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I Want a Web Site and I Want It Blue — How Much Will That Cost?

WHAT'S IN THIS CHAPTER?

➤ Understanding business strategy, web site strategy, and user strategy, and how they compliment and contrast with each other

➤ Understanding a target audience and how it helps shape the message of your web site

➤ Assembling a team to build the web site

If you're like me, you've been asked something like the question in the chapter's title more than once when talking to a potential client. How do you answer it?

➤ Do you offer them a package of services for a fixed price?

➤ Do you ask them whether they want a calendar, blog, or some other piece of functionality with that?

➤ Do you ask them whether they want to update the web site themselves, or do they want you to do the maintenance?

All these questions are reasonable to ask at a certain point in the conversation with your potential client. But a far better place to start is at the beginning. For example, I might reply by saying, "Sure, we can make it blue. But before we start talking about how the site will look, please tell me a little about your business. What do you do for a living?"

Why would I want to do that? If the client is telling me to set up a few pages and a calendar, what could be simpler? Charge the client and move on to the next one!

Many freelancers run their businesses just like this, and they do reasonably well in a reasonable economy. But as the economy gets worse, clients hold on to their pocketbooks more tightly. They

want to know they are getting the biggest bang for their buck, and they want to know that what you build is really going to work for them. And, of course, as the economy sours, moving on to the next client becomes progressively harder, because that next one is much harder to come by.

You bring more value to the table than just knowing which buttons to push to build a web site. You know all about technology trends and the latest cutting-edge Joomla extensions. You know about usability principles and how to make a clean interface. Maybe you had a client similar to this one before, and you know what worked for him. Perhaps it will work for this client, too.

You must market those strategic thinking skills and demonstrate how your good ideas add value to the service you deliver. Anyone can click buttons, but not everyone knows how to build a strategically sound web site. This chapter starts you on your way to doing that with your next client.

DEVISING STRATEGIES

When I was just getting started as a freelancer, I received a call from a housing developer who was selling his home in southern Vermont for $1.875 million. He needed to get some people in the door to look at the house and thought a web site might be a good way to do it. He wanted to know whether I had any suggestions.

We started by discussing his *business strategy* and *target audience*. Armed with that information, together we developed a *web site strategy* based on what he wanted to do and a *user strategy* based on what his site visitors would want to get out of the web site. Here's what we came up with during the discussion:

➤ **Business strategy.** His business strategy was to sell his home, hopefully close to the asking price.

➤ **Target audience.** His target audience had to be someone with enough money to afford a $1.875 million home. The average income for a southern Vermont family is about $44,000/yr, and most houses sell somewhere between $100,000 and $250,000, so the local people were clearly not the target. It was more likely that he was targeting someone from the big cities, like Boston, New York, or Montreal, which are in driving distance of the house. Big cities offer the possibility of jobs paying salaries that would support owning a home like this client's. Another target possibility was a corporate owner for the home, offering a retreat for senior executives.

➤ **Web site strategy.** Someone buying a house sight unseen, let alone a house with that price tag, is unlikely. Therefore, the web site strategy was to provide enough compelling information to get someone from a big city to come down for the weekend to walk through the house and hope-fully buy it. The photos should be seasonal, to emphasize Vermont's four distinct seasons and the activities one can enjoy in each season. Therefore, the photos needed changed three to four times per year to show how the house looked at that particular season. The copy could also be adapted as the seasons changed, emphasizing skiing in the winter and hiking in the summer.

➤ **User strategy.** The visitors to this web site had their own agenda. The user strategy was to see lots and lots of beautiful pictures, get directions, read up on the house specifications, and see what there was to do in the area to make a weekend trip to see the house.

Based on this information, we built a web site of about 20 pages. We had a professional photographer take dozens of photos of the house and the grounds and even had a helicopter fly over the house with the photographer to take impressive seasonal photos of the house and the surrounding gardens. We had a content writer write all kinds of flowery content, generating warm, positive feelings about the beauty, serenity, and seclusion of the house, yet how convenient it was to grocery stores and shopping. We also included a page of information about regional events and attractions that might be of interest to someone visiting the area for the weekend. And most importantly, we included contact information to get in touch with the owner, via phone or e-mail.

We also had to think about a marketing plan for the web site, including how to get the site to show up in search engines, but we also did some cross-promotional advertising in the *New York Times* homes listing and other home listings in Boston and New York. (Remember that when you market a web site, you don't have to do all marketing on the Internet. Cross-promotional advertising means advertising in a different media — in this case, the newspaper.)

Eventually, the house did sell, close to his asking price. The site was successful, and we archived it.

Now, had this client simply said he wanted to sell his house and asked how much it would cost for a web site, I might have come up with some of this information without our having had the strategic discussion. Obviously, the site should contain photos of the house, along with some additional information about how many bedrooms, baths, and so on. However, would I have come up with the idea of including information about the local events and what to do in the area? Would I have thought to change the photos seasonally? It's likely I would not have caught all the nuances of the strategy without our discussion, and perhaps the house would have taken much longer to sell.

Understanding Your Client's Business Strategy

A *business strategy* is some type of plan that applies to an organization to help it achieve its goals. Although the term is "*business* strategy," it is not necessarily limited to businesses. A non-profit can have a business strategy, as can an educational institution.

In general, this plan covers the mission of the organization, its vision, how it conducts business, its plan for the future, the markets in which it competes, and the people it serves.

If I'm running a web development firm, I might tell you that my mission is to build web sites, that I sell my services building those web sites to make money, that I'm competing with the guy down the street, and that I serve the people in my community.

However, I could make that mission statement a bit more targeted. Do I build web sites for just anyone? What kinds of web sites do I build? Somehow, I need to differentiate the work that I do from the web site developer down the street. For example, I might use Joomla to build my sites, whereas he builds static web sites. I specialize in web sites for environmentally oriented non-profits, whereas he designs sites for small local businesses. My web sites start at 100 pages and go up from there, whereas he builds smaller sites, normally 10–20 pages.

The more targeted a business strategy becomes, the more targeted you can make your marketing plan, and the more of the target audience you can reach. A focused, well-crafted business strategy converts more people to customers, and you're more likely to make them happy with what you offer.

For example, if my web development business focuses on environmentally oriented non-profits, it's less likely the local church will call me about a web site.

Constructing a business strategy is hard work, takes a lot of thought, and, frankly, many people are too busy running their businesses to consider their strategy. If they did take the time to think about that strategy, however, they would find their business runs more smoothly and efficiently. The owners spend less time running the business, rather than the business running the owners.

To determine a business strategy, usually all you have to do is ask your clients what they do for a living, and listen very carefully to what they have to say. They should tell you exactly how they fulfill their mission goals — how they make money, how they recruit membership, how they solicit donations, and so on. They should talk about a typical customer or client, what this client needs from the business, and how the business fills that need.

For an established business, this conversation is fairly straightforward. In general, the business owner has little trouble answering any questions you ask.

For a new business or organization, however, you might ask some questions that are answered with, "Good question!" If your clients are unclear about their business strategy, encourage them to develop a strategy first, before putting up the web site. Plenty of local resources specialize in helping with this, such as SCORE, your local Small Business Administration office, and local and regional programs targeted at fostering small businesses.

> *SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives) has more than 364 branches throughout the United States. SCORE volunteers help guide you through the process of setting up your business, as well as answering questions for existing businesses. It's staffed by volunteers, so there is no fee to use their services. You can learn more by visiting* `www.score.org`*.*

Some business owners will tell you they need a web site because everyone says they do, but they're not sure why they need it or what they'll get from it. This is not really business strategy. What you want is something like the following:

- ➤ I want to offer a way for people to discover my store hours and location, plus an easy way to contact me by phone or e-mail. I want to reduce the number of phone calls my staff gets that deal with these very questions.

- ➤ I want to offer my products online, and offer a way for customers to find out what stores are near them that sell the product.

- ➤ I want to establish my expertise in a certain area, which will lead to consulting requests.

- ➤ I want to recruit new dealers for my products.

- ➤ I want people to subscribe to my publication and look up back issues.

Occasionally, while you try to find out the business strategy, the client will want to start talking about technologies. I've heard everything from the importance of a blog on a web site to how exactly

certain database queries would be made. As soon as you go down the path of discussing technologies, you're discussing how exactly the site will function, not what problems the site will solve. Keep the conversation focused on strategy — what problems are you trying to solve? — and the technological solutions to those problems will be much easier to define.

Some Clients Should Not Have a Web Site

Consider how many sites you have visited that felt information-free and perhaps even half-finished. What was your impression of that organization? (Probably not positive, I'm guessing.)

This type of impression usually is a sign of an ambiguous business owner who got a site because someone (their spouse, a friend, a relative) urged her to get a site for the business. The owner wasn't necessarily convinced, and wasn't sure what to do with it, but now she has a web site so everyone will leave her alone.

Perhaps it's the type of small business where everything is done with paper and a non-computerized cash register. Although this seems impossible these days, these businesses are still around — and many are thriving.

A neglected-feeling web site might also be the sign of an overstretched owner who simply doesn't have time to think about updating the site.

If you are building a web site, and the owner doesn't seem particularly engaged in the process, make sure she understands the following about the commitment she is making by having a site:

➤ **The owner must commit to checking and answering e-mail every business day.** After all, web sites generate e-mails that must be answered. Visitors find not being able to contact the web site owner, preferably by e-mail, frustrating. (Famously, Southwest Airlines had no e-mail contact for years, but it had a web site. It finally offered e-mail contact in 2009 after customer insistence, but it states it has a five-business-day response window to e-mails.)

➤ **The site needs to be updated periodically.** How often? Of course, "It depends." Some sites can stand to be updated quarterly, whereas others should be updated every day. For example, an informational web site about your freelance Joomla business might be okay if it's updated quarterly. But if you're CNN, you should update your web site every day (perhaps even several times an hour).

➤ **The site is not a one-time investment.** A web site must be updated, redesigned, expanded, reworked, pared back, and have new functionality added. Nothing is worse than finding web sites that look like they were built around 1995 and have not been updated since. Rolling rainbow bars, starry backgrounds, spiders in webs, prominent hit counters, and little men in hardhats banging the ground with a hammer are generally considered "fashion no's" and hallmarks of a site that needs updating. Desperately.

➤ **Likewise, don't necessarily expect the site to "pay for itself."** This theme was common in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Site owners expected the web site to directly bring in revenue, or they would kill it. The web site is a piece of the overall marketing for the organization. Many people will read a web site and then call for more information, rather than purchasing a product on the site.

If your client doesn't seem to understand the preceding points, you might want to steer her away from a web site. Unfortunately, when sites are not updated regularly, they do go horribly out of date. Then the client is upset that the site isn't performing, and she was right all along, the web can't do a thing for her! Updating a site regularly, of course, is no guarantee of success — but not updating it regularly eventually leads to a business's goals not being met.

Aligning the Business Strategy with the Web Strategy

After you're clear on what a client wants to do with a site (the business strategy), it's time to think about how technology can help implement that strategy, meet goals, and solve any problems.

Some problems are easy. If the client wants to cut down on phone calls about the business location and operating hours, perhaps putting that information in the footer of the web page and again under "About Us" can solve the problem. (Of course, you don't know whether this method solves the problem until you test to see whether your users can find the location and hours easily.)

Unfortunately, user testing is beyond the scope of this book, but I highly recommend Steve Krug's book, Don't Make Me Think, *which provides a great overview of the topic.*

Other problems are harder. For example, how does a business communicate its depth of experience in a certain area?

Suppose that you identify the problem you're trying to solve as showing that you are a Joomla expert on your web site for your freelance business. What are some possible solutions to that problem? Here are a few:

- ➤ **You put up a bunch of text explaining your depth of knowledge, degrees you have, and awards you've won.**

    - ➤ *Advantage:* Cheap! Easy!

    - ➤ *Disadvantage:* Who really reads that stuff? You're telling someone you are an expert, but you haven't demonstrated anything. Should you put up the text anyway? Sure, it can't hurt, but it shouldn't be the only solution to this problem.

    - ➤ *Improvement*: Don't just say it yourself. Get testimonials from your clients and colleagues so you have third-party confirmation of how fabulous you are.

- ➤ **You list a bunch of sites that you've built in Joomla.**

    - ➤ *Advantage:* Easy! Just a list of links, right? And Joomla has a Web Link Manager. Piece of cake!

    - ➤ *Disadvantage:* A list of links shows off the sites, but it doesn't explain why the site is so great, what problems you solved for your client, or what the site is doing for your client now (increased traffic to the store by 10%, decreased phone calls for store hours by 5%, and so on). The Web Link Manager is beside the point, if it's not really solving your problem.

➤ *Improvement:* A list of links to the sites you've built, with some explanatory text about what problems the client wanted to solve and how you solved them. You want a screenshot of the site before and after you redesigned it as well so that visitors can see how much you improved the site. If you can incorporate the goals the site achieved, such as increased store traffic, even better.

➤ **You start a series of articles that talk about what problems you solve with Joomla, how you solve them, and why.**

➤ *Advantage:* It's in your own words, and it's your story. It's an authentic, believable voice.

➤ *Disadvantage:* You need to post articles regularly about what you do. Do you have time to do that? Who does it? How are the articles reviewed? Are they reviewed?

➤ *Improvement*: Again, including third-party verification of what you did is helpful. If you can get a statement from your client about how well your solution worked, it's a great thing to include in the articles.

Notice that I have not discussed implementation anywhere along the way in this list of possible solutions. Technologies might still spring to mind. It sure sounds like I'm describing a blog in the third bullet. The second bullet sounds like a series of case studies that talk about a client's problem and your solution, with a link to the final web site. The first bullet is a pretty standard About Us page.

Why do those technologies and solutions spring to mind so quickly and easily? Because I've essentially described them by describing the solution to the problem. Rather than stretching the technology to perform some ill-defined function on the site, technology is now serving the strategy in a clearly well-thought-out way.

I've also identified some potential problems and pitfalls with each of these solutions. If regular updates are problematic, I might want to think more about the first two solutions. If I'm looking for a solution that's a step beyond the usual, I will look at the third solution and less at the first. Now that I've thought through the upsides and downsides of each strategy, I can make a more informed and intelligent decision about which option is the right one for my web site.

If you're putting up any piece of functionality on your web site, it should go through the same vetting process. Be sure you can explain what problem it solves for the client.

Sometimes that problem seems very simplistic and/or trivial. For example, clients love slideshows, where there's a series of really big photos that fade in and out. They're particularly prominent on the home page of a web site. What function is this slideshow performing? It's "eye candy" for sure, particularly if the photos are good quality (or it's an eyesore if the photos are not). You might just be tempted to not ask too many questions about it, because the client asked for "interactivity" or "sizzle" for the home page.

Could a slideshow do more than that? Absolutely! It could set a mood for the site. A series of happy, smiling people doing various jobs conjures a different mood than a series of New England scenery photos. Slideshows can also be tied to branding. Think about the imagery that's used in commercials for companies. They're highly professional, job-focused people (airline commercials), or they're fun-loving, outdoorsy people (outdoor gear commercials), or they're people who are listening intently to

your problems and trying to help you (bank commercials). Think about your client's slideshow the same way. Could you improve the message it sends and think about it serving as more than just "sizzle" for the site?

Before adding any functionality to the site, be sure to ask yourself why you're adding the functionality and what problem it's solving. If you're not sure, or you're putting it up because the client asked for it, ask your client a few discerning questions. Your client will love you if you suggest a different, "better" solution to the real problem he's trying to solve. You will have elevated yourself from a "button clicker" to a partner in providing solutions to the business.

Understanding Your Client's Target Audience

Web sites should be built with a certain type of visitor in mind. That person is part of the target audience. These are the people you want to buy or use your client's product or service.

Ask your client who the target audience is for the web site. Sometimes a client can provide a very specific answer for you. For example, the site is for men, ages 18–24, who have shoe sizes over size 12, who live in an urban environment.

Unfortunately, more often than not, your client may not have a clear answer about his customers. Sometimes the only guidance you get is "anyone who wants to buy our product." That's really not the answer, though.

Try to determine the following about your client's target audience:

➤ **Demographics.** Who are the site visitors? How old are they? How much money do they make? What are their hobbies, their jobs, marital status, or things they have in common?

➤ **Technographics.** Do they access the web site through a PC, a mobile phone, or some other device? Do they use Internet Explorer or Firefox? Which version(s)? Are they on dial-up or broadband Internet connections? Are they using newer or older computers?

➤ **Environmental factors.** Are they surfing at 11 p.m. in their bunny slippers? Or is it 9 a.m. and they're at work with a cup of coffee? Are they there for business or are they there to explore leisurely? Do they have nearby distractions demanding their attention?

➤ **Geographics.** Are they from only the United States or from other countries? Does the client need to serve multiple languages? Are visitors from rural locations or from urban areas? The vast majority of small businesses in this country serve a small geographic area. A car repair shop doesn't worry about serving customers 1,000 miles away, let alone 100 miles away.

➤ **User goals.** After you understand who the client's users are, you'll want to understand what they want to do on the web site. Are they there to be entertained? Find a product? Get specifications? Buy something? Research something? You'll also want to think about what the site owner's goals are for these users, as well.

After you understand these factors about the target market, you can create personas describing key users for your web site. *Personas*, originally described by Alan Cooper in his book, *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum*, are fictitious people with certain characteristics and goals that reflect the type of people a business wants to attract to its web site. These fictitious people are composites of certain classes of users you've identified as key audiences for the web site.

Suppose you're designing a site for a men's big and tall store. Historically, this store has served men who are 40 to 60 years old and are either taller or larger than normal. The clothing styles have been a bit on the older, more conservative side. You now want to communicate that the store is carrying clothes for a younger generation as well. The web site should provide a clear message that younger people are welcome and the clothes are appealing. However, you do not want to go so far as to alienate the older audience, for whom you'll still be carrying traditional clothing.

You might develop a handful of personas to help with this process.

➤ Mike, a 23-year-old recent college graduate, who is 6 feet 5 inches tall and wears a size 14 shoe. He needs some new clothes for his new job working at a bank. (This is a very typical persona for the site.)

➤ Sam, a 46-year-old doctor, who is 6 feet 4 inches tall and wears a size 15 shoe. He has shopped at this store for years and buys most of his clothes there. (In this case, Sam represents a target audience you do not want to alienate as you try to expand your market to the younger crowd.)

➤ John, 20, is 6 feet 7 inches tall and works as an assistant manager at a restaurant. He wants casual clothes to wear after work. (This might represent part of that new market you want to attract.)

➤ Sally, 23, is looking for clothes to give her boyfriend, Jack, 24. (Sally represents an atypical customer, but an important one, because women frequently spend money on clothes for the men in their lives.)

You might then develop the following story about each of these personas and what they want to accomplish on the web site:

Mike finishes up work at the bank at 5 p.m. He looks down at his old, scuffed loafers that he has been wearing since high school. He really needs some new shoes for this new job, but finding a size 14 anywhere in the usual stores was so hard. Mike opens Google and types, "men's shoes size 14 Nashua, NH" into the search box. It pulls up one result, a big-and-tall store a few miles away. Mike wonders whether this store is like all the other big-and-tall stores, featuring clothes for his dad. He works at a bank, but he really doesn't want to dress like he was 50.

How would you finish this story? The preceding describes exactly the kind of person you would like to visit your store. To get him in the store, you must make sure your store can be found in Google, and you must communicate that it's "not just your father's clothes" at this particular store.

How can we make this web site appeal to Mike, and therefore, convince him to drive over to the store after work for a look around?

➤ Show some pictures of some more modern-looking shoes that could be worn to work and would appeal to younger men. You might have younger models showing the clothes to enforce the message.

➤ Make it clear that large-size shoes are available.

➤ Feature store hours, address, and directions (note that Mike is going there after work one night).

Mike's goal is to make sure there's a shot that the shoes he needs are available at this store. If he sees clues on the site that the store can help him, he's likely to take a look.

On the flip side, think about how this imagery and message would impact Sam, the 46-year-old long-time customer of your store. If the shoe styles offered aren't classic, will this be a turnoff for Sam? Is Sam really an important audience for the web site, though? Sam has been going to this store for years already, and he probably has a good feel for what's offered. Sam probably won't make buying decisions based on what's on the web site, but maybe you need to keep him in mind for organizing the store.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Rarely do clients think about how they will measure whether a web site is successful. Many think that if the web site looks pretty (to them), and it's completed and launched, the visitors will just come. And if they don't come, the problem is search engine optimization! There's nothing flawed with the overall premise of the web site, or how it was built, or whether the technology is really addressing problems that need to be solved. And if visitors do come, well, the site's successful, isn't it?

Maybe. It depends, doesn't it?

Success can be measured in many different ways. Some ways are very tangible ("we reduced tech support phone calls by 10%," "online purchases increased by $500 per week"), whereas others are much less tangible ("I don't feel embarrassed to send people to my web site anymore"). Some goals might be based on the web site itself (increasing visitors' time spent on the site, the number of contact forms completed and sent in, or the number of newsletter subscriptions).

Measuring the success of a web site merits a whole book by itself, and I have only a few paragraphs. Suffice it to say that the success of the site should be defined upfront, as you define what problems the web site will solve:

- ➤ The problem I'm trying to solve is…
- ➤ I intend to solve it by…
- ➤ I'll know it's solved if the following happens…

Answering these questions now gives you a non-emotional, fact-based method of determining whether you've achieved your goals. Preferably, it's also measurable, as in the earlier examples. Sometimes it's not measurable — being able to send people to your web site without making apologies for how bad it looks is certainly a positive benefit, even if you can't measure it.

Perhaps a goal was to drive more traffic to the web site. Many people decide whether a problem like this is solved by measuring web traffic via Google Analytics. Clients should have clear goals as to what kind of traffic they're looking for, though! Getting traffic to a web site is easy. Just add some talk about the latest pop stars or a few dirty words, and traffic will miraculously arrive. Unfortunately, these visitors are not likely to buy something, call the business, or sign up for a newsletter. So be sure that when you talk about "driving traffic to the web site" with clients you're clear about what kind of traffic they want and what they want visitors to do when they get there — the goal is qualified traffic that is interested in what the business has to offer.

To learn more about measuring success and using Google Analytics to help measure that success, research the field of web metrics. A good place to start is the Web Analytics Association (`www.webanalyticsassociation.org`), founded by Jim Stearne, one of the leaders in the field of web metrics.

ASSEMBLING THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM

Back in the mid-1990s, as the commercial Web was emerging, there was the web master. The web master did everything where a web site was concerned, including setting up a server, applying security patches, installing software, writing HTML, and running the web site.

Now, more than 15 years later, sites no longer have a web master. The Internet has exploded, as have systems and processes pertaining to it. Knowing everything about server configuration, programming and scripting languages, HTML and CSS, and databases, not to mention graphic design, project management, search engine optimization, and content writing is impossible. Web masters have moved to areas of specialization.

Every day, newly minted freelancers enter the marketplace, ready to build web sites for a living. As a freelancer, you can make a reasonable living building small web sites. You probably have an area of specialization. Maybe you're a Flash whiz, or you do amazing graphic design, or you can make any CSS cross-browser–compatible.

Ultimately, though, you are not good at doing some things, and some things you do not enjoy doing. These instances are where the development team comes in. You can find freelancers to help in a wide variety of areas. I regularly hire help for:

➤ Graphic design

➤ Content writing

➤ Coding with Flex and Flash

➤ Coding with PHP and MySQL, particularly Joomla extension creation and modification

➤ Search engine optimization

➤ Video and audio creation and editing

If a client is looking for a completely custom template (not an off-the-shelf template), some help getting content written, and a custom contact form, I know that I need to hire a graphic designer and a content writer. I can probably take care of the custom contact form myself, using a Joomla extension, and I'll do the coding for the custom template, once the design is defined. To get that done, I call the graphic designer and the writer, and I get quotes from both of them for the work. I add a little bit to each price (called markup), because I'll need to do some project management along the way, making sure they've done their jobs correctly and completely. Then I add the cost of my own time to that quote and send the whole thing to the client. The client pays me for all work on the web site. My graphic designer and writer are subcontractors, and they bill me for the work they complete. I pay them with the money from the client.

Working with subcontractors means that you can expand the range of services you provide. For example, if a custom extension is required as part of the job, you don't have to turn the job down because you're unable to provide that part of the work. It also means you did not hire this expertise as an employee, meaning you'll have to continually find new work for that employee and give him or her a steady paycheck. Hopefully, you'll cultivate a relationship where your subcontractors will also hire you for their own projects.

Cultivating a network of subcontractors does mean you must spend some time networking and getting to know your fellow web developers and designers. A great way to do that is to attend a local Joomla user group meeting. Don't have a local user group? Start one up yourself (see Joomla's community web site, `community.joomla.org`, for more details). You can also network online via the Joomla forums or other developer groups around the Web. Your local Chamber of Commerce may sponsor some networking events, or you might have other user groups in your area (such as an Adobe user group, a PHP user group, or some other computer-related group).

After you hire a subcontractor, you'll want to get a signed agreement in place that defines, among other things, what he will produce for you, the timeline, and how much you're going to pay him. Getting a clear specification from the client about what's involved is important, so that your sub-contractor can give you a fixed price for the job. I recommend staying away from open-ended hourly rates, because they can get out of control quickly. If you go with an hourly rate, be sure to specify an upper limit for the price charged for the work. Be sure to specify a schedule for production as well, so the subcontractor knows exactly what he needs to produce and by what date.

Subcontractor relationships can be risky. Despite their best efforts, people sometimes get sick. They also sometimes go on vacation or get swamped with other work to do. They have competing interests in their lives, like families and hobbies. Remember that you, as the contractor, are ultimately on the line for the work you have agreed to do for your client. Make sure your subcontractors are reliable and do high-quality work. Be sure to talk to their clients and get recommendations from other contractors. Also, you want to have at least two people to work with in each area where you need help. Sometimes your favorite subcontractor isn't available for one reason or another.

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