avoid the temptation of automatically selecting the lowest cost vendor. You need to factor

experience, quality, project management and customer service into the process. Do due diligence on the vendors, by taking up references in the same way you would for a new recruit.

Validate what is written in the proposal. For instance, a web developer who is pitching for a site which must meet accessibility criteria (for instance level AA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 of the Web Accessibility Initiative) should have a site that meets that standard. So too should the client reference sites. While accessibility validator tools will only give you a partial picture about accessibility compliance, they are a good place to start.

### 6. Beware of wild claims

Some web companies make claims that they cannot deliver. "We can ensure your site gets the top ranking in Google," is one such claim. Unpaid search (SEO) is a long-term, highly-specialised process where there are no absolute guarantees. You can certainly buy your way onto the first result page of Google but, depending on the target phrases, it can be expensive. Also, your ad may not appear at the top of the search list.

Similarly, a web development company which claims expertise in content should demonstrate that on its own site. Text content should be clear, well written and be well optimised for the search engines.

### 7. Protect yourself

A legally-binding contract need not be a monster document but at a minimum there should be a formal acceptance of a proposal, the programme of work and the project fee. Avoid up-front fees or pro-forma invoices, if you can. Set the payment schedules by project milestones and don't pay until

those milestones are met to the standard you expect.

Avoid lock-in to a single supplier who, potentially, can create a monopoly in follow-on support or other services. Seek a warranty period during which bugs and other problems will be fixed at no additional cost. Ensure your business or organisation gets the level of ownership needed for all project deliverables.

Finalise requirements early in the project lifecycle and insist on a detail project plan which should be reviewed and updated throughout the course of the project.

## 8. Allocate internal resources

There are often unrealistic expectations about what external suppliers can and will do in a web development project. Generally, many clients underestimate what is involved in delivering a new website and how much work needs to be conducted within the client organisation.

A client will need to manage the project and fulfil some key tasks (such as creating or sourcing the content, sourcing imagery or setting the fields for a database) and co-ordinate inputs from a range of different stakeholders. Often many well-designed and built websites cannot go live because the client cannot get others within the business or organisation to deliver content.

It can be easy to point the finger at the external supplier, whereas the delays or quality issues are often due to lack of internal resources or failure to prioritise certain activity.

## 9. Test, test and test again

Insist that your developer has a full testing regime in place for any new site or application. Carry out your own testing round for snags, bugs and content. Don't go live until you are happy that the site, application or campaign meets your quality standard.

Also, it is also valuable to conduct usability testing at various points in the development cycle, which often picks up issues which will act as barriers to typical users using the website or application. Such usability checks offer substantial return on investment, in terms of delivering sales or leads, increasing completion rates and improving customer satisfaction. Such testing is best conducted by independent specialists.

## 10. Remember the launch is only the start

Getting a new site or campaign launched is a big achievement. But it's only the beginning. You need to update the site, fine-tune the campaign and continuously manage, market and monitor the effectiveness of what has been designed and built.

### About AMAS

AMAS is retained by business and government clients to develop strategies, plan web projects, procure resources, carry out usability audits and ultimately support client teams throughout this process. For more details, or to discuss your needs, contact Aileen O'Toole on [info@amas.ie](mailto:info@amas.ie)