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**WHITEPAPER SERIES**

## CHOOSING A WEBSITE DEVELOPER FOR AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WEBSITE



A unique and highly specialized research and marketing consultancy conceived and designed to help organizations retain, expand and attract investment and talent.

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## CHOOSING A WEBSITE DEVELOPER FOR AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WEBSITE

Websites are irrefutably the most effective marketing tactic for most economic development organizations. However, given the myriad of website development firms out there, seemingly limitless special functionality, and different platforms for features like available properties, selecting the best website development firm for developing or redesigning your website can be difficult. This white paper lays out the questions to ask and the capabilities to look for when selecting a developer for your economic development website.

### The Key Is: Economic Development + Website Development

After having consulted with dozens of EDOs across the country on their websites, it is our experience that the best economic development website development firms are experts in both website development and economic development.



You need a firm that can program among the best of them, since this will greatly affect your search engine rankings, ease of updating, and usability. At the same time, you need a firm that understands economic development so they can effectively communicate your regional positioning, provide the data that relocating and expanding companies require, and organize all that information in a way that reflects the site selection process itself.

This white paper is organized into Economic Development questions to ask and Website Development questions to ask.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONS TO ASK

### 1. How will you make sure that the website fulfills our organization’s goals for it?

The answer you are looking for is two-fold: (1) a website development process that makes sense to you; and (2) a process for developing your region’s positioning and key messages, understanding what data is required on an economic development website, and recommending how the information on your website should be organized.

 The answer you do not want to hear is: The chosen website development firm shows up at the first meeting with two or three really cool designs for your home page – and then turns to you and asks, “What do you want the navigation buttons to say?” This is the sure sign of a website developer who does not have a clue about economic development or the navigation and content required to develop a best-in-class economic development website.

#### The Ady Voltedge Website Development Process

At Ady Voltedge, we have a step-by-step process, shown in the diagram at right.

- **Marketing Strategy.** If the EDO has not already developed its positioning statement (or if it needs to be updated), we start with that process. This often includes a manual search and review of the region on more than 40 different data elements, as well as EDO input on the region’s assets and liabilities.
- **Navigation.** The navigation includes both the “information architecture” (which identifies the number of pages and their connection to one another).



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janet Ady is president of Ady Voltedge, a firm that she founded in 2003. Her areas of expertise include marketing strategy development, the creation of the optimal navigation for E.D. websites, and place positioning.

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### ABOUT ADY VOLTEDGE

Ady Voltedge was founded in 2003, and continues to be run by its founder and owner Janet Ady. Within the last year, the firm hired its first full-time site selector, Paul Hampton, and integrated the Ady International Company site selection firm into Ady Voltedge.

- Ady International Company was operated by Janet’s father, Bob Ady, who located more facilities in the US than any other individual. The techniques, processes, client history, and corporate contacts that he cultivated over his career are now part of Ady Voltedge.
- In addition, Ady Voltedge also gained a treasure trove of marketing communications directed to site selectors – over 1,000 in all – which we have analyzed so as to help our clients craft the most compelling and effective marketing communications to this important audience.

Ady Voltedge provides a complementary suite of services:

- We provide site selection services to expanding and relocating companies
- We develop E.D. strategies for EDOs and help implement them.

We believe our success in both areas is not coincidental: each areas builds off the other. Ady Voltedge is the only firm in the country of any size that works on all parts of the economic development value chain.

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- Using an off-the-shelf program like Contribute or Dreamweaver. These programs are a couple of hundred dollars, and are not known for being very user-friendly. That means you may have to invest in not only the software license, but in sending an appointed staff person to training on the software. The result is typically a limit in how many people in your organization know how to make website changes and an internal bottleneck for ongoing edits.

Once you narrow down your list of website development firms, **ask for a demo of their content management system.** Most firms can set up a simple GoToMeeting link so you can see what the interface looks like, even if they are located outside of the area. Getting a demonstration is very important because most firms claim that their system is user-friendly and easy to use. Only you can be the judge of that, but here are some things to ask about:

**What are the characteristics of the CMS?** For example:

- Does it use a real-time “what you see is what you get” (WYSIWYG) interface, or does it make you click to a “preview” screen to see what the page would look like after the edits are made? Content management systems that are WYSIWYG are generally considered the easiest to use.
- Is it based on open-source programming? This can affect how easy it would be for someone else to make changes to the CMS if needed.

**What modules are available?** For example, at Ady Voltedge, we have over 20 different modules. Most of our ED clients use between six and ten modules, depending on their needs. Examples of some of our most popular modules include:

- **Page Editor** – the single most important module, it allows you to edit content in the main content area of a web page.
- **Document Manager and Image Manager** – allows you to upload documents and images (logos, graphics, photographs) to your website without having to use a separate FTP program.
- **Page Manager** – allows you to add, remove or edit pages.
- **Slide Show** – allows you to add or remove photos in a moving billboard area of your website and to add captions for new photos.
- **Multiple Administrators** – allows you to give different permissions to different people, give new people permissions or remove permissions.
- **Password-protected area** – allows you to create and administer passwords for password protected areas of the website, such as for board members or for site selectors to download documents related to an RFI.
- **Interactive Mapping** – allows you to add or remove layers on an interactive map and to add, remove, or edit points on an interactive map.

*With each of the above modules, you should ask to see a demo so that you understand exactly what is included within each module and how easy it is for you to use.*

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- **Content.** The next step is to develop the copy (including key words and descriptions), data, graphics, tables, diagrams, links, logos, and photos. Writing for a website is not like writing for other marketing communications; it takes special training in the use of key words, bullets, and data.
- **Design.** This is where the graphic designer creates the “design” of the website, which incorporates the region’s brand (logo, colors, “look and feel”), usability, and ease of use. We usually develop two or three alternative designs for the home page and a representative secondary page. From there, we refine the chosen design and finalize it.
- **Programming.** It is only at this stage that our programming team begins programming in HTML using CSS.
- **Special Functionality.** Aspects of special functionality can begin once the navigation is set, and behind-the-scenes programming work on these aspects usually starts about a third of the way through the project.

In our experience, this type of process helps ensure all stakeholders are on the same page (each step is followed by an update to the client), minimizes the main sources of potential budget and timeline issues (by having the designers and/or programmers wait until they have all the information they need to do their job, rather than letting them start prematurely and then having them go back and redo their work later if the navigation or content changes during development).

### Ensuring that the E.D. Website Is On Strategy

An effective E.D. website has to very clearly communicate its overall positioning. At Ady Voltedge, we can lead clients through the articulation of your three to five key advantages. We will also help you determine your optimal positioning to specific target industries or markets.

How can we do this? Because we understand what locational factors are the most important to the various economic development audiences you are targeting. At Ady Voltedge, helping EDOs develop and communicate their region’s most compelling messages is one of our core competencies. You should make sure that your website development firm is getting into this level of understanding, not just selling you a “templated” solution that might actually be detrimental to your optimal positioning.

Once the audiences and messaging is set, we turn our attention to the navigation of the website – what data will be required and how they should be organized. This is another core competency of Ady Voltedge. We customize the navigation to your own goals, audiences, and messages.

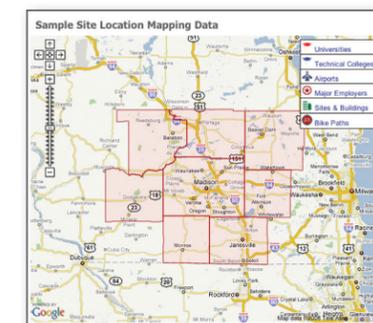
You should make sure that your website developer is capable of building you a website that is on strategy and is effective for you in reaching your goals. In our experience, “Form follows function” in that the marketing strategy drives the navigation and content, which in turn drives the design, which in turn drives the programming.

### 2. What about maps?

The answer you want to hear is that the website development firm has done maps before, it has an interactive mapping module within its CMS, it knows a KML file from a PNG, and it knows its way around the Google Maps API.

It’s common sense that maps would be of critical importance to an organization that is essentially marketing a place. Beyond the obvious, we will share with you best practices related to the use of maps on an E.D. website.

First and foremost, don’t assume that anyone knows where you are. You have to make it obvious by showing where you are located within your state or region of the country. Label it. Name the state you are in. Make the map(s) printable.



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Use maps to further your regional positioning (see item 1 above). Are you perfectly situated for distribution and logistics? Make sure to show the railroad lines, interstate highways, airports and ports on your map. You get the idea.

Interactive maps can be especially useful in allowing users to see multiple “layers” of their choice on a single map. Why show major employers on one map, railroads on another, and schools on yet another and force the user to try to compare them all? Put them all on one map, and allow the user to click on or off the layers they want to see.

### 3. How important is it to show available properties? And what’s the best way to show available properties?

Available properties, also known as Sites & Buildings, are absolutely critical to have on an economic development website.

The answer you want to hear is that the website development firm can provide you with multiple options for displaying available properties on your website.

#### The bare minimum information that you need to show for each available property is:

- Where the property is located
- What kind of property it is (industrial, commercial, office, or retail)
- Size of the property
- Whether it is for sale or lease
- The cost of the property
- Photographs
- Whom to contact for more information

Additional information about the property is a benefit. At Ady Voltedge, we have a list of over two hundred different factors that might be appropriate to show for any given property.

#### The bare minimum functionality that you need to provide is:

- Ability to view thumbnails of each property
- Ability to view additional information on each property (at least in HTML, preferably in a downloadable property listing sheet)
- Ability to sort the properties by type (industrial, commercial, office or retail) – advanced search is a bonus (allows users to sort by other factors, such as square footage, cost, rail access, etc.)

#### Optional functionality that you may wish to provide:

- Dynamic GIS data

When we consult with clients on their options for showing available properties, we walk them through their options at three separate points in the process: (1) options for gathering property listing data; (2) options for hosting property listing information; and (3) options for providing additional data and layers, and for downloading information.

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### 7. What techniques do you employ to optimize search engine rankings?

There is no single “silver bullet” to search engine optimization (SEO). You should ask what specific techniques the firms you are considering employ and compare it to the list below. We all know that the algorithms that Google and other search engines deploy are secret (they don’t want website developers trying to “cheat” the system), so if any website development firm or SEO consultant guarantees that you will be on the first page of search engine results, seriously consider running the other way.

SEO is also not something that can be band-aided on after a website is complete. To execute these techniques properly, they should be implemented throughout the website development process.

The types of search engine optimization tools that we believe should be built into every website include the following:

- Programming in HTML using CSS, for the reasons noted above (it’s very search engine-friendly)
- Good content with key words that users would search for included throughout the copy
- Use of meaningful page titles, descriptions, and key words – your website developer should also give you tips and answer questions about best practices here so that you can keep these updated as pages are added or modified
- Best practices in accessibility and compliance
- Use of Google tools, such as Google SiteMap and Google Analytics
- Registering your website with the key search engines
- Regularly updating the content on the website
- Keeping as much of the website content as possible hosted on your website versus linking to an off-site portal (see the section in question 3 on Sites & Buildings and Interactive Mapping portals)

On top of these techniques, you have options for search engine marketing (SEM), such as the use of paid advertising such as Google AdWords, social media campaigns, etc. Any website development firm you are considering should be able to give you its recommendations on the use of these tools.

### 8. What tools are available for us to keep the website content updated ourselves?

The answer you want to hear is that the website development firm has a Content Management System (CMS) with all the common modules already built and available. Nearly all of the websites we develop today incorporate one or more content management system modules.

Before we get into the specific features of the CMS that you will want to ask about, we’ll explain the three basic options you have for updating website copy. These are:

- Hiring a programmer to do it. The downfalls are the cost and the (potentially slow) speed with which changes might be made. If you expect to have very few changes, this could be a cost-effective approach. At a minimum, you will likely need to hire a programmer to make more complicated changes to your website anyway, so make sure you understand up front how you will be billed for such assistance and what the turnaround time will be.
- Using the website developer’s own CMS. There is no national or international standard in content management systems. The best we’ve seen have been developed by credible website development firms. If a firm you are looking at does not offer one, it’s not necessarily a reason for elimination, but it would certainly make me question their programming capabilities. Using their website developer’s proprietary CMS is usually the best solution for most EDOs.

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### 5. Do you ensure that your websites display correctly on multiple platforms and browsers?

The answer you want to hear is “yes.”



Your website should display the same whether the user is accessing it on a Mac or Windows platform, and whether through the most recent versions of Internet Explorer, Safari, Chrome, or Firefox.

As a website development client, recognize that Microsoft (Internet Explorer), Apple (Safari), Google (Chrome) and Mozilla (Firefox) are continually updating their browsers in a fierce competition for market share. When major new versions are launched, expect that your website programmer will need to spend time reviewing your website and troubleshooting your website so that it still displays properly on the latest version.

### 6. Are your websites Section 508 accessible and W3C compliant?

The answer you want to hear is “yes.” Although both are often mentioned in the same breath, each is a little different. Let's tackle each in turn.

#### Section 508 Accessibility

Section 508 and related laws are results of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It requires Federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. Section 508 was enacted to eliminate barriers in information technology, open new opportunities for people with disabilities, and encourage development of technologies that will help achieve these goals.

If you receive public funding, it is likely that you are required to meet the accessibility guidelines. Even if you are not publicly funded, it makes good business sense to make your website accessible to people of differing abilities.

An example of some of the requirements is that your website cannot use movement that is within certain “flicker rates” that have been shown to trigger seizures in persons with seizure disorders. Another example is that instead of labeling the photos on a web page jpg1, jpg2, etc., Section 508 mandates that you name the photos so that a user accessing the site through a site reader would hear “Downtown Madison at sunset” or “The Rock Island Arsenal admissions gate.” If you think about this last example, naming your photos with a description is also a best practice in search engine optimization – it gives more content for the search engines to take in, rather than the unhelpful “jpg1” moniker. For more information, visit [www.section508.gov](http://www.section508.gov).

#### W3C Compliance

W3C stands for The World Wide Web Consortium, which is an international community where member organizations, a full-time staff, and the public work together to develop Web standards. W3C's primary activity is to develop protocols and guidelines that ensure long-term growth for the Web. W3C's standards define key parts of what makes the World Wide Web work. Standards include such common sense protocols as making sure no links are broken to more complicated ones (check out <http://www.webstandards.org/learn/faq/> for examples). The W3C standards encompass HTML, XML, HTML4.0 and the new HTML5.0 protocols.

There are three levels of compliance: Priority Level 1, Priority Level 2, and Priority Level 3.

*The important take-away is that your website should be at least Priority 1 compliant.*

To see if your website is both accessible (Section 508) and compliant (W3C), go to [www.cynthiasays.com](http://www.cynthiasays.com), and type in your website's URL. It will run a free diagnostic that scores your website on the standards. This is also a great, free, objective way to check on the accessibility and compliance of other websites built by the website development firms you are considering.

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### Gathering Property Listing Data

The first question to ask yourself is what options are available to you.

- Does your local utility offer a Sites & Buildings system?
- Does your state offer a Sites & Buildings system? GIS Planning and Location One Information Systems/LOIS are representative providers of commercial real estate listings at the state and regional level.
- Are there any other systems available in your region, such as Xceligent, CoStar, Catylist, LoopNet or others associated with commercial realtors?

#### The next question to ask is what system(s) do/does your stakeholders currently use?

- Have they already listed their properties into one system or another?
- Do they support multiple systems?
- Or is there no dominant system currently in use in your area?

What you are looking for is whether there is a regionally-available solution that already has a good buy-in from your stakeholders. If so, that moves that solution to the top of your list (at least for now) because it could make the transition minimally disruptive to you and your constituents. If not, it identifies the systems that you will want to evaluate further. It may also highlight the need to come up with an alternative solution if any of the above options are not doable.

#### Hosting of the Available Properties Information

The next set of questions has to do with options for how property listing information is hosted and displayed.

Find out whether the systems you are considering are hosted off-site or on your actual website. The vast majority will be off-site. You can tell for sure by looking at other available property portals the company has done and watching to see if the URL changes from [www.yourURL.com](http://www.yourURL.com) to [www.someoneelsesURL.com](http://www.someoneelsesURL.com). Typically this is done in a frame so that the header of the page will resemble your own website.

#### The advantages of having the Available Properties hosted on your website:

- You will benefit from the key words and descriptions used in the portal, and they will increase search engine optimization of your website.
- There will be no risk of losing a user from your website to some distant portal where they can browse through other areas of your state. Some of the portals make it easy for a user to click around to other regions of the state you are in – i.e., if your available properties are hosted at an offsite portal, you may drive traffic to your website, only to lose them once they start navigating around to different areas of the portal or doing broader searches using the portal's search tools.
- The regions for which you show data will be customizable – i.e., you may be limited to showing data for specific counties, when it might be more advantageous to provide some data by county and other data by metropolitan statistical area (MSA).
- Can be integrated more closely to the design of your website.

#### The advantages of having the Available Properties hosted off of your website:

- Somebody else is monitoring the portal to make sure it is working and to perform routine maintenance and updates on it.
- Platform independent; you don't need a specific type of web server to link to an external system.

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### Options for Providing Additional Data and Layers and for Downloading Information

As mentioned above, the most important functionality is to be able to search among available properties and download property listing sheets. Beyond this basic functionality, there are many bells and whistles that you may also want to have on your website. The main ones are listed below, along with some considerations.

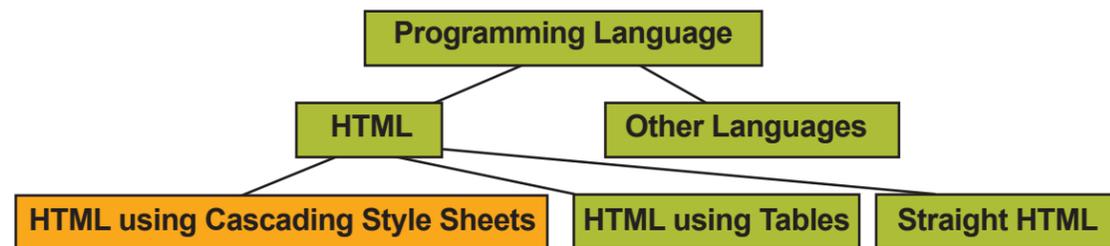
- Other layers, to show major employers, schools, railroads, airports, etc. Having this information on the same map is definitely convenient for users, especially if they can click layers on and off to show what they are most interested in.
- The statewide systems vary widely in their ability to offer this, and the best limit specific EDOs to the subset of maps available at the statewide level. If having specific layers are important to you and your audiences, check into what layers are available before you sign on the dotted line.
- You will also want to find out whether you can add custom layers, and whether you can edit the information on these layers yourself.
- Dynamically-generated data reports. Some services, such as GIS Planning’s Zoom Prospector and LOIS, allow users to download demographic, business, and other information associated with a radius or drive-time from specific properties.
- You may need to pay the data provider for each “click” to request data.
- This data may be of greatest value to retail operations, as it includes a lot of consumer-level data.
- Larger companies and those retaining site selectors may not find much value in these standard reports, since they will be using their own sources for basic demographic information.

## WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONS TO ASK

### 4. What is your experience in programming in HTML using Cascading Style Sheets?

The answer you want to hear is that the firm is proficient in HTML using CSS and that they will program your website primarily in this language. (Note that some special features, notably movement and back-end databases, will be done in other languages; that is okay.)

The programming language that is used on your website is extremely important as it will affect your search engine rankings and your ease of updating the content. The first major alternative is whether the website will be programmed in HTML or in another language.



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### The benefits of using HTML are:

- HTML is the most widely used language in the world (even more popular than the most common spoken language-English).
- It’s open-source, meaning you never have to buy HTML software, you can edit with a simple text editor, and it is constantly being improved upon by programmers around the world.
- It is designed to be read by the search engines that crawl the world wide web to index websites.
- HTML can be relatively easily modified without having to learn a programming language (more on that later).

### The major alternative to HTML is Flash. This is problematic for a couple of main reasons:

- Apple does not allow Flash to be installed on iPhones or iPads, so if your website is programmed in this language, it will not show up on these increasingly prevalent devices.
- Flash is difficult to edit; it requires someone with the source file and Adobe Flash to do so.
- Flash offers limited search engine compatibility compared to HTML.

### Within HTML, there are three major levels of sophistication. The one that you want on your website is HTML using CSS.

Comparison of the Most Popular Programming Languages		
Programming Language	Advantages	Disadvantages
 HTML using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cascading Style Sheets are the most search engine – friendly because they have a low code-to-content ratio, making it easier for search engines to quickly find the content on the page while being able to skip over programming language related to page layout and design.</li> <li>• Because “style sheets” are developed, making a change to a footer, font, background color, or other page layout or design aspect can usually be done by changing just one section of code in one place, rather than by manually going into each page and making the changes there.</li> <li>• Website programmed in HTML using CSS will display correctly on all mobile devices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be more difficult to achieve the desired layout. Coding time can be longer.</li> <li>• Extra care has to be taken to ensure cross-browser and cross-platform compatibility.</li> </ul>
HTML using Tables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick and easy way to define layout.</li> <li>• Still takes advantage of the benefits of CSS to set background images, fonts, colors, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not compliant code. HTML tables are supposed to be reserved for tabular data, and not used for layout purposes.</li> </ul>
HTML without tables or CSS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easiest option, can usually be done in a WYSIWYG editor like Dreamweaver.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal changes have to be made manually to each page</li> <li>• The “code to content” ratio is not favorable for search engine crawlers, and your search engine rankings may suffer as a result.</li> </ul>