



Keep Your Clients to Yourself!

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Keep Your Clients to Yourself!

Many advertising agencies and design firms have been cautious in their involvement with their clients' websites. In some cases they have avoided the web all together. Those who do offer web services often struggle to win their existing clients' web business. When won, producing and delivering a site that makes their client happy, and the agency money, has been elusive. This is one reason Newfangled Web Factory, and other web development companies exist. It's because your clients have been coming directly to us. Many of our clients have agencies and design firms, but we never meet or speak with them because the web project is seen as being outside their expertise or capabilities. We'll take the business, but frankly we feel that you should, "keep your clients to yourself!"

This month's newsletter makes a case for why an advertising agency or design firm should not be willing to let their clients' web business go to someone else. Obviously, we believe the involvement of a web specialist is important (especially as clients' begin to require complex database features and content management for their sites). Yet without an agency's experience, insight, and knowledge of overall marketing strategy the site will always suffer.

Offering web development services has been problematic to many advertising agencies and design firms. Technical difficulties have certainly created barriers, but there have also been barriers with regard to design, strategy, and making money on these projects. In some cases these problems have been so severe that the agency has made a conscious decision to avoid web work altogether. Some agencies have not given up and continue to include web design services among their capabilities. In these cases, technical complexities have forced agencies to limit themselves to creating simple static HTML sites, Flash sites, or limited database driven sites. Agencies are scrappy; they will usually find a way to get things done. They are used to solving problems, and managing their clients' needs. Nevertheless, web projects are typically among the most problematic, and ultimately least fun projects for most agencies, and they often lose money. As a result the web is usually not an area where agencies aggressively solicit their client's business. At best it is a service they're willing to provide, but on a limited and cautious basis.

Caution is always called for when discussing a client's web needs. It's certainly better to under promise and over deliver than to promise capabilities that end up being impossible or too costly to build. Such failures can be costly not only financially, but also to the very delicate agency - client relationship itself. I have heard more than one story where a very bad web experience contributed to, if not caused, the loss of an agency's client.

On top of all these issues, many agencies have found it difficult to compete for their existing clients' web business. They often find themselves pitching against other specialized web development firms who offer design as well as the advanced development services that the agency doesn't provide. Sometimes the agency can keep the design piece, sometimes not. The irony of competing for the trouble, risk, potential danger, and limited if not negative financial gain associated with web projects is hardly lost on the agency. What's the point? And so, most agencies and design firms struggle to keep their hand in the game. They have become passive with regard to their client's web endeavors, or simply avoid it altogether.

Stop the music

This trend has got to change. The problems are real, and the current state of affairs does not have a simple answer. However, the web is a strategic marketing and communications tool. Its importance and centrality to your clients' businesses is growing every year (especially in light of [local search](#)). It cannot be isolated from everything else your client does and remain an effective tool. The knowledge, experience, insight, and perspective you have, that your client recognizes and pays for, is often completely lost when it comes to their website. An

agency that cares about their clients' marketing, branding, and positioning cannot afford to be out of the loop when it comes to their web site. Forget the simple needs of maintaining a consistent look and feel, that's the easiest and most basic influence an agency will bring to a web project. What about, integrating web content with ad campaigns, email marketing, online surveys, and analysis of site usage that might influence offline marketing efforts or generate new ideas. What about lead generation through search engine strategies, and interaction with the press? There are many reasons why the strategic planning and overall marketing guidance that an agency brings to the table is essential for maximizing the client's use of the web. More often than not, this influence is missing when a site is being planned and ideas are being generated.

Common Advertising Agency Website Design Mistakes

How these problems are approached

There have been few options available to agencies and design firms who are not large enough to have a dedicated in-house interactive department. One option, as we've already mentioned, has been to avoid the web. This is not a good idea both from a strategic and financial perspective. We have identified at least three other possible approaches available to such agencies and design firms.

The simple approach

This simple approach is to build relatively simple, static, what have come to be called "brochureware" sites, using DreamWeaver or other WYSIWYG tools. This has worked fairly well, although I have heard many stories of how sites built using these tools didn't work the way they were supposed to, or didn't display the way they were intended to in various browsers. Without a low level knowledge of HTML and experience with combinations of browsers and platforms, these tools can often get an agency or design firm into difficult situations. Another limitation to this approach is that static websites are often too simple to meet their client's needs. They are also inefficient and hard to maintain. As clients' expectations grow and their needs for their websites expand, this approach is quickly becoming inadequate.

The Flash approach

Another approach has been to build sites entirely in Flash. Flash is an excellent product and is capable of building visually dynamic and highly interactive sites. The most recent version of Flash has begun to allow for better integration with databases. Nevertheless, a site built entirely in Flash has limited content management options, and is even harder to maintain than a simple HTML web site. If the client is only concerned with their brand image, then such a site may be appropriate, however most companies have much more practical needs for their sites and Flash is not the best tool. Additionally, Flash sites are not currently indexed by search engines - something most clients are concerned about.

The partnership approach

Finally, many agencies have recognized that they will need to partner with a web development firm in order to provide the level of capabilities their clients will need. This is obviously the approach we recommend, however there are serious potential problems with this approach as well. The first problem is choosing a partner. If you are not technically minded to begin with, how do you evaluate a technical partner? Choosing incorrectly can be costly.

Finding a technical partner that is respectful and sensitive to the agency - client relationship is also tricky. Programmers tend to be very pragmatic. There is little tolerance for illogical decisions stemming from the internal politics from within your clients' organization. Agencies and design firms are used to walking this thin line and know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. Explaining these kinds of subtleties to an unsympathetic technical partner can result in double frustration.

Finally, in terms of visual sensitivity to design, most programmers live on the other side of the planet from visual designers. It can be frightening to see how a programmer interprets and implements a finely tuned layout. Most programmers are oblivious to the subtleties of type size, and font, spacing, grids, and other aspects of design. Getting the final site to look like something resembling the client-approved layouts can sometimes be an exercise in futility. Technical explanations given by a programmer for why a site does not, or cannot look like a provided layout feels like being blinded with science. How does the agency then communicate these problems back to their client?

Limitations to Flash and HTML

The problems associated with these four common approaches usually make agencies passive, at best, when it comes to the web. They offer limited web services, simple static HTML sites, or Flash only sites. This approach may have sufficed over the past few years, but it's

not going to suffice much longer.

After 9/11 the business climate allowed a passive approach to suffice

The first few years of web development were chaos. Nobody knew what they were doing. The technology was fairly simple. Sites focused more on creative ideas and spinning logos than serious content and functionality. For a season after the dot com burst in 2000, and 9/11, many companies "back-burnered" their web projects. They had more important matters to concern themselves with, and advertising as a whole - never mind web development - did not rank high on their priority list. A casual, passive, or simplistic approach to the web was more than adequate since most companies were not requiring much of their sites anyway. But things have changed.

Today's capabilities and expectations

Today's websites are far more advanced than what most companies have experienced over the past few years. Sites are more commonly database driven. There are many content managements systems available making site management easier. Password protected areas such as partner or rep extranets are common. E-commerce is much more common than it used to be. Advanced tools like polls, bulletin boards, personalization, and online surveys are also common. Companies looking to redesign or upgrade their site now have much higher expectations for what they will be able to do. These capabilities are well beyond what Flash and DreamWeaver can produce. Maintainability is a real concern for new sites. Companies are tired of having to go through technical support staff, or pay a developer or agency to make changes to their sites.

Most companies are now aware of these advances in web technology. Agencies that do not have an in-house technical team will not be able to meet these needs. Nevertheless, the agency and design firms' wisdom, experience, and insight should not be lost in the process as it has in the past.

Rising Demand for Website Design and Development

Latent need creates opportunities

Clients demand for advanced site features will create problems for the web-passive agency. However these problems are also opportunities. Companies have left their websites alone for a few years. Not only are these sites due for a redesign, they can take advantage of the benefits afforded by database driven, content management enabled sites. Because their current sites have been left in the dark for so long there is now an urgency to get them redone.

The question is, will they go to their agency or design firm to redo their sites? Given the past trends, and what I am seeing in the market place today, the answer is a sad no. Most clients simply do not see their agency as having the specialized technical expertise to meet their needs. Very often they have this perception because that's the perception the agency has given. Many agencies are resigned to this, and given past frustrations, it's often an area of business that they are not very sad to see go.

The Mission of Newfangled's Agency Partnerships

We want to reverse this trend. We know that the expertise of the agency is highly relevant to maximize the usefulness of a company's website. Our goal is to fortify advertising agencies and design firms to comfortably, confidently, and profitably offer web development services to their clients.

We have helped many agencies and design firms gain positive and profitable web experience. Our agency partners feel confident when their clients come to them for web services - they also have become aggressive in winning back this aspect of their client's business. The web is just another aspect of your client's marketing and communications efforts, one that is becoming increasingly important. Don't let this important element of your client's business go away from you. "Keep your client's to yourself!" ***But let us help!***