

SELF-SERVICE CUSTOMERS

Web developers and consultants say their clients want to be shown how to do it, not have it done for them.

By Jeff Barbian

In the pioneering early days of the Internet, simply investing in a domain name and home page caused some executives to scratch their heads, with cynics and visionaries often battling in the boardroom over how much to invest in the newfangled technology. Web development was wholly—and happily—left to outsourced upstarts with the techno-savvy to effectively piece together graphics, content, and connectivity.

But, the technology that drives the Internet has evolved toward usability. Simply put, it's less mysterious. Increasingly, companies are taking ownership over their own Web strategies and are adding staff accordingly. Many aspects of Web development, such as domain registration, hosting, graphic design, maintenance, programming, and software-based content management systems, are affordable and can be handled in-house with minimal staff additions.

"We've seen the progression go from, 'Web site, what's that?' to 'Web site, I have to have one,' to 'Web site, I'm going to do it myself,'" says Nathan Almquist, president and COO of Golden Valley-based Designstein, Inc., an interactive design and development firm. "Companies now regard the Web as a living, breathing, active part of their marketing campaign and service delivery."

Indeed, the increasing importance of the Web to companies may be driving the desire to bring Web functions back in-house. "Common business philosophy is

to outsource noncritical functions or excess work in a particular specialty," says Mike Sowada, CEO of Visi, an Internet service and Web-hosting provider in Minneapolis. "Since the role of the Internet in almost every business has increased significantly on a yearly basis, it is natural to see companies bring in at least the core Web development work."

For Suzanne McGann, president and owner of Voyageur I.T., a Web site design, development, and hosting company in St. Paul, the usability of Web-based software has given companies the gumption to go it alone. "The primary factor is a lack of mystique," McGann says. "Ten years ago, many of our early clients were so confused that they really did need somebody to partner with and make it easy. Now, more and more clients say to me, 'What would it take for you to come out

and just help us for an afternoon, or manage us monthly and keep us accountable to our metrics?'"

Analyze This

Business leaders want to bring Web work in-house and they want the same professional Web presence they'd get with an outside development firm. No longer the exclusive domain of the IT department, company Web efforts also bring together sales, marketing, and graphic design departments to strategize on Web development. A competent internal Web development team will cost an organization more than \$250,000 per year, according to

server and hosting requirements.

However, the cost structure may not be working in your favor. "If you follow this strategy, prepare to incur the costs of ascending a steep learning curve, and understand that the cost of doing something only once is high," Bourgeois cautions. "It's unrealistic to expect best-in-breed solutions from an internal team that is doing something for the first time. Many small companies outsource big Internet projects and have internal teams work in partnership with their Web consultants over time to optimize returns on Internet investments."

The size of the company and its



Tim Bourgeois, CEO of Pixel Bridge, Inc., a Boston-based Web site design company. This includes a designer to create a look that enforces your brand, a developer to build the interface between the design and the behind-the-scenes programs, and a marketer to collaborate on Internet strategy, as well as IT staff to maintain the

commitment to its online blueprint are chief factors in the decision to outsource or "insource," according to Rick Prendergast, vice president and managing director of Minneapolis-based Tenth Floor, a developer of Web sites, portals, and content management software. "It really is based on needs," he says. "The pattern we've seen is that the

Fortune 500 companies tend to insource and manage the Web on their own, while small to mid-size companies gravitate toward an application service provider."

Gelco, an Eden Prairie-based firm that provides international leasing and expense services, has a full in-house staff to oversee the company's Web presence, but also employs Voyageur I.T. to provide web strategy. Gelco's internal team oversees the Web site's administration, a support team does online editing and manages the e-mail programs, and a vice president of sales and marketing supervises it all.

Voyageur's work with Gelco is about bridging the gap between the talents of the in-house team with the strategy and implementation expertise of a Web site design, development, and hosting company. "These workers are not encouraged, or innately hired, to step back and evaluate Gelco's Web development process," McGann says. "Our role at Voyageur is to take these seven or eight people who are all tracking different things and make it work by keeping them accountable and helping drive their vision."

Developers: Stay Relevant

While insourcing Web development is becoming popular, external Web developers are far from an endangered species. In fact, there are opportunities for Web development firms in helping companies to insource. "We have to be nimble," McGann says. "We started offering training for Web editors, and we have many content management systems we can use that keep our project management fresh."

Tenth Floor offers a Web software suite called BASE-10 that can provide a company one thing



Rick Prendergast, Tenth Floor



Suzanne McGann, Voyageur I.T.

or everything, from content management and e-commerce to digital-asset management and e-mail marketing. "We work in some environments where our clients develop their Web site in-house and purchase our software suite and have us host it," Prendergast says. "So they take on the creative, and they leave the technology to us." Customizing software so that it's tailored to the needs of the client's business has also become more prevalent.

Plus Relocation Services, Inc., is a St. Louis Park-based company that helps relocate people who have been transferred to a new city. Designstein helps with the more sophisticated applications of Plus Relocation's Web site. "We redesigned their site,



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