Web templates: A Fortune 500 look, on the cheap

By Joe Dysart

While the first "prefab" Web sites had all the design panache of a Ford Edsel, today's offerings can literally give a skating rink business the feel of a Fortune 500 firm -- for about a hundred dollars. Essentially, the days when Web designers wouldn't return your calls for less than $10,000 are long over. With Web design, it's a buyers' market now.

Other than an extremely slick feel and often arresting beauty, probably the greatest convenience of prefab Web sites, or Web templates, is that the sites can be downloaded, customized and published in as little as 24 hours by an experienced Web designer. Even that high school kid you know who's good with computers can customize a template with just basic Web design skills.

Entry level Web template sites often go for $50 or less, and generally feature a home page, links page, about page, frequently asked questions page and email contact page, already pre-configured. With more advanced packages, running $90-$150, you'll get access to even more page templates, including credit card processing, live chat room support, and the like.

Either way, generally all you – or your Web design friend -- will need to customize these sites is a Web authoring program like Microsoft Expression Studio (http://www.microsoft.com/expression/default.aspx?ag=false) or Adobe Dreamweaver (http://www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver/).

Moreover, if you'd rather not mess with the customization details, you'll have no problem finding a professional Web designer to handle those finishing touches on your Web template for a fraction of what it would cost to build a site from scratch.

Of course, as with any other purchase, you'll want to venture out into the Web template market with your eyes wide open. Here's what to look for in a prefab Web site, and what to avoid:

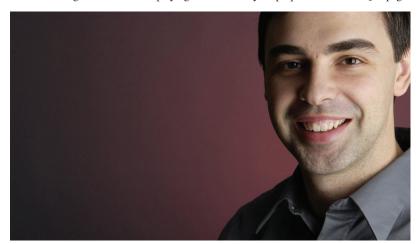**Look for compatibility with your Web software**

While most Web templates are designed to work with common Web authoring tools made by Microsoft and Adobe, a few do not. Be sure to check before you buy. If an outside designer will be customizing the template, have the designer verify that he/she has the software to work with the template.

Use multimedia and Flash templates sparingly

While graphically dazzling, Flash effects and similar animations tend to slow page downloads. In addition, some special effects on your home page sometimes make it tougher for the search engines to find and list your site, which could result in a low search engine ranking for your consulting business. If you must use such effects, you may want to include the fancy stuff behind the home page.

"Take off any 'gimmicks,'" says Leon Millard, director, WebCreationUK (http://www.webcreationuk.com), a Web design firm, who agrees that often, less is more. "Having a Flash loading screen or music playing in

Google's CEO Larry Page is offering a service that helps speed up Web sites.

the background may seem fun and 'cool' but the reality is that it will simply annoy your browser which could cost you a sale."

Consider Google's 'Page Speed Service'

Your Web site will download more quickly with this service (http://code.google.com/speed/pss/, which relies on Google's own computers to download your Web pages to your customers. "Your users will continue to access your site just as they did before -- only with faster load times," says Ram Ramani, an engineering manager at Google. "In our testing we have seen speed improvements of 25% - 60%."

"Download speeds matter," says Jay Correia, CEO, DreamCo Design, a Web design firm. "How fast the Web site loads are also a factor in search engine optimization. Loading slow could literally mean you are on page two or three as compared to page one when someone seeks your products or services out. Though it isn't one of the most significant items in terms of SEO, it is still critical."

Nail down customization costs and timeline ahead of time

Most template companies will do a little customization for you, or at least point you to a partner who will help. Basic changes can be done for as little as a few hundred dollars; more sophisticated alterations can cost thousands. Either way, nail down the costs, and the project timeline, before you buy, if at all possible.

Consider a local Web designer for customization

The advantage of a local Web designer is that you'll be able to meet face-to-face. Many Web designers like working with template customization because the major hurdles of a project – overall concept and broad-stroke execution – have already been completed before you knock on their door.

Don't buy more site than you need

While some skating rink businesses may have a real need for a 30-plus page Web site template, many others can get

away with eight pages or less. Remember: once you purchase a template, you generally have the right to alter any page for your use. A "client list" page, for example, can be easily re-purposed as a "FAQs" page, simply by changing a few words on the template.

Consider customizing templates made for photographers

Many template companies offer templates designed for showcasing photographs. If you plan to showcase many images on your site, these templates could be a perfect fit for you.

Test the tech support before you buy

Too often, bargain basement Web template vendors take your money and run when it comes to tech support. Test their tech support before you buy, if possible. Call their 800 number or email support and see how long it takes for them to reply. If the company offers tech support, talk with a telerep for a few minutes to gauge the kind of care you'll be receiving.

Explore the full range of vendors

Type "Web site templates" into any major search engine, and you'll be greeted with a plethora of companies eagerly vying for your business. You'll also find plenty of "free template" offerings -- although you probably won't find much support from those free providers if you need help or need some minor customization. As an alternative, here's a sampling of pay-for-site companies that do offer technical support:

*AllWebCoDesign.com (http://www.allwebcodesign.com): This company offers beautiful sites at bargain basement prices. Instead of cookie-cutter solutions, you'll find original, innovative designs that are easy to customize. All the company's templates come with step-by-step instructions. Plus, you'll be able to do "global editing" -- or "change one page, change all pages" editing -- of Web site page colors, font styles, corporate logos, and other recurring site features.

AllWebCoDesign.com features hundreds of templates ranging $20 - $150, with pages pre-configured for slideshows, FAQs, news, links and contact via email. The

company also offers some sites with MP3 (sound) capability. A huge plus: all of the company's pages – even those feature Flash effects – can be edited with MS Notepad, a simple word-processing program that is easy to use and standard issue to every MS Windows user. (Notepad can be found in the "Accessories" category on Microsoft Windows' "Programs" list.)

*TemplateMonster.com (http://www.templatemonster.com): This is another top-flight Web template company offering hundreds of professional-looking templates, also at $20 - $150. In addition to typical page features, TemplateMonster.com also offers pre-fabricated corporate logo designs you can adopt and use as your own. Plus, there is a small library of free clip art you can download to help further customize the look of your site.

TemplateMonster.com also offers a "unique" purchase option, which enables you to "sunset" the use of any Web template or logo you choose from further use. Under this agreement, companies already using the template or logo can continue using it. But TemplateMonster.com agrees not to sell the design to additional customers.

*Template.Tuning.com (http://www.templatetuning.com): This is the company for skating rink businesses that have no problem buying a template, but would rather have someone else handle minor customizations. TemplateTuning.com offers more than 5,000 basic templates, which it will customize at an entry level fee of about a few hundred dollars. Roller skating centers opting for the service get to interface with a TemplateTuning.com Web designer by phone, chat or email, explain the customization they want, and then wait an average of 48 hours for the changes to be made. Basic changes include the addition of text, images, color and font changes, custom animation effects and logo changes.

Pick a Web host you can live with

By the time you're ready to "go live" with your Web site, there will be a great temptation to simply pick the first Web hosting company you can find and get your Web name up in lights. Resist. By making a few, careful considerations, you'll be able to select a reliable service (which you'll upload your Web site to for display on the Web) that makes the most sense for you. You may also get a bargain. Basic Web site hosting starts at less than $100/year.

Web Host Magazine (http://www.webhostmagazine.com) and Web Host Directory.com (http://www.webhostdir.com) offer insightful, in-depth, critical analysis of the Internet's Web host providers. After much trial and angst over the years, I've settled on Hostmonster (http://www.hostmonster.com) to host my sites. They're very reasonably priced, and the tech support is outstanding and swift.

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