



Decide how much of your website to DIY

Traditional wisdom says off-the-shelf website solutions are cookie-cutter and a bespoke website will send you broke. The problem with traditional wisdom, writes **Kate Hennessy**, is that in the fast-moving world of websites, tradition fades fast. We look at five aspects of a successful website - SEO, copywriting, design, programming and photography - and give the experts in these fields a chance to sing for their supper. If this leaves you determined to blaze your own trail as a copywriter and leave the design to the experts, for example, we also asked them for their best tips for beginners.

Includes advice on:

- How to get the most bang for your buck from web professionals
- What to look for when choosing website templates
- Which businesses are most likely to need professional web services

These days, it's possible to customise off-the-shelf templates to reflect your company's branding. Packaged solutions can also come conveniently rolled with hosting, search engine optimisation (SEO) and technical support. Some even claim popular templates are more robust platforms since they've been tested and tweaked by thousands of other market users.

Do these whizz-bang templates mean the death of the bespoke website for SMEs? Well, no. Outsourcing your website to the right professionals should result in an attractive and functional site that looks nothing like the competition's. But the right professionals cost money.

So, if your budget dictates that a template is the way to go, what should you know? Or, if you decide to go bespoke, what components are you paying for and where should you focus your funds?

1. Why use an SEO specialist?

The managing director of SEO company Hot Goanna, Andrew Coates, says basic SEO recommendations can be implemented relatively easily, but ensuring your entire site is search engine friendly requires an expert eye.

Specialist technical skills like SEO site design, SEO-friendly content and adding keywords into code are employed. Strategic planning, management and execution are other good reasons to get expert advice.

Businesses who need it most?

Those in a heavily competitive space, such as local service providers and online retailers. Businesses with customers who are active and savvy online researchers. Attracting business relies on being listed first in organic search engine results. First listed, first clicked!

Price ranges?

For approximately \$250 you can expect site analysis and recommendations to improve your rankings. You can then

opt to get keywords identified and pay for a managed link-building campaign. For around \$300 per month, you'd get ongoing dedicated support and monthly reports. Or, for a larger one-off investment of around \$5000, you could get a six-month managed SEO project, including regular reports.

2. Why use a specialist copywriter?

Web copywriter Stephen Craft says the right copy can make your site sing where sub-standard copywriting can spoil it. A poorly-written site won't hold the attention of fickle online readers for long, no matter how slickly designed. Confusing, long-winded or ungrammatical copy can damage your brand. Also, online readers 'scan', rather than read, so your copy needs to be well-structured and economical. A good copywriter can hone a winning value proposition to wow your target market and translate it into concise, elegant prose with a crystal-clear call-to-action.

Businesses who need it most?

Businesses with complex or technical products and services. An experienced copywriter takes technical detail and

complex concepts and makes them easy to read. They connect it to compelling, concrete benefits, and capture the excitement and enthusiasm you feel about your products and/or services.

Price ranges?

Close to \$2000 should buy you an initial consultation from a reasonably experienced writer (a 'middleweight writer') and around five to eight web pages of 350 words each. Plus, an outline and two rounds of reviews. Spending up to \$5000 will buy you a basic site from an experienced senior writer, who may be either an SEO specialist or an industry authority. Or, an extended site from a middleweight writer of up to 20 pages of web copy. Price may not indicate quality so always get writing samples and client references first.

3. Why use a specialist programmer?

Director of email marketing and web design company Brown Box, Andrew Beeston, says a template often provides a solution for somebody else's customers - and may look like someone else's business, too! Customers have different needs and wants, which

Templates: four tips to narrow the search

Going DIY and looking for a template? Here's a quick and crucial checklist.

Portability: You love your website but decide to change your hosting provider. Can your website come too? If your package was bought through your hosting provider, it's not always possible to shift, so check before you buy.

Flexibility: Clarify how you want your website to look (form) and what you want it to do (function). Can you add your own logo and colours? Does it have e-commerce capability? Then, make sure the solution can do it.

Usability: Do you know any html or do you need a simple, step-by-step system to build the site? Be aware that the technical skills required differ from package to package.

Support: As an SME you don't want to land yourself a website that has no technical support. With good packages, ongoing phone support should be part of the initial costs - unlikely if you're buying from overseas.

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bespoke programming meets. They may want to book services, peruse itineraries, or make an impulse purchase or donation. After the initial cost, it can be profitable long term to offer these services that many templates won’t offer.

Businesses who need it most?

Websites with a lot of information to search, like a travel agent. Or businesses with large catalogues to peruse, like a parts’ supplier. Also, prefabricated solutions often don’t work for niche companies because their products or services are so specific to their customer and the template doesn’t exist, yet.

Price ranges?

For around \$1000 to \$2000 a programmer could customise an off-the-shelf template, including new pages. Or, trouble-shoot plug-ins and programming already in use on your site; for example, a broken search function. For \$5000, a designer can develop bespoke themes and templates for content management systems such as WordPress or Expression Engine. There’s usually a four to six week turn-around to build the site after the design process is complete.

4.

Why use a specialist web designer?

Designer Bea Pierce says design is more than just skin-deep. Good designers delve deep to understand your business and online needs. They

Will out-of-the-box functionality limit your website options?



plan a logical, well-organised and accessible information structure and use graphics that aid comprehension. Good design is invisible yet positive, but bad design will always be remembered negatively.

Stock templates can offer nice window dressing, perhaps with a sexy Flash slideshow or scripted gizmo, but will not guarantee your business will stand out. And they’re not as easy to customise as they often claim to be. Something as simple as adding your company logo can be time-consuming, and concepts such as resolution, pixels, compression, directories, FTP uploads and CSS confuse people with little web design experience. Usually, the nicer templates are, the more they’ll cost. Lots of Indian and Chinese companies offer packages for as little as \$50, but many have hidden limitations and ‘upgrade’

options and waste your time. Also, costs can blow out.

Businesses who need it most?

Those who want more than just window dressing. Businesses in creative or visual-based industries will lose credibility with sub-standard design, such as interior design firms, or jewellery or clothing design businesses.

Price ranges?

\$1000 to \$2000 would buy you around 10 to 20 hours. With this you could get a small website of less than 10 pages, created only in Flash or HTML with minimal interactivity or functionality. Or, you could buy a simple CMS website structure using an application such as WordPress with a customised template.

For around 50 hours, or \$5000, you could get a medium-sized website (less than 50 pages) with information architecture analysis, your choice of

“Professional quality images reassure consumers you are a professional organisation with quality products”

interface, a mid-weight CMS system, or fully scripted interactivity in Flash, plus some training in administration tools to manage your own content.

5.

Why use a product photographer?

Photographer Chris Walsh says consumers today spend more time online researching their purchases, regardless of if they intend to purchase online or in-store. Professional quality images reassure consumers you are a professional organisation with quality products. Poor photography will have the opposite effect on any size business.

Businesses who can't do without it?

Businesses with product catalogues. Quality images allow consumers to see your product quickly and in detail. Crisp, clean, well photographed images of common products will allow consumers to compare your product to a competitor's. Lighting, composition and continuity is important when comparing similar products. Very small businesses may also benefit because good photography may alleviate consumers' concerns that they're a 'backyard operator'.

Price ranges?

Photographic solutions can be tailored to any budget depending on the size of the business and product range.

Tips for DIYers

SEO

If someone in-house is familiar with code, the back-end of your site and has a sound understanding of communications, they can search-optimize your site to a basic level.

- 1 Identify keywords your customers are currently using to find your products or services.
- 2 Integrate these keywords into your page title tags and page content. This increases the 'relevancy' of your site to search engine crawlers.
- 3 Develop a site map for your site and all pages linking to it. Make it easy for search engines to find every page within two clicks.
- 4 'Submit' your site to each search engine so they know you exist.

Copywriting

- 1 Take a crash course on the rules of writing for the web. Jakob Nielsen, a widely published commentator on web usability offers some advice at useit.com/papers/webwriting.
- 2 Think before you write. Define your target audience, your value proposition and your call-to-action. Then, test your copy against these before you finish.
- 3 Be sincere. Let your enthusiasm for your products and services shine through. Be direct and conversational, rather than distant and formal.

Programming

- 1 Plan first, build later. More time planning means less time and cost for later changes.
- 2 Build in stages. Building a website over time will help you see what your customers want or don't want. Keep some budget to allow for responsiveness.
- 3 Keep it simple. Adding functionality because it's tricky, cool or new does not equate to more sales. Allow people to get what they want from you easily.

Design

- 1 Use a suitable stock template. Pick one as close as possible to the design and colour scheme you're seeking.
- 2 Get an editor you can use easily. A WYSIWYG design editor won't need much HTML or CSS knowledge.
- 3 Keep images small so pages load easily. Use Photoshop's Save For Web feature and compare file size and image quality for GIF, JPG and PNG files. The general rule of thumb is, best image quality, smallest file size.

Photography

- 1 Make sure the product is lit beautifully, highlighting the main features.
- 2 Composition and lens selection need to be appropriate for the product type.
- 3 Create a subtle mood and energy in the image without distracting from the product.