

Free Design Template or Pro Web Design? 12 Things to Consider

[Mark Knowles](#), May 6, 2013



Every now and then, a little perspective helps when it comes to the value of a website design. Template-driven or custom webs design both have several phases or steps they go through before completion. Most of the steps are invisible or produce a single piece of the finished product.

So, how do you decide which is best for you – a free website design or services you invest in?

If your needs are on the lower side of any of the 12 factors discussed in this article, you may be fine with a free web design or blog template.

As the factors we'll discuss increase in importance and have more influence on your [goals](#), you may want to consider custom design and professional specialists for certain areas of the design.

6 Factors That Drive Web Design Results and Costs



Ambition

What is the goal of the design? A simple goal may not mean accomplishing it will be inexpensive. The design must stay focused on the goal. The question is, how much effort is required to do that?

Number of People

How many people are involved in the design? Is this a one-person project, a group of five, 10 or 30? When there is a group of people on a design project, decisions and communication will take more time.

- **Time-saving tip:** While you may seek input from lots of people, when their help is complete, let them go back to work. If someone isn't needed in a meeting, spare them and don't invite them.

Type of Website

Is this a lead generation site, ecommerce, match-maker, educational, or a personal vent vehicle? Your design effort needs to match the type of site your building and the content it needs to support.

Size of the Stakes

How big is the win? If the win is big and the stakes are high, the design almost always costs more. If this site is mission critical to the success of the business or organization, treat it that way and take the design seriously.

Be careful what you ask for, and understand the cost implications of your request. Conversely, if the stakes are small, you don't need to get carried away.

Competition

A highly competitive site may require a group of top professionals in several disciplines to pull this off as chances are others are there too. Your [research](#) should point the way here.

Make sure you don't show up at a gun fight with a knife. In contrast, non-competitive sites can sometimes "win" when just one or two things right.

Funding Source

Is this a nonprofit, a small business, or a large corporation? How do they make money? The size and type of organization behind the effort affects their approach.

The way an organization makes money influences how they justify expense and pay for things. If you can, learn how much influence that will have up front.

6 Disciplines That Can Make or Break Your Next Web Design



There are several roles involved in site design. At a high level you can view these roles as either web design or web development. Underneath that umbrella there are six disciplines at work.

As you read the following section, imagine a lever on each of these six disciplines where the lever represents your investment in each. Tweak the levers to fit your design, almost like your mixing a recipe of ingredients together for that perfect dish.

By knowing the factors that drive your design results, you should be able match the disciplines to fit your needs (a little of this, none of that, a whole bunch of the other... etc.).

Consider these roles when deciding if a free design template or professional services are right for your goals.

Marketing

Take a look around. How is marketing being done right now? That's probably your best indicator as to how it will influence your new site design.

It's a rare group that can look at a new design project and develop a completely different way to do things overnight.

If it isn't good, it might be time to bring in outside help. If it is good, that helps a lot. You just need to understand how important marketing is to the new design effort.

Sometimes it's everything, and marketing should own this. Marketing almost always has an influence; you just need to know how much.

User Experience / Interactive Design

Web designers create interactive user experiences every day. They really can't avoid it. It may be a small part of their work, or they may focus their entire practice on it.

Personally, I love these people and they are an amazing group. They range from conversion specialists to psychology "artists".

If you have complex goals or you need visitors to [step through on online process](#), you're going to want to put in some in effort here.

Page Layout

Part of your design will be affected by the quality of your page layout. Which parts will be present on other pages and which parts won't are all influenced by page layout.

Do most of your visitors arrive via a mobile device? If so, page layout is huge. You may want to use responsive design to handle different screen sizes on phones and tablets.

Page layout can sometimes be confused with user experience and interactive design, but in practice, it's rare to see one person who does both well. There is a different type of thinking that goes into page layout and implementation that usually requires a different person to do it well.

Typography

There was a time when the Internet had almost forgotten typography: the art of arranging type to make language visible.

With the increased popularity of [Adobe TypeKit](#) and [Google Web Fonts](#), typographers are alive and well online today. It may have been said best when Mig Reyes of [37 Signals](#) demonstrates how he redesigned "Signal vs. Noise" last October.

Typography is here and it's a big deal. Take the time to review your typography, ask questions, and use it to make your design better for your visitors.

Motion Graphics

You remember the waving flags in the left and right corners of the website header, or the infamous moving "flames." Yeah, you may not want to use any motion graphics in your design because they are just too distracting; however, there are times where this type of treatment delivers exactly what the page needs to make its point.

If you might have one of those pages, get someone who understands motion graphics and subtle influence. Test your ideas, and respond to what you learn.

Now What?



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The pieces leading up to a web design may not have much sizzle or zing; they include "boring" pieces like your written goals, research findings or concept drawings. All these just aren't as much fun to share as your new design. Design is something to see, and people get excited about that.

But if you're involved in web design, development, and marketing, these 12 components are critical to knowing how to achieve your goals. After you have your web design goals down, what comes next is assembling the team:

- If you find a template that does what you need, you're on your way.
- If you're by yourself, you may prioritize your time a little differently.
- If you're part of a group, get your "mix" together, assemble your team, and get rolling.

Good luck on your next design project!