

# The secret to choosing a **Web design agency** in **8 easy steps**

**There's now an almost universal consensus that says, "if you have a business you need a website"... and the reasons behind this are very compelling indeed.**

You've no doubt heard about many of the reasons for this, you've almost certainly read about them and you're also very likely to have talked about them.

At the end of the day, however, it all amounts to the same thing; if you're not on the Web, you're leaving money on the table. So what do you do about it?

Well, if you've been tasked with finding a Web agency to help develop or improve your Web presence then you need to quickly identify what your current situation is.

Typically, you'll be able to relate to one of the following scenarios:

- You have an existing website which you want to improve upon slightly (makeover)
- You have an existing website which you want to improve upon hugely (re-launch)
- You don't have a website and you're looking to build one from scratch.

Conducting an on-line search for 'Web companies' provides you with a raft of options that can deliver results ranging from challenging to daunting. One Web designer is offering websites for £500, an agency says that their sites start at £10,000. Then there's the difference between 'Web agencies', 'Web designers' or 'Web programmers'.

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You need help so where do you start? And what if you want to have total control over your website but lack either the time or the skills to achieve that? What then?

If this scenario sounds familiar, or you are about to embark on finding a new Web design agency, here's our definitive guide for what to look for and, more importantly, the essential questions you need to ask.

## Step 1. Getting business results: the 'end game'

Without doubt, the single most important factor is working out what you want your website to achieve by carefully considering what its principal aims and goals are.

For example, if your website is a commercial enterprise or for an organisation that's financially accountable, it should be about return-on-investment (ROI).

If you're looking mainly to build your brand, it should be about a clear focus with good visibility - and lots of it. And if you simply want to provide information about your products or services on-line, your website needs to be an interactive, open-all-hours library - in other words a virtual extension of your sales and marketing collateral.

**Your Question:** Ask your Web partner to provide solid proof of their abilities through customer testimonials and case studies and assess both the standard and effectiveness of their work. When you know what you need your website to deliver, you will be able to see if the company fits the bill.

## Step 2. Budgeting: putting a price on value

Cost is a significant factor in any Web-based project and can often be a deal maker (or deal breaker) particularly when it comes to appointing a new agency.

As with most industry sectors, the phrase “you get what you pay for” rings true in the world of Web design and development as anywhere else so the value that a new site can offer is a vital consideration. Put another way, what you might save by cutting costs may not reap as much value in the long-term when it comes to delivering results.

For example, If you spend £5,000 on a website and in the first year get sales leads that deliver £10,000 in revenue; then depending on your margins, you could have made a £5,000 return on your investment. If, however, you spend £500 and get nothing - then you're £500 down.

**Your Question:** Ask your Web agency if they can provide clear evidence of value delivered through tangible results. Understanding the difference between cost and value means that the former needn't be a deal breaker if you're confident that your agency can provide a good ROI for your business.

## Step 3. Track record: the proof's 'in the pudding'

How much of a track record does your agency have and do they have it in your sector? The more the agency understands about your industry and your business model, the more they should be able to create a Web offering that will deliver your prospective audience to you.

Also, how similar are you to their existing customer-base? You may well be too small or too large for the company to deliver to your expectation.

Across the spectrum, there are websites that cost many millions of pounds to produce and some that cost hundreds.

**Your Question:** Ask what kind of a track record your agency has in terms of historic performance and, crucially, can they demonstrate it in your industry sector?

## Step 4. Communication: The Key to Success

The nature of the Web frequently makes it a highly complex and technically challenging area even for the most experienced of those involved so it's very important that you understand what your Web agency is talking about (and vice versa).

When you enter into discussions with them, they should be working very hard to explain what they do in a way that is meaningful to you. Remember, if you're baffled by any part of the discussion, it's not your fault... it's theirs.

**Your Question:** Ask them what they can do to make sure that you not only feel that you're getting value-for-money but that you're comfortable with the fact that you know exactly what you're getting.

## Step 5. Good Design: Usability and Accessibility

A website is a user interface - plain and simple. Its design is therefore based primarily around usability, i.e. to make sure that visitors can use your website quickly and with the minimum of effort.

Another important aspect that sits alongside usability is accessibility. This is primarily intended to assist those with disabilities, but can be helpful to all readers and has both legal and ethical implications.

It's been a requirement under law for UK websites to be accessible since 1999. Since that time, all websites have been expected to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure their websites accommodate all users regardless of ability.

An accessible website can therefore provide business benefit by giving you the widest possible market reach along with an improved on-line customer experience.

**Your Question:** Ask your agency how usability and accessibility can be used most effectively to drive quality traffic through your website to aid your pre-defined goals or conversions.

## Step 6. KPIs: Key Performance Indicators

When you start talking to a Web agency, its useful to know what it is you want to achieve. Define what it is that in six months time will reassure you that your money was well spent.

Be realistic by investing some time and thought into developing a good website brief beyond “appearing on page one in Google” or “getting more traffic”.

### Typical website goals include:

- Generating sales enquiries
- Making on-line sales
- Improving product / brand awareness
- Distributing e-collateral.

### Typical conversions include:

- Driving traffic towards strategic ‘landing pages’ (i.e. special offers or events)
- Driving traffic towards strategic ‘calls-to-action’ (i.e. newsletter opt-in or syndicated content opt-in).

**Question:** Ask your prospective Web agency what tools and mechanisms can be developed, implemented and deployed to drive measurable traffic to the places you have pre-targeted and to where business value can be realised.

## Step 7. SEO: Finding the ‘Phrase that Pays’

A key element of any website is content. Can you create your own content, do you want to create your own content or do you need help? The value of having well crafted content on your website is one of the most significant factors that can make-or-break the volume and quality of search engine traffic you attract.

It’s very common for some Web designers, Web developers or Web agencies to immerse themselves in the planning and production of a website with little or no thought given to optimisation for the ‘spiders’ (or ‘bots) whose job it is to find and index your website. If your agency makes no mention of website optimisation - or worse, tell you it’s not important - walk!

**Your Question:** Ask your agency what techniques will be used to make sure your website will have the best possible chance of achieving a high ranking amongst the huge and rapidly growing number of websites on the World Wide Web - some of whom are likely to be your competitors.

## Step 8. Strategy: Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail

Ultimately, from the small business website upwards, any Web agency worth its salt should be offering you a clear and concise Web strategy. Yes, you may be able to get away with a few pages created by your nephew as part of his college project, but will it deliver genuine awareness and generate real sales on-line?

Think of your website as ART. It needs to convey a strong sense of Authority, Relevance and Trust. It’s these components that underpin your strategy to convert site visitors from casual browsers into people who are prepared to ‘buy into’ your on-line business - both metaphorically and literally.

Much thought also needs to be given to the way the site looks (i.e. the colours and images that you use), the site framework (i.e. the specific platform to support the functionality you require) along with compelling textual content which is highly targeted and on-message.

**Your Question:** Ask your Web agency to explain their approach in detail. Make sure that the overall strategy is ‘joined up’ and takes a pragmatic approach to providing a top quality deliverable that’s on time, within budget and which meets all your business goals.

## Summary

A Web agency that can deliver will ask more questions than you ask - about your customers, your business and your industry.

If all that matters to them is the platform your website will sit on or the wonderful design they can create, you could well end up with a website that gets very little (if any) traffic.

And if you have a business; you need a website. So that really isn't an option.

**If you're in the market for a Web design agency that 'ticks all the boxes', then contact The Escape today - because we really should be talking.**

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