

# Redeveloping Your Website:

## Asking the Right Questions, Finding the Right Partner

A White Paper by mStoner

mStoner

SMART SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

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## If your website needs help, you probably know it.

Maybe you've heard from your admissions team that the site doesn't stack up against your peer or competitor institutions. Maybe faculty members have spoken up about much-needed services. Incoming freshman may have pointed out holes in the information they were searching for last spring. Maybe visitors aren't using the site the way you want them to. Or maybe the site is just dated and ready for attention.

For many of our colleagues in education, deciding that it's time for a website redesign isn't hard. The challenge is figuring out how to get started. A successful website redesign requires funding, executive-level support, campus-wide buy-in, and thousands of hours of involvement from faculty, staff, and students from throughout the community. For the small group or individual charged with getting the ball rolling, the hurdles can seem impossibly high, even if your institution is a small and close-knit independent or professional school.

mStoner has completed hundreds of web development projects with schools, colleges, and universities of all sizes, and we're the first to admit that there's no single, magic solution. Tackling a project like this one requires hard work. Three basic preliminary steps can make the difference between a successful process and an administrative mess:

- 1 Clarify your needs—clearly define the scope of the changes that need to be made.
- 2 Determine whether you'll need help from a consultant.
- 3 If you need help, find the right partner.

This white paper offers some of our thoughts about how to approach these decisions and make the best choices for your project and your institution. Follow the discussion—and contribute your own thoughts—on our blog ([budurl.com/pgrt](http://budurl.com/pgrt)).



# Redesign or Redevelop: Clarifying Your Needs.

If you're already considering a website redesign, your stakeholders probably already have some consensus that your site needs to change. However, it's important that you define your needs clearly right from the start. You should have specific criteria for your improved website that will help guide your decisions throughout.

It's often helpful to envision the "future state" of your site by doing some comparative research. What can you learn from your competitors? What do you need to do make them envy your site?

It's important to think about what makes an effective website for a college or university. Here are some of the key criteria that make up a great site:

- **The site is well-organized.** Visitors who know nothing about your institution should be able to find information quickly.
- **Navigation should be clear.** All the navigation should be "visitor-centric," focused on helping visitors find what they're looking for.
- **The design should be fresh and reasonably consistent across the site.** Your site should look fresh and, if possible, should be tied in to other major communications at your institution. As visitors move from section to section, they should find plenty of visual clues that tell them that they're still on your institution's website.
- **Content should be timely and up-to-date.** Regardless of the number of contributors and the amount of content on a site, it should be meticulously up-to-date. And content should be shared across the site where appropriate. This often means having appropriate technology, such as a content management or calendaring system, in place to facilitate updates.
- **Design is fresh.** Even the most well-organized website may begin to look dated over time. The look and feel of the site should be fresh.
- **The messaging should be clear and direct and help visitors learn about what is special about your institution.** Your website is an important tool in helping to differentiate you from your peers and competitors. All its messaging should support this objective. Your website should clearly promote and continually reinforce what is unique or noteworthy about you.
- **The search tool should be effective.** Your search option should be easy to find, and should yield meaningful results.
- **The site reflects your institution's strategic goals.** You should be clear about the outcomes you need from your site. More students, better students, the right students? More alumni engagement? More dollars for the Annual Fund? Your site should encourage visitors to take actions that are important to your institution's objectives.
- **There's a management infrastructure in place for your site.** Everyone should be aware of who's responsible for managing the site and there should be a Web Advisory Committee in place. (No WAC? See our blog post on how to start one: [tinyurl.com/lztpjr](http://tinyurl.com/lztpjr)).

If you've already addressed most of these criteria, you may be in a position to focus on a redesign that includes tweaking your content, adding video, integrating social media, or considering other elements that will refresh and liven up your site.

## Common Site Redevelopment Goals

Once you've established the general scope of the project at hand, it's essential to set goals for your project. What do you want to achieve? What are the outcomes you need to reach your institution's strategic priorities?

With today's demands on budget and resources, measuring accesses or page views is no longer enough to demonstrate clear return on investment. Websites must be linked to campus-wide strategies and tactics for communications, messaging, PR, student recruitment, alumni relations, advancement, and giving. Here are some goals common to many of the redesign and redevelopment projects we take on.

- **Branding:** What do our core audiences say about the new site? What do they think about us, based on what they see online?
- **Recruiting:** Did online application numbers jump? What about site traffic and stickiness for admissions and yield-related pages?
- **Giving:** Did we see growth in online dollars? Number of online gifts or online donors? Average gift size?
- **Engaging:** Did participation in online communities, events, or alumni giving increase?
- **Communicating:** Can internal campus constituents find the information and updates they need more readily?

When putting together your goals for a website redesign, it's a good idea to prioritize this list (or one like it) according to your institutional needs. The needs and goals of your institution should drive your integration of new "fun" elements—a new visual design, new content elements, and social networking tools—into your site, not vice versa. It's not enough that your site look cool; it should also drive the audiences that are most important to you toward taking the actions that are most critical to you.

And if you already have this strong foundation to build on, then you may be able to undertake the project internally. You may have staff with the right kind of experience and the time to do the work, or you may need only a limited amount of assistance from an external consultant.

Far more often, though, institutions need to fully redevelop their website, which means that they need to rethink some or many of the fundamental aspects of their web presence.

Answering the question of whether you need to redesign your site or redevelop it is such a vital first step because it drives all that will come later. A redesign project will generally take less time and cost less than a redevelopment project, and will be easier to manage.

## Determining Whether You'll Need Help

In these days of tight budgets, it can seem extravagant to hire a consultant. It can even seem threatening or insulting to internal producers when institutional leaders choose to hire a consultant to help with a project that might better be handled in-house.

Not every project needs our (or anyone else's) help. For certain projects at certain institutions, keeping the work in-house is the right decision. Here are some indications that you can do the project yourself:

- **You have internal expertise.** If you have team members who have experience writing for the web, who have designed for the web in the past, or who have otherwise worked on large-scale web projects, you may be in a better position to manage and complete a project internally.
- **You have technical skills and capacity.** If you have a technical team who has the skill and experience to manage the back-end implementation of a project like this, that is an excellent first step. If your technical team also has the time to commit to this project, even better.
- **The website is a priority.** One of the challenges with a website redesign or redevelopment project can be building consensus and support for the project, and maintaining it throughout. If you're starting from a place of broad support from the institutional leadership and your colleagues, you're more likely to manage the project successfully throughout.
- **Expectations are realistic.** If your team members understand the scope of the project—the amount of their time and commitment that you'll be asking for over the next seven to twelve months—they will be in a better position to deliver what you need.

On the other hand, bringing in the right consultant can complement your existing team, rounding out their strengths and knowledge of the on-campus environment with the experience and skill of a team that's been through many similar processes before. Being clear from the start about the nature of project you face helps you determine whether you need help, and if so, what kind.

You may want to consider bringing in a partner if:

**You're not sure exactly what you're looking for or what your project needs.** You may find yourself in a position where there are many ideas about the direction a new website needs to take. Or there may be conflicting ideas about the audiences for the site. Or you may have difficulty in developing strategic priorities for the project or the site. Because a good consultant has been through similar projects in the past, they should be able to help you and your colleagues sort out these issues and present a variety of options and

## Project Time Estimates

With or without help from an outside consultant, a website redesign or redevelopment process is time-consuming. We estimate that it takes from seven months to one year to perform a complete site redevelopment project that includes a content management system implementation. A more limited project can be accomplished in less time, of course. But remember the old adage: "Fast, good, or cheap: pick two."

Managing a web redevelopment project takes a lot of time, so if you're the project manager on campus, you can expect to be very busy during this period. Nancy Prater, who managed the redevelopment of Ball State University's website (BSU.edu), estimated that she spent 25-50 percent of her time on the website relaunch project while it was underway; during the final six weeks before launch, it was 100 percent. (Nancy shared some of her insights about her experience in a post on mStonerblog: [tinyurl.com/p3jk93](http://tinyurl.com/p3jk93).)

Susan T. Evans led the redesign of William & Mary's website. Here are some estimates of the time she spent on this project from May 2006 to July 2008 (totals include her time only, not that of the other members of her team):

- **Preplanning/assessment/needs analysis** (prior to hiring a consultant): 125 hours
- **Kickoff/RFP:** 280 hours
- **Redesign** (working with mStoner): 2,700 hours (30 hrs/week for 104 weeks)

Note that William & Mary is a fairly large, complex university with undergraduate programs and graduate and professional schools. If you work at a smaller professional or independent school, you won't spend as much time as Susan did on the project—but it will still take a lot of time.

solutions. They can serve as a reality check to those with wildly impractical ideas. And they can help you to ensure that you're choosing among the best options for your project.

We sometimes hear that because the Internet has made information widely available, you can research solutions for your challenges—like a new information architecture, the best approach to developing an admission site, or which content management system to use—and find the best one. This is only partially true. Information isn't the same thing as knowing how to apply your knowledge or having the experience you need to do so. An experienced consultant can ensure that you know the right questions to ask, that you're aware of potential pitfalls, and that your expectations are realistic. Clients benefit from this experience, and it improves the odds that the project will run more smoothly.

**You know you may face political logjams.** Politics are a reality on any campus. And the more complicated a project is, the more political it will be. For example, faculty may want to present the institution as a research powerhouse when it isn't—and admissions knows that prospective undergraduates don't care about research. An experienced outside voice can often help you make a case and break through apparent roadblocks, moving things forward.

**You have more work than your staff can handle.** Whether you anticipate a simple site redesign or a complete institutional redevelopment project, one reason that people hire a consultant is that they simply don't have enough staff, with enough time, to achieve the institution's vision alone. Experienced consultants focused on your single project can often do the work faster and more efficiently than an internal group stretched too thin.

**You need help from specialists.** It takes a pretty diverse team to pull off a redesign or redevelopment project—including project managers, strategists, writers, designers, testers and technology specialists. Even if your on-campus team includes folks with experience in some of these areas, the right consultant can round out your expertise and ensure that the project is correctly staffed and managed throughout.

## Establishing a Budget

It's often hard to determine how much you're going to spend to do a project, which is one reason it's so important to ask the right questions at the beginning. Even if you do most of the work in-house, you may need external services of one kind or another: video production, photography, design, programming, and so on.

Every prospective client wants to know how much a project is going to cost, but to provide specific budget guidelines requires knowing specific project needs. In general, we tell prospective clients that for \$100,000 they can get some strategy, message development, and design or some programming and development work. A complete project, with strategy, messaging and content development, design, a CMS implementation, beta testing, and other services can range from \$250,000-\$500,000.

We know: those are big ranges. How do you figure out what your project might cost? Here are two suggestions:

- **Check with some of your peer institutions to learn their budgets for web development projects.** You can ask them about their budgets for various components of these projects, providing you with some guidance as you develop your own budget.
- **Here's another idea: if there's a partner that you really want to work with, consider sitting down with them and having a frank conversation about where you really need help and what you have to spend.** A smart consultant can work with you creatively to

### *Project Time Estimates (cont'd)*

How about the amount of time it will take to accomplish different phases of the project? Here are estimates of how long it takes our team of experienced writers, designers, and developers to complete various phases of a web project:

- **Write 50 pages of web content: from start to finish, including research, writing, and editing:** six weeks
- **Develop three creative concepts: from creative brief to presentation:** three weeks
- **Develop six templates from a finished home page concept:** two weeks
- **Produce HTML files from completed designs and test them in preparation for CMS templating:** three weeks
- **Implement a set of nine templates in Drupal (an open source content management system):** four weeks
- **Beta test a new, 500-page website:** four weeks

supplement the resources that come from your in-house team—it's often just a question of taking the time to discover where those touch-points should be.

## Finding the Right Consultant For Your Institution—and Your Project

If you decide that a consultant is right for you, your next step is to determine which consultant is right for you.

Consultants offer vastly different services. Consider the following:

- **The flagship firm.** The consulting firm that takes on big, institution-wide website redevelopment projects and not much else
- **The boutique, full-service firm.** The firm that does institutional website redesigns and smaller projects, such as a major look-and-feel redesign or message and content development for a new site.
- **The design shop.** The firm that offers some strategy and content development but emphasizes design.
- **The technical shop.** The technical firm that specializes in software development or CMS implementation, but offers some design services.

It's important to match your project to the consultant and their capabilities. Don't expect that small tech firm to help much with a big, institution-wide redevelopment project that involves message development, interface redesign, and usability testing. They generally can't offer the breadth of experience of a larger firm that routinely provides those services. And don't expect a design firm to be able to handle implementation of—or even do a good job helping you select—a complex content management system.

On the other hand, make sure that the services the flagship firm offers match what you need. Do they have experience in choosing and implementing a number of content management solutions, not just one or two? Have they worked on enough projects similar in scope to yours to give you the confidence that they can complete it successfully? Do they specialize in institution-wide branding and design projects, when you need a usable website redesign?

### Where do you find experienced consultants? Some proven places:

- Check the listings in directories of organizations such as CASE, UCDA or others.
- Check out professional listservs such as Communications-L (hosted by CASE) or UWEBD (University Web Developers). (Note: search the archives first to see if there are recent threads about consultants. If not, start one.) The advantage of this method is that you can see recommendations from people at institutions like yours; this may help you jump-start your search and narrow the number of consultants you want to consider.
- Ask the managers of websites you like who designed their sites.
- Consider attending a conference like EduWeb and HiEdWeb, where you can hear other institutions present case studies and meet potential vendors. Not everything that's shared at a conference always reflects best practices, but it's a good place to get ideas.

You should develop a short list of prospective partners that you believe could handle your

project. Then do additional research to ensure that these companies are, in fact, a good fit.

We always start with Google. Search an agency's name and see how many links on the first two pages are to their work and how many are to other resources. Look at their websites and explore what they do with social media. Use tools like Twitter Grader (Twitter.Grader.com) and Website Grader (Websitegrader.com) to get a feel for their rating against other consultants you're considering. Read their blog if they have one: what can you learn about they think about their work, how they work with clients, and the outcomes that result?

You want to end up with three or four finalists—certainly no more than a dozen. The more companies you reach out to, the more work you'll have to do to qualify them.

## Selecting a Consultant

Once you've identified a number of potential consultants, it's time to find the right fit for your institution and for your project. This takes some work—and you may need some help from internal stakeholders. Think carefully about how to structure the decision-making process. When you decide that you need to hire a consultant, one of the first decisions you should make is who will help you make the choice.

In a typical web redevelopment project, your consultants will be working closely with a small group of people virtually every day. So you want to make sure that you find a team with whom this group can work well.

But your consultants will probably also be interacting with a large number of people across your campus. So while they need to have the experience to do all the large and small parts of the project that you're going to hire them to do, it's also important that they be able to interact with stakeholders. In the best-case scenario, your consultant should have the stature to influence senior leaders and your CEO about issues such as design, messaging, and brand development and to encourage them to rethink staffing or reallocate budgets.

As you are preparing an RFP and reading the responses, it's helpful to have other people involved. It's essential to invite people who will be an important part of the redevelopment project to participate in interviewing potential consultants—you'll need to listen to their voices in making your final decision. But you also don't want to be forced to accept a partner who you believe will not be a good fit for your team or your institution.

Our advice: it's a good idea to ask for input from colleagues in selecting a consultant; and it's a good idea to establish up front who will make the final decision. Will a small group, a committee, or task force decide? By consensus? By vote? If people can't agree, who will make the final decision? It's worth thinking about these issues up front and communicating them to people who will participate in selecting a consultant.

## Choosing from the Mix: Prescreening Consultants and Writing an RFP

For most institutions, it makes sense to pre-screen a small group of consultants to get a sense of who's out there and what they can do for you. You'll also find that if you prescreen potential consultants, you can ensure that every organization receiving your

## Does Education Experience Matter?

Should your consultant should have experience working with other education institutions? Or is it better to work with a consultant who has worked primarily or exclusively with other kinds of organizations?

Some people believe that consultants who work in other industry segments can bring the fresh perspective and new approaches of .coms to the problems of .edus. Others prefer to partner with consultants who have chosen to focus exclusively in the education industry.

So, does higher ed experience matter? In our opinion, yes.

Higher ed experience in and of itself won't guarantee that your consultant will help you create an effective site. The driving philosophy for any consultant must be a dedication to visitor-centered design. A good consultant shouldn't be focused on adding clients to their portfolio, creating another award-winning design emblematic of the style that they're known for, or running you through their regimented process. Rather, they should be focused on working with you to build a site that uses design, information architecture, content, and multimedia to reach, engage, and move to action your target audiences.

With that foundation, experience in working in an education environment helps chiefly in these ways:

- A consultant's experience in education will help you avoid mistakes of regression specific to independent school, college, and university sites. Web design in education has evolved a lot in recent years, but we find that people still ask the same questions about best practices. A consultant with knowledge of what's been done before and how best practices evolved can save you a lot of time and money.
- A consultant's experience provides you with cover. Chances are you know what you need, but there's a big difference between having the right solution and selling it to the people whose support you need. A consultant with experience in

RFP is at least theoretically a partner who can complete your project successfully. That can save you a lot of time.

Even if you write a short RFP, you're likely to receive many long responses. It will take a considerable amount of time to review them in detail and sort out which companies you'd like to invite to campus.

Writing an RFP shouldn't be arduous (unless you're at a state institution, in which case you've got your own set of rules and hopefully some help from the purchasing department), but it should be done thoughtfully. The clearer you are, and the more information you provide, the easier it is for prospective consultants to understand your needs and to reply.

Here are some thoughts about writing an effective RFP:

- **Provide information about the institution.** Describe your institution and the opportunity at hand. If you can share the history of the specific project, even better. Being transparent about how you work will give firms an early idea of whether a partnership with you might work.
- **Be clear about what you know you want.** When you receive RFP responses, you'll want to compare apples to apples, so you need to be sure that everyone is proposing the same scope of work. Share as much as you can about your goals for the project, and any timeframes or budget parameters that have been established.
- **Be equally clear about what you're not sure of.** If your RFP makes it clear that you're looking for some help with strategy and scope definition, you should be able to expect some interesting suggestions from the proposals you receive. This can be a good way to learn how your prospective partners would approach your opportunity, and may help you narrow the field.
- **Ask vendors to be specific.** You probably have a sense of how you'll judge prospective partners for your project. Maybe you know that past experience is particularly important to you, or that you're looking for precision in the project management process, or that you want someone whose design philosophy meshes with yours. Asking consultants to answer specific questions will allow you to make straightforward comparisons and the best final decision for your institution. It also makes it easy for them to give you exactly the information you need.
- **Don't ask consultants for spec work.** We believe that smart, strategic work that gets results happens when we get to know an institution in-depth and interact with our partners there. We, and many of our respected peers, spend a lot of time meeting with stakeholders and getting to know our clients so that we can deliver dynamite creative work that helps address institutions' real needs. If you want a sense of a prospective partner's creative chops, look at work they've done and ask to see the concepts they developed for particular clients—the ones that didn't get used. But if you ask for work on speculation, you'll be judging consultants based on their assumptions about you, not on what you can achieve together.
- **Provide contact information for follow-up questions.** There's a good chance you won't answer every question in your RFP. So make sure that consultants know who can answer their questions.

*Does Education Experience Matter? (Cont'd)*

higher ed will be familiar with the way things do (and don't) get done in an independent school, college, or university, and can help you to effectively navigate your institution's particular course.

- The consultant's past work helps them to understand the culture of education and the challenge of building consensus in an environment where decisions are influenced, if not determined by, many voices—some of them not necessarily well-informed.
- Schools, colleges and universities are complex institutions. Understanding institutional culture will help move things more quickly. Consultants who don't know how things are done often have a steep learning curve. And sometimes their credibility (and therefore yours) can suffer as a result of their inexperience.

The decision, of course, is yours. But we'd suggest that you challenge potential partners to tell you how they'll operate in your environment. Make sure that they understand who the stakeholders are and how they plan to communicate effectively with a variety of in-house audiences.

You may be interested in seeing some discussion of this issue on mStonerblog: [budurl.com/a5vb](http://budurl.com/a5vb)

## Meetings and Consultant Presentations

After you send your RFP out to prospective partners, you'll be ready to review responses. This is where your Web Advisory Committee can help. While you may not wish to have the entire group involved in evaluating RFP responses, you should enlist some of the members to read the RFP responses and help you narrow the field to two or three.

Most institutions invite these finalists to campus to give a presentation about their capabilities, their process, and their ideas for your project. Your prescreening and review of proposals can tell you a lot about potential consultants, but there is no substitute for sitting down in a room with the best-qualified people you can find and having a real conversation. Remember, you will be working with one of these groups on a large-scale, long-term project.

These meetings take time. You want to be thorough, test whether your impressions of the vendors is accurate, and allow your campus colleagues to meet them. You want to be inclusive about who you invite to these meetings, but not too inclusive. Give key members of your internal project team a chance to ask questions, and invite key stakeholders—members of your IT team, admissions staff, alumni relations staff, and a couple of faculty members and students, for example—to the table.

Have as many decision-makers as possible at these meetings. You'll need their buy-in and support to move the project along. But be wary about involving trustees and volunteers in the final decision. They, after all, are not going to be working on the project.

Plan on spending at least two hours with prospective consultants. Give your finalists an agenda for the meeting (including any specific questions you want answered), but leave them enough flexibility to share the things that they think are important. And allow plenty of time for questions and engagement. You want to make sure you can follow up on ideas that come out of the presentation or address concerns.

For the meeting, you'll need to provide an Internet connection, a projector, and a screen. It's helpful for consultants to know who they'll be talking with, so a list of people who will attend the meeting, with their titles, is a courtesy.

If you've prescreened consultants, by the time you get down to two or three finalists, chances are that any of them can do the work. What you're looking for now is something a little bit less tangible that helps one stand out from the others: a unique methodology, an innovative approach to your specific challenge, or a commitment to collaboration. You may find yourself making a final decision based on the personalities that feel like a match, and that's okay. Your consultant is going to work closely with you for as much as a year, so it makes sense to choose someone with whom you think you'll work well.

Here are some questions to ask prospective consultants. Sometimes these questions are part of an RFP, but often you will want a prospective partner to elaborate or clarify their answers.

- How many projects like yours have they completed?
- How many FTEs do they have? What role do freelancers play on their projects? (You want to know that the company has enough people with the right kind of experience to handle your project and the others they're doing. And you want to know that the company has its own staff dedicated to your project and isn't assigning it to freelancers who will have less dedication to getting your work done. Not that using freelancers on a project is bad—just make sure that they are augmenting the skills of in-house staff, not carrying a major project load. For example, hiring someone with Flash expertise to create a Flash component is an appropriate use of a freelancer, but be wary of a company that hires a freelance project manager to manage your project.)
- What are their specific areas of expertise?

## Contents of a Typical RFP

Here's a list of the contents of most of the RFPs we receive at mStoner:

- History of the institution
- Overview/scope of the project
- List of project deliverables
- List of expected proposal elements
- Expectations for timeline and budget

And here's a list of the information that we're usually asked to provide as part of our response:

- Firm contact information and history
- Team bios
- Process overview
- Samples of work
- References
- Timeline
- Pricing

- Do they offer different levels of customization based on your specific needs?
- Do they have a standard process and can they explain it? Can they be flexible to suit your needs?
- Will they discuss costs and benefits of deliverables and help you choose the options that best suit your institution and project? You may not need every deliverable that the company wants to sell you as part of their package. Or you may indeed need them, and need the company to tell you why.
- How do they price projects? By phase? By resources required?
- How do they deal with changes in project scope?
- How do they prefer to communicate (e.g., email, video conference, phone, in-person) and are they willing to adapt to your preferred method of communication?
- Can they clearly outline responsibilities of their team members and yours?
- Can they provide a portfolio of their work and client list?
- Will they provide multiple references?
- Can they work within your current CMS, if you have one?
- What can they offer in terms of support, training, and documentation post-launch?

Some campuses use a checklist to help a group evaluate a prospective partner (see appendix for a list that Bethel University used). Each person attending a meeting with a prospective partner is asked to fill out a copy of the checklist as one way of sharing his or her response to the vendors.

## References

Although you'll probably be anxious to get the project started, we strongly encourage you to take the time to check references.

Any of the vendors that you're considering should be more than happy to provide you with at least three former or current clients who are willing to discuss their projects with you. Ask questions that dig deeper than "are you happy with the site?" Try to find out about the working style of your finalists. Are they willing to collaborate? Do they take client feedback and criticism well? Can they help you control the scope of this project, while planning for next steps that may take your web presence even further? References can confirm the impressions you had in your meetings with vendors, or they can offer information that could raise red flags.

## Finalizing your Decision

Best case: you've had the presentations, checked references, and everyone agrees on a partner. Essentially, that means that you can go ahead and finalize an agreement with your partner and get to work. We have more to say about that below.

But what if that doesn't happen? In some cases, you and your colleagues will have differing opinions of the strengths and weaknesses of potential partners. How do you resolve them? Here are some ideas:

### Questions to Ask Yourself (and/or References) about Prospective Partners

*What can you learn from working with this partner?*

*Have they demonstrated that they can complete projects like yours successfully?*

*Do they practice what they preach? What kind of website, blog, and social media outreach do they have?*

*Do they have enough staff to manage your project and others if they are working with several clients simultaneously?*

*Do they have a rigid process from which they won't deviate, or can they be flexible enough to change things up to meet your needs?*

*Will you be charged for every little change to the project?*

*Are they willing to work with you and your team, or do they want to do the whole project themselves?*

*What do their references say about them? Are they easy to work with? How do they respond to changes? Does the team include prima donnas who sulk or become defensive if they don't get their way?*

*How do you react to their team members personally?*

- Hold a group conference call with each potential partner and talk with them about your concerns.
- Invite a small group of people, including those who disagree or have voiced concerns about a potential partner, to participate in a conference call with one or more references to probe more deeply about concerns with a partner. You'll all hear the same thing, you'll be able to ask relevant questions, and you'll be speaking with someone who has direct experience with your potential consultant.

We believe that the best decisions generally aren't made by groups, but by one or two people who weigh the many factors that may have an impact on their final choice. What are the most important factors at your institution? That your admissions dean or the CIO loves your consultant, even if you're convinced that this particular partner is not the best fit?

Different decisions are right for different institutions. But we do know that it helps to have thought out up front how the final decision will be made and to be careful to communicate about this to the people who have participated in the consultant interview and selection process.

Once your decision is made, communicate the good news to your new partners, and talk to them about next steps. Then take a few minutes to let the other consultants you interviewed know that you selected someone else for your project. They'll likely wish you well, and appreciate any feedback you can give.

## Congratulations: You're on the Way

From having worked on hundreds of projects with many different kinds of institutions, we know that, as institutions differ, so do projects. No two institutions make decisions in the same way or, given similar circumstances, will make the same decision. So each project we do presents different challenges and different opportunities.

Lao Tzu said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Whether the journey to your new website involves a few trusted colleagues or a much larger team that includes a consultant depends on the thoughtful and thorough questions you ask yourself at its start—as does the long-term result of your work.

## With a Little Help From Our Friends

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