

10 things *to look out for as you review website agencies*

ONE

Ensure the scope of work accurately reflects your requirements

This is number one for a good reason! After working with clients of all shapes and sizes on website projects and performance marketing campaigns for over 15 years, we can say confidently that when a client approaches WebBox after having a bad experience, it's almost always because the scope of work did not reflect the conversations that both parties had during the sales process.

This leads to misaligned expectations and ultimately disagreements over what is or isn't included within the project. Ensuring that everyone involved in the project is clear on the remit from the outset isn't something that should be underestimated.

So often, brands and agencies are eager to start the project – often due to a pressing deadline – however, the discovery phase is critical to help shape and document the requirements of the project.

Key takeaway: If you're dealing with an agency that hasn't written or asked you to write a scope of work, then you should ask why this has been overlooked.

TWO

The design process

Most agencies bat around the phrase 'bespoke design', however, the word 'bespoke' means different things to different agencies

With every sector becoming more and more competitive, it's paramount that your website stands out amongst the crowd. Therefore, the design of your website should reflect your branding, values, and ambitions and leave a lasting impression on our users.

To achieve this using an off-the-shelf template is difficult, to say the least, as you will be bound by the restrictions of that particular template.

Key takeaway: If you're looking for a website that will set you apart from your competition, then you should ask the agency about their design process, and how 'bespoke' it really is.

THREE

The quality of the code

During the development process of a website, web developers will write a lot of code in order to create the functionality and user interface for your website.

Taking the opinion that 'code is code' is short sighted and will lead to issues further down the road. For example, poorly written code is difficult to maintain, it makes it more difficult for other developers to see what the code is doing, it makes CMS/plugin updates more complicated, and transferring your website to another agency will become complicated quickly.

However, developers worth their salt will write code in accordance with industry best practices, leave plain text / comments in their code to explain what a section of code is doing, and have a log of the changes made to the code over time.

One of the industry standards that developers should adhere to is the PHP Standard Recommendation (PSR). This is a PHP specification published by the PHP Framework Interop Group and its purpose is to standardise programming concepts in PHP.

Key takeaway: It's important that you don't sweep the unseen aspects of your website under the carpet, therefore, ask the agency how they ensure the quality of their code is upheld.

FOUR*Discuss the budget*

One of the many signs that you're discussing your project with an experienced agency is when the agency asks for the project budget. At this point, the last thing you want to do is put on your poker face!

But, why do experienced agencies ask for this? An experienced agency will know what can be delivered within a particular budget, and this will likely dictate what is proposed to you.

For example, working with a higher budget allows the agency to spend more time on user experience (UX) design, or host user groups to obtain feedback from your target audience. If the budget is lower, the agency might need to reduce the scope of work so that they can deliver a product within the budget. Specifying a budget or price range, however vague, is the best way to direct an agency.

Key takeaway: Look out for this question as part of your initial conversations with an agency, and don't be afraid to answer it honestly.

FIVE

Clear timescales

Similar to the point above, an experience agency will be able to tell you how long a project should take from start to finish. However, there are so many variables to consider that you shouldn't be taken in by short timescales.

For example, one agency might give a short timeframe which doesn't allow time for feedback cycles, thorough testing, and content entry. Whereas, another agency might provide a more realistic timeframe which includes these aspects. On the face of it, we would all choose the project plan which leads us to the finish line as soon as possible, though if that's unachievable, then it becomes worthless and not a factor that should sway your decision making process.

Key takeaway: The important point is that you understand what is included within the timeframe, as opposed to focusing on the estimated completion date.

SIX

Case Studies

You might be surprised to learn that case studies can be a double edged sword. Allow us to explain...

There's no doubt that you should ask the agency to see examples of their work and read about the journey they took their clients on. This is important in order to demonstrate that they have done this type of work in the past.

On the flip side, discounting an agency because their case studies are not within your exact sector might be viewed as an oversight. In doing so, you are not looking at how the agency approaches a project, the ideas they come up with, their ability to deliver on time, and so on. You are simply making a judgement call because they haven't built a website for another firm of solicitors, or another pharmaceutical organisation, as an example.

Key takeaway: Make sure you ask the agency for case studies. While reviewing the case studies, assess how the agency approaches a project, the ideas they come up with, their ability to deliver on time, as opposed to the clients they have worked with.

SEVEN

Discuss disaster plans (fun stuff!)

No ones talking about this subject but it's an important topic to touch on. What happens if the agency goes bust, or completely changes its direction in the future?

When asking this question of the agency, you need to be assured of a few key points:

- *Are you able to migrate your website to another agency?*
- *Are you able to access the website's files and database if the agency goes bust?*
- *Are you able to switch agencies without penalties or notice periods? If so, are there charges involved in doing so?*

The other side of this topic is what would happen if the agency had a server failure. It is important for you to understand if the website is backed up, and where the copy(ies) of the website is stored.

Key takeaway: Don't shy away from asking the tough questions because you will kick yourself if you ever find yourself in a situation where the agency goes bust or if the agency experiences a server failure.

EIGHT

Peripheral and on-going services are as important as the project itself

We can spend so long discussing the website project itself that we forget about the importance of the peripheral services such as website hosting, backups, SSL certificates, and so on.

You could ask questions such as, where are your servers located?, what's the average uptime of your servers?, will we have access to the hosting control panel?, how frequently do you take a backup of our website?, how many backups do you hold and where are they stored?, and are renewals of domain names and SSL certificates automatically renewed?.

Moreover, once the website project is completed, one hopes that there will be a long term partnership between the brand and agency. Therefore, it's important to understand how post-project support will work with that agency.

You could ask questions such as, who will be my point of contact once the website project has completed?, how do you handle support requests?, how do you approach bug fixes?, can you outline your support plans/packages?, and do you have a service level agreement (SLA) for support tasks?.

Key takeaway: Make sure you discuss the peripheral and on-going services with the agency, as these will outlive the initial website project.

NINE

Points of contact

A common phrase that you hear people say is 'people buy people'. This is so true, but especially when you're working with an agency because you will be dealing with people in that agency on a regular basis.

Therefore it's important to understand who will be your point of contact throughout the website project. In addition, you could ask whether the point of contact will change after the initial project has been completed.

In addition to this, it's worth asking the agency how they tend to communicate with clients, and whether that fits in with your approach. For example, if the agency communicates solely through a support ticket system, but you thrive on face to face communication, then it's worth considering whether this fits in with your preference.

Key takeaway: We all set out wanting to build a long-term partnership, and let's not forget that we want this engagement to be enjoyable, so look out for people that you feel you could work with long term.

TEN

Don't underestimate values and culture

Last but not least is values. Most agencies define a set of values that should infuse everything that they undertake. And it's true that brands and individuals have values in their respective work and home life (even if they're not documented).

Some agencies will be more forthcoming with their values than others, however, we recommend that you ask the agency about their values. What drives them? What do they stand for? In turn, consider how these align with the values of your brand and you individually.

To close the loop, you should look out for where they've demonstrated their values in past projects to ensure the values aren't just for the posters they have in the office!

Here at WebBox, we have five values which infuse everything that we do. One of these values is to be 'relentlessly responsive'. I'm sure we'd all like to think that we're responsive, however, at WebBox we have a number of ways that we can measure this. For example, we can demonstrate that our median first response time to support tickets throughout all of 2022 was 53 minutes and 4 seconds.

Key takeaway: Get to know the agency by asking about their values and consider how these align to the values of your brand and you individually.



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