

*untangle*theweb

EXPOSED: The secret life of a web designer

What unscrupulous web designers get up to behind your back – and the signs to look for to stop yourself being ripped off.

Amanda Gonzalez



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First published in 2010 by Untangle the Web.

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Thanks

Bill Harper

Your proofreading is second to none. You possess the elusive ability to edit without leaving footprints. And you make me look good. Thank you.

www.billharper.com.au

Alex Vaughan

You make me physically look good! Thank you for your incredible work with my social media portraits. You're the perfect blend of professionalism and kookiness.

www.alexvaughan.com.au

Alan Jephtha

My darling husband, thank you for letting me bend your ear. And then bend it some more. And then bend it over the weekend. And over dinner. I love you.

Twitter

For answering questions, patiently listening to the occasional rant and being so incredibly generous.

And for true friendship.



About Amanda Gonzalez



I'm a closet journalist.

I've always enjoyed writing. From passing secret notes during prep at boarding school to writing internationally published print articles, I love the physical sensation of seeing my words and ideas staring back at me.

I never became a journalist because I didn't get the final marks.

I ran away to Spain to find myself. As you do.

After months of living like a true Spaniard, I got myself a job at a summer holiday hotel. To translate for the foreign tourists,



you see. In my excitement I had my hair and makeup done and splurged on a new pair of killer heels for my first day on the job.

I strutted with 'tude through the lobby like any other self-respecting 18-year-old, ready to show these villagers a thing or two about the English language.

Instead, I was handed a mop and bucket.

What did I find?

The beginnings of humility. The desire to run my own show. And an incredible number of blisters on my hands and feet.

So I returned to Sydney, studied business management and IT network administration, then promptly got myself a job at Ernst & Young. For seven years.

Surprise, surprise, I felt unfulfilled. And it wasn't until after a year-long honeymoon jaunt throughout Europe and Africa and the birth of a baby that I realised how unfulfilled I really felt.

So I started my first business. And it flopped.

One of the hardest business decisions I've ever made is admitting my time was up and it was time to let go. But the demise of the business wasn't the problem. It was the realisation that everything I'd sacrificed had amounted to nothing.

I now disagree.

The success of Untangle the Web owes itself to my seven years in corporate, running a failed business – and wielding a mop and bucket.



What's this got to do with [Exchange](#), [SharePoint](#), [web design](#) and [copywriting](#)?

Everything.

Because it's not about the tools or the disciplines. It's about having the skills to extract from you exactly what you need from your business.

Through a highly detailed briefing process developed over two years, I help you uncover what you want your business to achieve online. And then I deliver it with pinpoint accuracy. The tools and the disciplines, really, are just a means to an end.

What's more, I can empathise with you. We're all business owners here, and we know what it's like to *be* in business.

I'm not afraid to admit I make mistakes.

Anyone who presents a perfect business is lying. What I can present to you, however, is a business that fails forward. One that learns from mistakes, and then evolves to stop it from happening again.

Here's 11 things you most likely don't know about me:

1. I'd swum approximately 27,000km before I turned 18.
2. English is my second language (Spanish, my first), despite being born and bred in Sydney's east. My French is a trifle rusty.
3. I'm terrified of being mediocre.
4. I'm a true child of the '80s; the music, the clothes, the hair. It's also when I was born.
5. I'm left-handed, and hopelessly un-co with my right.



6. Red lipstick is my secret weapon.
7. My year 10 school report said 'Amanda asks too many questions'.
8. Unless the life's been melted out of it, I hate cheese. (Cheesecake doesn't count.)
9. Exclamation mark abuse drives me to the brink. And almost the drink.
10. I love running-writing.
11. I bought my first car when I turned 18; a 1963 Ford Falcon XL Deluxe (column shift, of course). I bought my second when I turned 21; a 2002 BMW Z3. I'm still deciding what to buy for my 30th. Any ideas?

And that's me.



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Foreword

Almost as prolific as social media 'experts', web designers are a dime a dozen. And like most professions, it's nearly impossible to understand at face value why their prices vary so much and how much experience they really have.

So how on earth do you know if you've chosen the right one?

The bad news is you really don't know until you've decided.

The good news is this frank account into the antics of unscrupulous web designers will greatly reduce the risk of your project (and bank account) going south before you take the plunge.

Like anything in life, to get the best possible outcome and value for your money, you'll need to get involved. *Really* involved. You'll need to answer a stream of questions — including some you won't have a clue about — and do loads of research.

Ultimately, this isn't about web design. It's about putting together a business strategy to achieve your online goals. And because no-one knows your business, clients or goals like you do, *you* are the key to your project's success.



IMPORTANT: Remember, this is a general guide, not a definitive one. I want to get you thinking and to point you in the right direction. You should find out more about each topic so you're confident about your decision.



Unscrupulous act 1:

Your web designer doesn't have a website

This is one of my favourites. Your web designer is so inundated with projects they don't have time to put their own site together.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? It's like the plumber with the leaky toilet, the builder with the hazardous driveway and the mechanic who drives an absolute bomb.

Frankly, it doesn't cut it. Why? Because it demonstrates either laziness and unprofessionalism, or a complete lack of experience. Is this really a person you can trust to help you grow your business online?

The funny thing is, I've come across brilliant web designers (and one web developer) where this rings true. But there aren't many. Three, to be exact.

How to stop this happening to you

It's simple. Look up their website — even if they were referred to you by someone you trust. If you can't find it (and easily, for that matter), then cross 'em off the list and look for another web designer.

The chances of that designer being brilliant are awfully slim. Why risk it?



Unscrupulous act 2:

Your web designer isn't active in online communities

Can a web designer really keep up with design and technology trends — and the future of the web — if they're not involved in online communities?

I doubt it. Like it or lump it, the web is transforming the way we *all* do business. And while you could argue why a web designer who doesn't actively use Twitter is the best match for you, I doubt this web designer has the skills and initiative to create a progressive website for you.

Your web designer needs to be open-minded, a forward thinker and an early adopter. If they're not involved in an online community, they're simply not displaying these essential qualities.

How to stop this happening to you

Take 15 minutes to snoop around online. Not sure what to search for? Check out:

Their blog

- Do they have one?
- What do they blog about?
- Are the topics thoughtful and decisive, or just rehashes of existing content?
- How often do they blog? Frequently? Consistently? Both?
- Who's commenting?



- Are they participating in the commentary themselves?

Their published articles

- Where are the articles published?
- Have they been published in reputable online publications, or just submitted to mass article farms?
- What are the articles about?
- Do they show depth of knowledge?
- Have the articles attracted quality commentary?
- Who's commenting?
- Are they participating in the commentary themselves?

Their Twitter stream

- What do they tweet about?
- How often do they tweet?
- What is their following/follower ratio?
- Are most tweets self-promotional puff?
- Do they link to interesting articles, even if written by a competitor?
- Do they interact with others, answering questions and sharing knowledge?

A general Google search

Search for both their personal and business name; you might find both personal and business related links. Consider how much weight you'd like to give the personal links (such as Facebook photos). Will this impact your decision to hire them?



HOT TIP: Don't focus on one bad review or one bad comment; look for patterns. If you do find something negative, how they dealt with the situation will tell you a lot. Have they been rude and patronising to someone who disagreed?



Unscrupulous act 3:

Your web designer is your web developer

A good web designer has a sound understanding of web development. They know exactly what can be achieved within your budget, and which web development boundaries to push.

But can a web designer be just as good at web development? No. They're two completely different skill sets. You'll find plenty of people who can do both, but I'd question their strengths on each discipline.

Many web designers will have a pool of web developers at their disposal (if they're not working with one already). It's up to you whether to use one of theirs, but it's a great place to start if you're not sure where to look. Why? Designers and developers are notorious for not getting on (both think the other is unreasonable, unrealistic and stubborn) so using a pair who understand each other is in your best interest.

How to stop this happening to you

Ask who will be responsible for each discipline. Will you be working with each person individually, or will your web designer manage the entire process? It's easier to let the designer and developer work together — they have the skills and knowledge to communicate what you want effectively.

What if you're after a web developer to tweak an existing web design template? Do you still need to engage a web designer?

No. But I'd either choose a web developer who's interested in web design or doing some serious reading on the topic. Even



though the design is out of the box, you still need to adapt it to your website goals.



HOT TIP: If you're engaging a copywriter in the process, it's better to be in direct contact with them during the briefing rather than working through the web designer.

It may be convenient to hand over the lot, but are you willing to have your message lost in translation?



Unscrupulous act 4:

You're not asked any questions

An unscrupulous web designer is a master at answering all your questions 'Yes' without asking any themselves, seemingly removing all barriers so you feel compelled to go ahead.

They criticise other web designers for complicating the process. They can't understand how a designer can ask you a myriad of questions during the briefing process, and then expect a generous amount of time to build your design concepts while asking even more questions.

And what a compelling proposition it is. A web designer who can knock your project over in a week, and who doesn't need much from you so you can get on with running your business.

Don't be fooled. It's a façade. Without asking you questions, and without careful consideration when answering yours, your website is destined to underperform, if not fail completely.

Why? Because your web designer has no idea about your business. Without this knowledge, it's impossible for anyone to customise anything to achieve your website goals.

And your designer shouldn't ask you questions just at the beginning, either. They should be asking them throughout the entire process. They are the expert here, so they should take the lead. And since no one knows your business like you do, it's up to your web designer to expertly and accurately extract this information from you.

Building a website is a process that needs equal involvement from you and your designer. Some questions are easy to answer, others may require deep thought. But a question worth asking deserves time to answer.



So don't be fooled by the deceptive promise of a quick and easy path.

How to stop this happening to you

From the moment you first contact them, see how your web designer interacts with you. Are they doing more talking than listening? Are they telling you what they'll do straight up?

And ask questions yourself, such as:

- What sort of questions will you ask me throughout the process?
- If I don't have the answers, how will this affect the project delivery timeline?

Be realistic about the process. Your website is one of your most powerful sales tools. It has to deliver your message precisely to achieve your goals, and you'll only ever achieve this with time and effort.



Unscrupulous act 5:

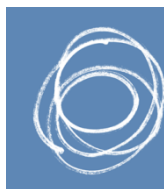
You aren't given a scope document or terms of trade agreement

Committing to a project without these two items (either in a single document or split into two) is asking for trouble. An email loosely covering tasks or a serviette covered in bullet points won't do the trick, either.

Why? Because a scope document is your insurance policy. A tailored, detailed and transparent scope and terms of trade covers everything that is — and just as importantly, isn't — included in the project.

Above all, it's an excellent tool to gauge how well your web designer understands your project *before* you sign on the dotted line.

These documents not only drastically reduce the chances of things going awry, but also give both parties a document to go back to if they do.



HOT TIP: Some designers may refer to their scope as a quote. Although not the true meaning of the word, as long as it covers everything it needs to, I'll forgive the bad choice of word.



How to stop this happening to you

Find out what sort of documentation you'll receive before the project starts. Your web designer might have this outlined on their website in a 'How I work' section, or you might have to ask when you first speak with them.

So what should you look for?

Scope document

The process

- What is the process?
- How much do you need to be involved?

Website strategy

- Will your web designer create your strategy, or is this something you have to provide?

Design concepts

- How many design concepts will your web designer create?
- How many revisions on the final concept?
- What happens if it's still not right by the final revision?

Content Management System (CMS)

- What will you be able to update and add yourself?
- Text?
- Images?
- New pages?



Copy

- Will you be providing final copy?
- If your web designer is engaging a copywriter, what's the process?

Images

- Will you be providing final images?
- Or will your designer be sourcing images for your approval?
- What about licensing?

Hosting and email

- Will your web designer organise your hosting and email, or will they need to work with your provider?
- Is there a charge to do so, or will you be the liaison?

Timeframe

- How long will the project take?
- What if either party runs late with delivery?
- By how much will this delay the project?

Validity

- How long is the scope document valid for?
- What happens if you accept the scope after the due date?

Project fees

- Are the fees transparent?

Payment schedule

- What's due when?



Payment methods

- Are there multiple ways to pay?
- Can you use a credit card?

Terms of trade

Confidentiality and privacy

- Will your personal details be sold to third parties?
- Is confidentiality assured?

Commencement

- When will the project start?
- When will this date be set?

Payment

- What happens if you pay late?
- Will there be a financial penalty?
- Will this affect the delivery date?

Content

- Who's responsible for what content? (Remember, content is *everything* that goes into a site, including copy, images and logos.)
- If you're providing the content, what format should it be in?

Stage sign-off

- What happens at the end of each stage?
- Do you need to physically sign anything before continuing with the next stage?
- Does a progress payment coincide?



Changes

- If you need changes, how will this be managed?
- Will it be incorporated into the same project, or will a mini-scope be drawn up and costed?
- How will this affect the project's delivery date?

Rescheduling

- Is there a penalty for rescheduling at the last minute? (This is more so if you're meeting face-to-face.)

Cancellation

- What if you can no longer go ahead?
- Are you entitled to a refund?
- Do you own the work to date?

Copyright

- Who owns copyright of the design/copy/images?

Alterations

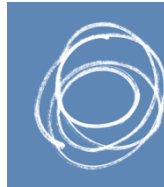
- What happens if you or a third party make changes to the website that causes errors?

Portfolio

- Are you happy to be used as a case study down the track?

Remember, different designers may call these documents different things, but as long as it's comprehensive and covers all the important bits, it doesn't really matter what it's called.

And don't rush reading through these documents. Depending on the size of the project and your resources, it might be good for someone with legal knowledge to read through them as well.



IMPORTANT: DO NOT SIGN ANYTHING until you are completely satisfied with *EVERYTHING*. It's simply not worth the risk.



HOT TIP: These documents are a great way for a web designer (or any service provider, for that matter) to guide the project effectively. For an insider's peek, check out my popular Flying Solo piece, '[The nine keys to managing client expectations](#)'.



Unscrupulous act 6:

Your web designer registers your domain in their own name

Unscrupulous web designers love registering your domain in their own name. Why?

Because it's the perfect way to hold you to ransom. If the relationship sours, they could turn nasty and refuse to relinquish the name back to you. Even worse, they could charge you a fortune to buy it back. There are a bunch of legalities surrounding this that you really don't want to get involved in.

Don't put yourself at their mercy.

How to stop this happening to you

You've two options:

Register the domain name yourself

It's easier than you think. You just fill in an online form with a few business details, nominate a few contacts and then pay on the spot.

If you're unsure of who to nominate as your contacts, this will help:

Domain name owner

This is the only role that **MUST** be in your name. To legally change the ownership of the domain name, you need to go through a *Transfer of Domain Name*. Even without any objections to deal with, it's a tedious process.



Administrative contact

The administrative contact is a nominated person to make decisions on behalf of the domain name owner. If you've engaged a person/organisation to maintain your site, this will generally be them.

This can be easily updated.

Technical contact

The technical contact is the person who looks after tasks such as hosting, IP addresses and forwarding. Generally, this contact is the person maintaining your website (generally not your web designer if all they're organising for you is site design).

This can also easily be updated.

Billing contact

The billing contact is the person responsible for renewing your domain name. Generally, whoever maintains your site will be the contact if they're looking after everything for you, and they'll notify you once it's up for renewal. If you're more comfortable, this can just as easily be you.

And yes, this can easily be updated, too.

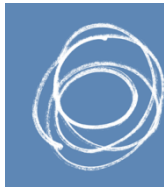
Have your web designer register your domain name on your behalf

If you don't trust your web designer to do this for you, I'd question whether you've chosen the right one.

Make sure your web designer creates an account just for you (and then log in and change the password immediately) so you can access your details as you please. It's also the only way you'll ever know who's updated what.



HOT TIP: The hardest part is choosing a domain name to register! It's not as simple as registering just your business name. Glenn Murray from [Divine Write](#) has put together an excellent series of videos on [how to come up with the best domain name for your business](#). Take the time to have a look.



HOT TIP: Why does the cost of domain names vary wildly? Because sometimes they're bundled with additional services such as web hosting (which you might already have organised elsewhere). Make sure you're comparing like with like.



HOT TIP: Not sure the domain name you want is available? Go to [whois.com.au](#) and find out in a few clicks.



Unscrupulous act 7:

You're forced to host with your web designer

Just as they do with your domain name, unscrupulous web designers will force you to use their hosting service.

I'm not talking about customised website systems such as [Business Catalyst](#), where you need to use their hosting for the suite of systems to operate. I'm talking about straight web designers who use run-of-the-mill hosting platforms available pretty much everywhere (which will be the vast majority).

Using their hosting service is not the problem (in fact, this is quite convenient, but more on that in a mo). It's the fact you don't have a choice. This is alarm bell territory.

How to stop this happening to you

Ask about their hosting service. These questions are a good place to start:

[Do you own and maintain the web hosting server yourself?](#)

Maintaining any server in tiptop condition is a time-consuming process that requires a fair degree of technical knowledge.

Does your web designer have this knowledge?

[If not, are you a reseller?](#)

This is most likely the case. Reseller hosting means your web designer is buying lots of hosting from dedicated hosts and selling it to you with a markup.



What's your percentage of uptime?

Anything below 99.5% would make me look elsewhere. Think I'm being picky? A 99% uptime means your site can be down for three full days a year.

How much data space do I have? What happens if I run out?

Depending on what you have on your website (text, images, videos, etc.), you may need more or less space. Make sure you've plenty to begin with, and find out what happens if you need more.

Does this include hosting my email?

Many will offer email with primitive-looking web access. How many email addresses can you have? How much space is allocated for each one? Do you set users up through Google Apps?

What happens during maintenance? Will I be notified?

Maintenance is normally planned over weekends and evenings. But what if the server is overseas? Does this mean your website will be down during the day because of the time difference?

If you're using a business with a small Asia Pacific client base, this is most likely the case. Those with a large Asia Pacific client base should have their timing down pat.

Your web designer will be notified of scheduled maintenance, which they should pass on to you. There's nothing worse than pulling an all-nighter to get a job done, only to find you can't access your website.

What do I do if I can't see my website?

Will I be able to phone someone on the spot? Or will I have to fill out a helpdesk ticket, and then pray someone will get back



to me urgently? The less money you pay for hosting, the more likely you won't get to speak to a person.

With the difference between the two levels of service being around \$10 - \$15 per month, think carefully whether it's worth the risk.

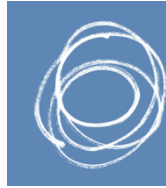
[What if I have general questions or need general advice?](#)

Again, the less you pay the more likely you won't get to speak to a person. If you're paying around the \$20 - \$25 per month mark for your hosting, you should be able to get your questions answered free of charge.

The advantage of having your web designer/developer as your web host is they've got immediate and seamless access to all facets of your site. Anything that needs to be done can be done immediately, without having to wait for a third party to co-operate.

But if you do choose another host, keep in mind that your web designer (or developer) may need to spend time talking, emailing and often waiting to get your website on the road. Depending on how responsive your host is, this could delay your project by weeks- and your designer/developer may even charge you for the additional time needed to co-ordinate with your host.

If you trust your web designer and you're satisfied with their hosting arrangement, then choosing them as your web host is the most convenient and cost effective option.



IMPORTANT: If you do choose your designer/developer as your web host, make sure they create an account for you (as an administrator) to access your hosting details. And don't forget to change the password the first time you access it.

Your web designer will have their own administrative account, but it's important all your changes are done through your own.



Unscrupulous act 8:

The price is suspiciously low

Why would you pay \$8000 for one web designer when another has quoted \$3000? Or even \$950?

It's awfully tempting, isn't it? But if it sounds too good to be true, I can assure you it is.

Why? Let me ask you this: Can a web designer extensively research, contemplate, consult, create and deliver a tailored solution to take your business to the next level for \$950?

Is this how you really want your business represented? Don't forget that, increasingly, your website is the first impression people get of your business. Are you prepared to risk your reputation?

How to stop this happening to you

Compare apples with apples. Are they designing from scratch based on your website goals, or are they just choosing an existing template, changing the colours and fonts and then handing over the reins?

Before you even get to the pricing stage, your designer should have been through a briefing process with you (most likely over the phone or in person but it's also common via email). If they haven't, how can they accurately scope your project? (More on this under [*Unscrupulous Act 4: They don't ask you any questions.*](#))

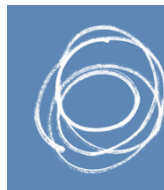
Depending on the individual designer, you may get charged for the briefing process. After all, it's pretty extensive. Most, however, will offset the fee you paid for this service towards



the project fee. But no matter what you decide, you'll always get your money's worth.

If you're after a glorified brochure that looks like everyone else's website and really does nothing for your business, take the cheapie. But if you're serious about your website working hard and growing your business, you need a highly targeted website built on detailed research and strategy.

The choice is yours.



TRUE STORY: I paid \$1500 a night for a safari lodge in South Africa. With more staff than guests, the service was second to none. The food was delicious and plentiful, the rooms opulent and I won't even start on how spectacular (and informative) the safaris were. I felt like I'd scored a bargain.

Fast forward two weeks to Luxembourg. I paid \$147 for a four star hotel room which smelt terrible, had a bath covered in mould and had a broken air-conditioner. The staff were surly and breakfast was stale. I felt utterly ripped off.

The moral of the story? It's not about the final dollar amount. It's about the value the product/service will give you.



Unscrupulous act 9:

You're expected to pay 100% upfront

I can't think why any service should be paid for 100% upfront.

But a deposit is a must for everyone involved. Why? Because a deposit shows that both parties don't just agree to the project — they are committed to it. Depending on the project, the percentage will vary, but both parties need to know the other is committed.

In terms of web design, anything between 10% and 50% upfront is legitimate. Depending on the size of the project, expect one or more progress payments, then a final payment to go live.

But if they ask for any more than 50%, I'd really question why.

Then again, anything less than 10% would make me wonder if they're running a professional business. Be careful. They may be brilliant at their 'job', but are they professional in dealing with deadlines and unexpected changes or communicating effectively with you?

How to stop this happening to you

Before you agree to anything, ask about the payment terms. Of course, if you already have your scope and terms of trade documents, they should be fully outlined there. (See [Unscrupulous Act 5: You aren't given a scope document or terms of trade agreement.](#))



If cashflow is a problem for you, say so. Any decent designer (or business owner, for that matter) should be willing to negotiate either a change in percentages or a payment plan over a short period to help you out. As long as you're showing commitment and you both win, there's no reason why this shouldn't be up for discussion.

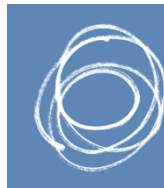


Conclusion

Choosing the right web designer is a time-consuming — and often risky — process.

But now that you've armed yourself with the right questions to ask and a set of realistic expectations, you've greatly reduced the chances of your project going pear-shaped.

Now get out of here. Start asking those questions!



REMEMBER: If you're just not sure about something or need a fresh mind, [ask me](#). I'd love to lend a hand.



Where to next?

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