



Choosing a Website Development Provider

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About this guide

It's easy to feel overwhelmed as you begin to look at development providers based on the number out there, the different ways they approach web development, not to mention the platforms. You need a developer who is capable of doing the work and also serves as an experienced advisor and partner. This allows you to move forward with complete confidence that you've found a team who will lighten your load, not add to it.

After 15 years in the industry, we've heard many distressing stories from prospective clients about their prior development experiences. Some of them are quite astonishingly bad – developers abandoning work, rescoping mid-project at twice their previous rate – we've heard it all. Web development can be complicated, but with the right partner working alongside you, it can make for an enjoyable, straightforward experience.

This guide uses a framework of five primary options for how to approach your website development:

- 1. The Freelance Developer**
- 2. The Web Development Firm**
- 3. The Full-Service Agency**
- 4. An In-House Development Team**
- 5. Off-Shore Development Teams**

Let's dive in.

Initial research: Assessing team needs

You don't need to be an expert (in fact, your knowledge of web development could be another indicator of the kind of service provider you need) but appraising your current website and defining pain points will help determine your service provider category.

This is all to reduce the chance of committing to a service provider who's a poor fit. A poor fit could mean you chose a freelance developer who can code but not have the business acumen to be a strong solution architect when what you really needed was a development agency.

A poor fit could mean that you've chosen to go with a large, full-service agency when all you really needed was ongoing support for your WordPress website and you've found yourself last in line at a large agency.

That's not to say a freelance developer or a full-service agency isn't the right fit in some cases. But when they're the wrong fit, this can lead to poor communication and increased frustration – exactly the opposite of what you were looking for when you set out to find a web service provider in the first place.

What is your website strategy?

Before you begin to analyze your options, take a moment to look at your current web strategy and ask yourself the following questions:

- 1. Where does your website fit in your business strategy?** Is your website a marketing and communication tool, a distinct line of business, or just one of several channels?
- 2. Are you looking for both solutions and implementation?** Are you needing some periodic small adjustments to a built system or tactical implementation to an already built system? Or are you also looking to re-platform your current environment and connect it into multiple API or marketing tools? (This means you also need significant development strategy and solution architecture support.)
- 3. How is your team structured and how much guidance do they need?** Every project needs a pilot. Do you have an internal, experienced team capable of meeting deadlines and finding solutions? Or do you need a service provider to fill the role of a technical project manager to guide your team?
- 4. Do you have a roadmap and if so, how extensive is it?** The web is constantly evolving. Businesses have dramatically different levels of need for support and ongoing improvements to their website. A roadmap helps to define where you are taking your website in the future and how much it will change. If you don't have a roadmap already you'll need more solution planning help from your development partner.

5. What level of customization does your business need? How unique is your business structure? Does your website roadmap include using tools that already exist or does it require new integrations to be developed for your website?

6. Is your team interested or experienced with a particular website platform? Most platforms (from simple platforms like WordPress to more complex platforms like Salesforce Commerce Cloud) have a learning curve, so choosing a firm with significant expertise in the platform your company is going to support can be beneficial. What kind of website have you worked with before? Drupal? Shopify? Adobe Commerce (Magento)?



To start on the right path in your research of different web service providers, write down your understanding of your team's internal needs today.

Part 1. The Freelance Developer

When you have a strong understanding of web development and modest budget.

Hiring a freelance developer is essentially like hiring a developer onto your staff – except you will not have control of their time.

Typical Rate Structure: \$55-\$100/hr

Typical Size: 1 Employee

Key Benefits

- Working directly with the developer and managing their work
- Inexpensive.

Drawbacks

- Limited areas of expertise. They might be strong in PHP, but lack front-end development skills, project management, or web operations knowledge that is necessary for the whole project.
- Since freelancers are typically sole proprietors, which can be a high-risk approach for your business. It is in the freelancer's best interest to always look for the next best gig (which can come out of the blue). They can

also become too busy to take on your work, retire, change careers, or any other number of things that may mean you're suddenly left without development support.

- You are responsible for holding them accountable to deadlines.
- You must be able to define, communicate (usually via tickets) and manage in the developer's terms because there is no project manager to help translate.

When are freelance developers the best choice?

Freelance developers are a popular choice for many businesses because their market rates are the least expensive of your options inside the United States. But unless you have a straightforward website, hiring a freelance developer can add to your work, instead of lightening it.

Freelance web developers are the best choice for when you:

- Know exactly what you need and can clearly communicate your needs to the developer.
- Are able to hire and directly manage a developer.
- Are looking for short-term support and not counting on them as a primary long-term function of your business.
- Are aware that dependability could be an issue.
- Have budget constraints.

What freelance developers don't provide

The biggest frustration we hear from customers who are using or have used freelancers is that while the price point is nice, managing their developer is extraordinarily time consuming. And without that management, they sometimes vanish or have difficulty juggling work.

Another common pain point we hear is the mismatched understanding between the freelancer and the project owner. This can happen on any project, however, it's less likely if a technical project manager (TPM) is involved. A solo freelance developer may struggle with communication requirements. What you intend and what the developer builds, unless explicitly communicated, may be entirely different.

In summary

Many larger companies shy away from using a freelance developer because of the lack of accountability and longevity. But for smaller organizations that have an in-house technical project manager capable of managing the work, this can be an economical choice.

Part 2. The Web Development Agency

When you need expert solution planning and technical project management.

Web development agencies focus on development services and can help with complex development needs, front-end, user experience (UX), web ops, solution architecture, technical project management, and more.

Typical Rate Structure: \$125-225/hr

Typical Size: 10-50 Employees

Key Benefits

- A clear focus and specialization in development.
- Typically experts in a handful of specific platforms and technologies.
- Lower overhead than full-service agencies.
- A full team of specialists – web operations, senior developers, technical project managers, front-end developers, solution architects, QA engineers, etc.
- Better accountability than a solo freelancer.

Drawbacks

- Not a “full-service” marketing agency. You might still need to hire a performance marketing agency, writers/content creators, and graphic designers if you have needs in those areas.

When are web development agencies the best choice?

Largely, what you’re paying for with a web development agency is the ability to work with a team of cross-discipline specialists. Which, unless you’re a very large company, is difficult to build internally.

These firms are also a great choice for assisting your internal team. Or, if you don’t have an internal team, you just need someone to interface with the technical project manager at the dev agency.

Development agencies are the best choice for when you:

- Aren’t as familiar with the intricacies of web development.
- Want to maintain control of your project but work directly with a technical project manager to help guide you.
- Need a team that can get to know your business and provide support now and in the future.
- Need a full spectrum of specialized development services.

How complex are your project's needs?

The process of working with a web development agency – the scoping, the periodic reviews throughout the project – is a good choice for businesses looking to tackle large-scale, complicated projects that often need to be roadmapped over a few months.

For complicated custom builds, or business-critical integrations, a web development agency is a great choice. But for businesses that need something simple, the extensive planning assistance that you receive from a web development agency may be unnecessary.

What is the development firm's specialty?

Different agencies specialize in specific technologies. One may work especially well with open-source platforms, such as Adobe Commerce or Drupal CMS, more than they do with Salesforce Commerce Cloud or WordPress. If you've decided on particular web technology, you'll find the most success working with a development agency that specializes in that area.

For example, here at Bear Group we specialize in building websites on Adobe Commerce, Shopify, and Drupal. We hire developers to our team who are proven experts in these technologies and their knowledge continues to grow with each project.

Part 3. The Full-Service Agency

When you need assistance beyond your website.

The full-service agency provides many services. These tend to be larger agencies and can include consulting, advertising, design, digital marketing, strategy, branding, as well as some web development.

Typical Rate Structure: \$225–650/hr

Typical Size: 100–10,000 Employees

Key Benefits

- It's a one-stop shop.
- Good project accountability, and ability to deliver on very large projects

Drawbacks

- Incredibly expensive. Even at the best agencies, the coordination and account management requirements chew up significant budgets.
- Track record for trying to up-sell you on services.
- You're often distanced from the people doing work on your account.
- These agencies are oftentimes strong in one area, but outsource the rest to other white-label firms (often offshore).

When are full-service agencies the best choice?

These are a good choice for enterprise businesses (for example, if a company like Microsoft wanted to launch a coordinated campaign around a new product release) because a full-service agency is more capable of handling the type of budget and pace that effort requires.

Full-service agencies will help you strategize your online web presence, but it's not the entire focus of their work with you.

Full-service agencies are the best choice for when you:

- Need assistance with additional promotional projects.
- Need an account manager to guide your project and skilled web developers.
- Don't need to be heavily involved in scoping your project. If measured along a gradient of price and project management, full-service agencies would exist at the farthest end of the spectrum.

Other considerations

Full-service agencies tend to be very large, and because of their size, they often create bad experiences for mid-size businesses. Communication – and overhead – can turn a small, simple project, like updating your ecommerce website, into an ordeal. Even at the best agencies, the coordination and account management requirements chew up significant budgets and move you further away from the people doing the actual work.

Usually, they are only a viable option for very large companies and clients who don't need to have much involvement in their projects. Before you decide to partner with a full-service agency, consider the entire scope of your project and be wary about proceeding forward in a direction that distracts from what was the original catalyst of your provider search – your website.

Part 4. The In-House Development Team

When your website IS the business (i.e. AirBnB).

Hiring a group of developers whose time is completely dedicated to building and maintaining your system at all times.

Typical Rate Structure: \$100,000–\$350,000/year per person

Typical Size: Need a full team of specialists (one person can't do it all)

Key Benefits

- 100% focus on your work.
- Have a strong stake in the organization's success.
- Can iterate rapidly.

Drawbacks

- Usually need 3-4 hires. This can include a project manager, senior developers, and web ops to make an initial team.
- Hiring, management time.

When is an in-house development team the best choice?

For some businesses, their development needs come to a point where the best solution is to hire their own developers. For entrepreneurial projects, where the site essentially is the business, or the means by which it's delivered, having an in-house team will ultimately be a business requirement.

An in-house development team is the best choice for when you:

- The website or application IS the primary business and it likely doesn't make sense to outsource your core business.
- Need a team that will focus on your project and only your project.
- Have the management capacity (like a good CTO) who can build an engineering team.

When you need your own team

If your business is the website or application, outsourcing that work will quickly become laborious, time-consuming, and tedious. You want your own team, that'll both grow with your business and know your system as thoroughly. This is an issue of security, having a team that you can depend on at all times, and speed. Technology evolves quickly, and taking the time to consistently scope and execute continuing updates to your website when it's your main source of revenue may stunt your growth.

We do not see very many businesses (even multi-billion dollar large public companies) who are building internal development teams – unless that function is core to the business.

The best internal teams start by hiring a senior leader who will build up and manage their team of specialists. Many are structured like internal development service departments – micro agencies serving the needs of the organization from the inside. When it's time to build up your internal development team, the decision tends to be obvious.

Part 5. Off-Shore Development Teams

When you need inexpensive work and have a strong understanding of website development.

Off-shore developers are an inexpensive option for businesses that know exactly what they need and can manage their own development projects.

Typical Rate Structure: \$50-\$100/hr

Typical Size: Large

Key Benefits

- Perceived cost savings.

Drawbacks

- Requires a strong technical project manager on your team to manage the off-shore resources.
- Formalization of communication.
- Time zone differences.
- Lack of commitment to your work or your business.

When is an off-shore development team the best choice?

Some businesses choose to work with off-shore developers because they can offer cheaper rates of services. For businesses that are familiar with web development and are capable of piloting their own project and know exactly what to communicate to a developer, many choose off-shore developers because of their low rates.

An off-shore development team is the best choice for when you:

- Know the technical specifics of what to ask for.
- Have a project manager on hand who can guide the project.
- Don't need continuous support from a specific developer who's familiar with their system.

Why we don't recommend off-shore development

While off-shore developers are just as capable of writing code as local developers (expertise is expertise) we've seen, and personally experienced, communication and commitment issues with off-shore developers.

Off-shore firms are often quite large, made up of hundreds of developers, which sounds appealing. But most projects are built by very small teams comprised of one lead developer, a technical project manager, and three to four supporting roles. There really is no need for hundreds of developers on a web project.

When your web development is business-oriented, you want your developer to have a contextualized understanding of your business's needs. Communicating that to an off-shore developer can be difficult and time consuming, posing similar issues to freelance development.

Decision: Finding the right provider

Once you've identified which category fits your business, you'll want to research a few providers. Doing a Google search may be a logical first step, however, it's not always easy to identify a company size from a website. We've seen some amazing websites built by solo freelancers, and horrible websites built by full-service agencies. It's not always obvious what category they're in.

If you're starting your search from scratch, keep these tips in mind:

- **Look to platform experts:** If you already have a website platform in mind for your business, look for providers that have significant expertise in it and are platform partners. Most platforms have a directory of partner providers on their website.
- **Search within your region:** Working with local providers can help with overall team alignment and provides more opportunity to periodically meet in person.
- **Question the authenticity of review-based directory listings:** Be wary of directories like G2 and Capterra in your search. These directories tout having authentic reviews but often follow a "pay to play" model.
- **If you're considering going with a freelancer, check stack overflow:** We recommend checking the quality of freelancer's work on websites like Stack Overflow and Github, to ensure that their work has integrity.

Identifying the best provider for you

There may be a specific style that works more for you – and your management style – than it does for others. Beyond judging the technical capabilities of your web development service provider, determining if your management styles are compatible is more of a subjective judgment.

Here are a few ways to narrow down your search and select the ideal provider:

- **Ask for referrals** from trusted sources in your network. If they come recommended to you by someone in your network, you'll have a very real frame of reference on which to base their work.
- **Evaluate their portfolio of prior projects** to give you an idea of whether or not they're capable of handling your project. Look for information on how they scoped out their project with their client, as well as terms specific to the work you need, like what kind of platforms they've worked within the past, how they approach technology integrations, and how they approach web design elements.
- **Meet the team you'll be working with** to gain confidence in your decision. We recommend speaking with the account/project manager you'll be interfacing with the most to make sure that you can communicate well.

If you're trying to figure out where to start your research, and what category of development service provider is the right fit for your organization, please feel free to contact us for a free consultation with one of our technical project managers.

Best of luck in your search!

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	Freelance	Development Agency	Full-Service Agency	In-House Development	Off-Shore
Typical Rate	\$55-\$100/hr	\$125-\$225/hr	\$225-\$650/hr	\$100K-\$350K/yr	\$50-\$100/hr
Typical Size	1 employee	10-50 employees	100-1,000 employees	Full team	Big
Key Benefits	Inexpensive. Works directly with developer.	Project scoping. Specialization. Lower overhead. Team of specialists. Project accountability.	One-stop shop. Accountability. Ability to deliver very large work.	Dedicated to your project. Invested in your success. Rapid iteration.	Inexpensive.
Drawbacks	Higher level of communication needed.	Not a one-stop shop.	Very expensive. Risk of up-selling. Indirection communication with developers.	Hiring. Management time.	Requires a strong technical PM. Time zone differences. Lack of commitment.

About Bear Group

Bear Group is a web development firm specializing in custom websites, ecommerce solutions, and integrations that fit your brand, timeline, and budget. With over 15 years of experience and 200+ clients, we are proud to lead the way on the digital frontier for our clients.

Web projects are large undertakings that go much smoother when you work with an expert partner to guide you through the process. At Bear Group, we've seen web projects of every size and have led our clients through scoping, development, launch, and post-launch support.

Ready to love your website? [Request a free intro call with our team.](#)

Learn more: beargroup.com.