



Outsource or Hire?

An outside firm or in-house staff can build your site

In March I wrote about the types of infrastructure options available for your Internet retailing efforts. From now on, I'm going to assume that you took my suggestion and are going to custom develop your site on an established e-commerce platform (as opposed to complete custom development or a cookie-cutter solution).

So who's going to design and build your website? You've essentially got two choices: You can hire people internally to take it on, or you can use a professional design and development firm. Note the word *professional*. The guy who maintains your computers and does web development on the side is probably not the right person. Preferably you want to choose a firm that's dedicated to Internet retailing and has developed its own e-commerce platform. You don't hire carpenters to wrench on bikes, even though they both use tools, right?

The best configuration would be to have a highly competent employee with an excellent mix of technical, business and product knowledge be the point man to manage a top-notch partner during the design and development phases. This employee would then be responsible for Internet retail operations once the site is live.

When looking for a firm with which to partner, there are some points to consider. Besides the typical things such as history, financial stability, reference accounts, etc., when it comes to Web design, you need to understand the firm's areas

of expertise. While I don't have the space to describe them in detail, the employee who'll be managing the design firm needs to understand these areas and use them as criteria when choosing a firm. Does it have a strong information architecture practice? What about usability practices and testing? How strong is its graphic design team? What about marketing and branding support? If it's dedicated to develop-

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ing e-commerce sites, does it have a strong focus on merchandising and other techniques that will make the site more profitable?

Internal Solution

The next best structure would be to have an internal employee dedicated to the design, development and operation of the site. This person needs to have a strong combination of business sense (you are going to give him major bucks), technical competence (he needs to be well versed in Web-related programming languages and development environments such as your chosen e-commerce platform), graphic design and production skills (both artistic and technical), as well as in-depth knowledge of the products you sell (he's going to be responsible

for the merchandising and management of the site). As you can imagine, it's going to be very difficult to find this person; therefore, you may need to have more than one person and have them work as a team.

In closing, here are some tidbits about how to deal with whoever develops your site, especially when working with an outside firm.

Understand the point of view of the person to whom you're speaking at any given point in the program. The programmers, artists, marketing folks and salespeople with whom you'll speak all have their own language and can have vastly different interpretations of what your goals are. Make sure that there is zero ambiguity in the contract before the first line of code is written or the first design mock-up is produced. Small differences in interpretation early in the project can explode into a disastrous implementation. Misunderstandings about design direction, features, functions and other deliverables are the No. 1 reason a relationship between a development partner and your shop can go sour. You need to understand how to communicate with and direct your developer to avoid problems.

Next month I'll go into more detail about how to prepare for the engagement and how to manage it once it's begun. **D**

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