

How to Create a Request for Proposal (RFP) for Web Site Development Services

By Tom Grant



Your company has asked you to create a Web site development Request for Proposal, or “RFP”, and send it to qualified Web site development companies. Where do you start? How do you decide what to put into your RFP? Do you really need an RFP at all? Who do you send it to and how?

These are all great questions, but first, it may be important to ask...

Is an RFP the Best Way to Hire a Web Development Company?

It’s important to determine whether you really need a Web site development RFP at all, or if there’s a better way to find a company to design and build your Web site. Most companies use Requests for Proposals because they believe an RFP will help them get the most favorable deal on a Web site. This can sometimes be the case. Web development companies know the process is going to be competitive, so they will be price conscious when they respond.

An RFP can also help ensure that each Web development company you think about hiring will be “on the same page” and you’ll be comparing apples to apples when you decide whom to hire. Since you’ll spell out everything you need in your RFP, each company that responds will be responding to the same requirements. Creating an RFP takes a great deal of time, thought and effort. Before you dive in and start writing, you should determine if an RFP is the best way to hire a Web development consultant.

To determine whether you should prepare a Web development RFP, ask:

- Can I be very specific about what my needs and goals are?
- Can I clearly state what the objectives of my new site should be? Or do I need help to determine this? If so, who will help me?
- How will I determine what the new site should do to help me meet my needs? Who will help me determine this?
- Do I have the ability to communicate with all the interested parties in my company - such as sales, marketing and the people in the warehouse doing order fulfillment - to find out what they want the Web site to do?
- Do I know what other types of Internet-related services may help my business? For example, have I considered e-mail newsletters, e-commerce, online forms, calendars, chat or other tools? If so, why do I want to use these tools?
- Do I have time to gather information, write an RFP, send it to qualified developers and review their responses?

If you can’t answer these questions easily, you may not want to create an RFP to find a Web site development company.

For Most Companies, an RFP is NOT the Best Way to Hire a Web Site Developer

While you're an expert when it comes to your business, you may not be an expert when it comes to Web site development. In fact, there may not be anyone in your company who really understands what the Web can do to help your business. There's nothing wrong with this. Your company focuses on its own market, not the Web. However, if you're not a Web design expert, how will you know what to include on your new site? Without outside assistance from a Web design professional, you may end up spending lots of money for a new Web site that's no better than what you have now.

If you want help to determine what your Web site should do, an outside expert may be the answer. Web site development companies, including Blue Ray Media, have helped other companies succeed on the Web and know what works and what doesn't. Put others' experience to work for you, so you can avoid mistakes. Use a Web design consultant to help you see things from a new perspective.

Instead of creating a Request for a Proposal, consider contacting four or five Web development companies and talking to them first. Most Web development firms will consult with you for free to help determine how to put the Web to work for your business. Spend some time meeting with them face-to-face or over the phone. Then, ask them to take what they've learned and prepare a proposal that addresses what you've spoken about. Ask that it include a Web site development plan, timeline and the costs involved. Then compare proposals and choose the developer that you feel most comfortable partnering with to create your new site.

By talking to experts, you allow them to uncover needs that you may not see and to suggest solutions you may never think of. In fact, you can contact Blue Ray Media for a free Web development consultation right now.

If You Decide to Create a Request for Proposal

If you feel comfortable creating an RFP – if you can comfortably answer the questions above – then you could go ahead and create one. To do so, you'll want to:

Gather Requirements

First, determine what your new site should do. Find out by asking people in your company what they want to it to do. You may or may not know what's feasible on the Web, but find out what your co-workers want and keep track of what they tell you. Sales may be looking for more and better leads. The Events Coordinator may need an easier way to accept payments, keep track of guests and promote events. Write down what you hear from others in your company.

Then, find out what your customers want. This may be more difficult, but it is possible. If you have lots of interaction with your customers, think about what frustrates them and how you could make it easier for them to do business with you. Write down ways you

could make life easier for your customers. Talk to people in your company who have the most interaction with customers and ask them what they think customers want. Review feedback sent from your current Web site. Frequently, e-mail sent from your current site will include valuable suggestions and feedback. You may want to create a survey of customers and use it to learn why they enjoy doing business with you and what they find difficult. Look at your Web site usage statistics and find out what people are doing on your site now. Can you improve the process? How? Your new Web site should enhance what already works for your business and improve what doesn't.

Your List of Requirements

Create one big list of everything you've learned from your customers and co-workers. This is what you want the Web site to do. You may want to prioritize things on the list. What are the top three things a customer will want to do on your Web site? Those should come first. What will save your company money or help you make more money? Those should also be at the top of the list. Think big!

After you've created a list of your "must haves", you've created the most important part of your RFP. At this point, it may be tempting to try to figure out how you're going to accomplish all this. This isn't your job. It's the Web site development company's job. Don't get bogged down in technical details or restrict what a Web site development company can do. For example, if you want to use the Web to take reservations and payments for events, leave it at that. Don't tell prospective partners that they must use a certain technology or methodology unless there's a good reason to do so. They may use a different solution that's just as good or better.

Decisions, Decisions

After you have created your list of requirements, you have a decision to make. Ask yourself again, should I send a Web site design RFP, or should I choose a different route? At this point, it may make sense to contact a few qualified Web development firms and meet with them to talk about your requirements. They may help you clarify your goals or help you take your ideas to another level.

However, if you believe your list of requirements includes everything you could possibly want, go ahead and prepare your Request for Proposal.

Writing the RFP

When you write your Request for Proposal, be sure to explain what your company does, who your customers are, and what you want. Include your entire list of requirements. Tell the Web development companies everything you can about what you want. Let companies know when a response is expected and how they can deliver responses to you. Is a digital copy sent by e-mail sufficient? Or would you like three printouts delivered by mail?

It's important to include everything you think is significant in the RFP, but don't get bogged down in unimportant details. Now is not the time to say you prefer dark blue to light blue. Save that until after you've hired a developer. If you want an e-mail newsletter management solution, say so. If you know each section you want to include on your new Web site, include a site map. If you want each response to include a timeline that explains how development will proceed, ask for one. If you wonder about how a company controls quality and tests a site, ask about it. If your new Web site absolutely, positively must be up and running by a certain date, say so. If you think something may be too expensive to include, include it anyway. You may be surprised.

A Word about Budget

If you know your budget, tell prospective partners what it is. That way, they won't waste time responding if they can't give you what you need at a price you can afford. It will also be easier to compare responses if you specify your budget. It will be easier to see which ones give you the most "bang for your buck". The more open and honest you are, the better your responses will be.

Finding Qualified Firms and Distributing the RFP

How do you find a qualified Web site development company? You can ask friends and associates who they recommend. An easy way to find candidates is to search for Web development companies near you or firms that specialize in working with companies like yours. If you run a small non-profit organization, for example, you may want to find a company that designs Web sites for non-profits. When you find prospective Web development partners, look closely at their portfolios and see if they seem like a company that could provide the services you seek. Once you find a few companies that seem like they could be a good match, contact them and ask where you should send your RFP to and how you should send it. Most will give you an e-mail address where you can send your RFP. Send it as a PDF and ask recipients if they think they will respond.

Questions and Answers

It's important for you to be open and accessible once you've sent your RFP. You may have left important details out of your request for a proposal. If Web design companies are confused, they won't respond or may not respond well. The best way to handle questions is to allow recipients to e-mail questions to you during a specified period of time. Then, to be sure everyone is on the same page, answer each question received and send all questions and answers to everyone who has received an RFP. Remember, the more information the Web development firms have, the better their responses will be.

Reviewing Your Responses - What to Expect

If you've asked recipients whether they'll respond to your RFP, you should have a good idea of how many responses you'll receive. If you receive too many, it will be difficult to evaluate them all. If you don't receive enough, you may have to change your deadline, prepare a new RFP or simply choose from a pool made up of sub-standard candidates.

Some Web development companies may deviate from what you expect. That's okay! Don't miss an opportunity to create an excellent new Web site simply because a responder has prepared a proposal that's a bit different than what you thought it would be. Read each response carefully and judge each on its merits. How does it meet your needs? Are all your requirements met? Which solutions seem to be the most efficient and cost-effective? Are there future costs that aren't covered? Do you feel comfortable with this company?

Making a Decision

Before you decide which company to hire to build your new Web site, you may want to interview the finalists. Ask them any questions they didn't address in their proposals. Get a feel for how they will work with you on a daily basis. You can interview candidates in person or over the phone. Choose the company that has provided the best solutions for you and the one that has a portfolio you admire and make sure you feel comfortable with your decision. Once you've made your decision, contact every company that has sent you a response, thank them for their time, and let them know you've selected another company. Remember, it takes time, effort and thought to respond to your request. Companies that prepare a proposal for you deserve the courtesy of a response.

If you don't find a company you feel comfortable with, feel free to start again. It's better to feel confident in your decision than to hire the wrong Web consultants just because they were the only ones to respond to your request.

Contact Blue Ray Media for a free Web development consultation. We'll be happy to talk to you in person or over the phone about your needs and goals and the services we provide.