A Quick Primer on Managing Your Web-Development Tasks

Need to modify your website or app? Here are the tips you'll need to do that right.

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Early in the life of your startup, perhaps when that venture is still just a side project, you need to get serious about the design of your website or app(s). And you can expect that task to be a financial drain. Building a great interface isn't all that different from building a house: It has to be done by a great designer or coders; and those professionals' labor doesn't come cheap.

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However, there are ways you can reduce costs and the amount of time that designer or coder spends on your project. Here are the typical stages of a web-development project and how you can reduce costs at each step.

The web-design cycle

For those of you less familiar with web development, there is usually a set system for how new pages and features get designed and built. While this might vary from place to place, most larger businesses will have some variation on the following stages for building and improving web properties and apps.

Initial wireframes or mock-ups

First, there is a pre-design phase where any new ideas are mapped out, usually as a “wireframe” or “mock-up” (there is a difference). Those ideas might be for a new web page, a new feature in an app or some other element which might change the overall aesthetics or functions of your web property.

The design of a whole new site or app can be a large undertaking requiring many mock-ups and meetings, but a single page change will often be something an individual can build a wireframe for. This rough sketch of the proposed site can be shown to colleagues at meetings as well as to the company’s go-to or in-house designer. It can be discussed and reworked until everyone is happy.

The design at this point will only be rudimentary and will show where certain features are and where large images might go, and give some indication to the designer of how the overall page/feature should look.

Wireframing tools

There are many tools out there that can help you make wireframes and they are often extremely easy to use, Balsamiq is a popular one. Most tools have click-and-drag functionality and will offer common features like buttons and social media icons, etc. These tools allow a web design amateur to get his or her vision across to a designer.

The design phase

Once everyone is satisfied with the wireframe, it can be handed over with any relevant notes to your designer. That individual’s job is to create the “art” for the website. This entails a realistic image of what the new web page, app page or feature will look like. This will not be a functional

page with clickable elements or links. It’s only a clear representation of what to expect visually, which can then be handed on to a web developer (coder) who will turn this artwork into a real, functional web page.

The feedback loop

Once a design is complete, and the web developers have completed their role, there will be opportunities for the project manager and related team members to give feedback on the work and debate any changes. Once things get closer to completion, people will have differences of opinion over how things should look and function.

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It’s important at that point to schedule time for feedback and any needed redrafting; so it’s important to include opportunities for feedback in the overall scheduling of any web-development project.

Handing completed designs over to web developers without having reached a consensus will create issues further down the line. Typically, another company founder, or senior manager, will see the new page or feature for the first time in the “sandbox,” leading to redrafts and wasted developer and designer time.

What then, exactly, is a “sandbox”?

Once the web developers have rendered the designer’s work into a real-life web page, app page or feature, they won’t release it live onto the site or app. First, they’ll place it in a “sandbox.” This amounts to a clone of your web property where you can view changes, and experiment without those actions actually affecting your actual site.

A sandbox looks and acts just like your site, so, once you're happy with the changes, and the necessary approvals have been given, this new page or feature can be pushed onto the real version of your site or app.

Working with freelancers

The above system is typical of medium- to large-size companies, with in-house designers and developers. But when you're just starting out, you may need to create your own wireframes and hire a freelance developer to create designs for you.

You can also work with agencies that create the necessary designs and turn them into functioning web pages. Outsourcing this work is often necessary in a business's early days. You can use a site like Freelancer to find designers and developers. Codeable is particularly good for finding WordPress site developers.

Landing-page solutions

It's worth mentioning instant page-building applications like Instapage. Such apps are increasingly popular and can be lifesavers for large and small businesses alike.

These applications allow amateurs to create web pages without any knowledge of HTML or web design. And they're easy to use: Most have a click-and-drag functionality and use templates. You can build a new web page from scratch and, with a bit of help, get the application connected to your site, then quickly create new landing pages. The amount of time and money these apps can save you is eye-popping, and may make some businesses reconsider hiring a full-time developer.

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In sum, web-development projects can be tricky and require careful communication skills and an understanding of relevant terminology. Just remember to leave enough time for a feedback phase and the redrafting of wireframes and designs. See this resource to get up to speed with all the necessary terminology.

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