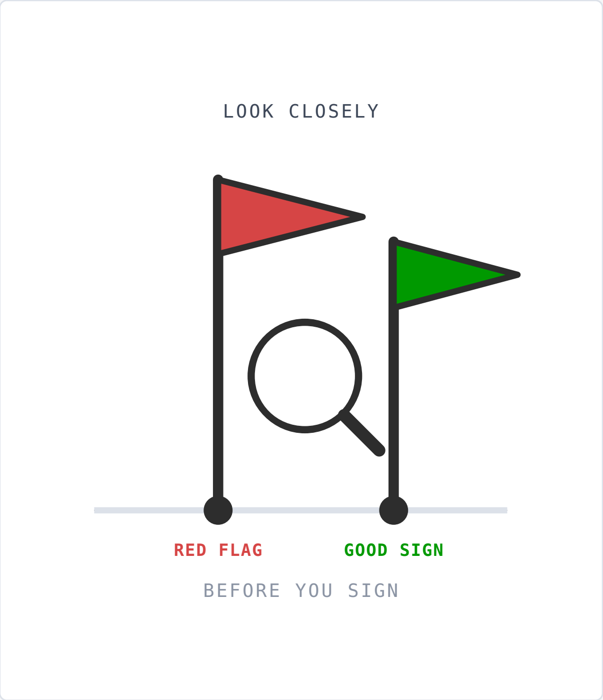
ASK BETTER QUESTIONS, SIGN BETTER CONTRACTS

How to Choose a Digital Marketing Agency.

Pricing models explained, typical costs by service, the red flags that predict a bad hire, and the exact questions to ask before you sign anything.



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RED FLAGS TO WATCH

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SCORECARD

BEFORE YOU TAKE A SINGLE CALL

The wrong agency is worse than no agency

A bad hire doesn't just waste your budget — it can lock you into a long contract, leave you without ownership of your own accounts, and set your marketing back further than if you'd done nothing at all. Most business owners choose an agency based on a good sales call, not a genuine evaluation.

This guide covers exactly what the title promises: how pricing actually works, what a real engagement should include, the red flags that predict a bad experience, and the specific questions that separate a real agency from a good sales pitch.

> **How to use this guide:** Read Sections 1–3 before you take any sales calls. Bring Section 4's questions and the scorecard on page 8 into every call you actually take.

WHAT'S INSIDE

FOUR WAYS AGENCIES STRUCTURE FEES

Understanding pricing models

None of these models is inherently better — the right one depends on what you're buying. Knowing how each works helps you spot when the model doesn't match the work.

Hourly Rate

HOW IT WORKS
Billed for actual hours worked, tracked and invoiced.

BEST FOR
One-off projects or unpredictable scope.

WATCH FOR
Costs can balloon with no clear ceiling.

Monthly Retainer

HOW IT WORKS
A fixed monthly fee for ongoing services.

BEST FOR
Ongoing SEO, social, or ad account management.

WATCH FOR
Vague deliverables buried inside a flat fee.

Project-Based

HOW IT WORKS
A fixed price for a clearly defined scope and deliverable.

BEST FOR
Website builds, one-time campaigns, audits.

WATCH FOR
Scope creep that the original quote never covered.

Performance-Based

HOW IT WORKS
Fees tied directly to agreed results — leads, sales, or rankings.

BEST FOR
Agencies confident enough to be measured on outcomes.

WATCH FOR
Vanity metrics substituted for real business results.

> **Why it matters:** A mismatched pricing model is often the root cause of a relationship that feels wrong later — hourly billing for an ongoing retainer relationship, or a fixed project fee for genuinely open-ended work.

WHICH MODEL FITS YOUR SITUATION?

- [ ] **One-time project with a clear finish line (a new website, a single campaign)**
  Project-based pricing gives you a fixed number to plan around, with a defined deliverable at the end.
- [ ] **Ongoing work where effort and results build month over month**
  A monthly retainer suits SEO, social, or account management better than hourly billing ever will.
- [ ] **Small, unpredictable tasks that don't justify a full retainer**
  Hourly billing keeps cost proportional to the actual work, as long as there's a monthly cap agreed in advance.
- [ ] **A narrowly defined, easily measurable outcome (leads, sales)**
  Performance-based pricing works when success can be tracked cleanly and attributed fairly to the agency's work.

02 What Should Actually Be Included

The baseline for a real, honest engagement — regardless of which service you're buying.

- **Monthly reporting tied to real business metrics** CRITICAL
  Leads, revenue, or bookings — not just rankings, impressions, or "engagement" with no context.
- **A named point of contact, not a rotating account manager**
  Continuity matters — a new contact every few months means constantly re-explaining your business.
- **Work across the pillars that actually matter for the service**
  An "SEO retainer" that's only content, with no technical or off-page work, isn't a complete SEO service.
- **Clear communication about what's being done and why**
  You should always be able to answer "what did I pay for this month?" in plain language.
- **You retain access to and ownership of your own accounts and data**
  Analytics, ad accounts, and your website should belong to you — never solely to the agency.
- **A defined process for approving content or changes before they go live**
  You should see and approve what represents your brand publicly, not discover it after the fact.
- **An onboarding process that starts with learning your business**
  An agency that starts producing work before understanding your customers is guessing, not strategizing.
- **A realistic timeline for when results should start showing**
  Honest agencies set expectations in months, not days — be wary of anyone promising overnight results.

A QUICK REFERENCE BY SERVICE TYPE

A REAL SEO RETAINER INCLUDES

- Technical audits
- Content strategy
- Link building
- Ranking + traffic reports

A REAL PPC RETAINER INCLUDES

- Keyword research
- Ad copy testing
- Bid management
- Conversion tracking

Why it matters: These aren't premium extras — they're the baseline of a professional engagement. An agency that can't offer these isn't cheaper, it's just less accountable.

03 Red Flags to Watch For

Patterns that predict a bad experience — often visible before you ever sign anything.

Guarantees a #1 Google ranking
Nobody can honestly guarantee a specific ranking — Google's algorithm isn't controlled by any agency.

No case studies, references, or verifiable past results
A real track record should be easy to show — vague claims of success without proof are a warning sign.

Reporting that doesn't tie to real business outcomes
Reports full of impressions and "engagement" but no mention of leads or revenue avoid the question that matters.

Pressure to sign immediately with "today only" pricing
Legitimate agencies don't need artificial urgency to close a deal that's genuinely a good fit.

You don't own your website, ad accounts, or analytics access
If the agency disappeared tomorrow, could you still access and run your own digital assets?

Communication disappears after the contract is signed
Responsiveness during the sales process is often the best it will ever be — pay attention to it now.

A one-size-fits-all package with no customization
Your business, market, and goals are specific — a genuinely good fit rarely comes off a fixed shelf.

Reluctance to explain their process or methodology
"It's proprietary" is a reasonable answer once, not a permanent excuse to avoid transparency.

No clear point of contact — passed between different people
Being bounced between staff on every call is a strong sign of an account that's not really being managed.

Reviews or testimonials that can't be independently verified
Screenshots without names, dates, or a way to confirm authenticity are easy to fabricate.

Heavy focus on vanity metrics during the sales pitch
Follower counts and "engagement" sound impressive but rarely translate directly into revenue.

Can't clearly explain how they measure their own success
If they can't define what "working" looks like for their own team, they can't define it for your business either.

> **One flag rarely disqualifies an agency on its own** — but two or three together are a genuine pattern worth taking seriously, not a coincidence worth explaining away.

READ THIS BEFORE YOU SIGN, NOT AFTER

Contract red flags

These live in the fine print, not the sales pitch — worth reading closely, or having someone else read closely, before you sign.

Auto-renewal clauses with long required notice periods
A contract that quietly renews unless you cancel 90 days in advance can trap you far longer than intended.

You don't own the website, domain, or creative assets after the contract ends
Confirm explicitly, in writing, that everything built for you is actually yours to keep.

No defined exit process or data handover terms
A good contract spells out exactly what happens, and how quickly, if either side wants to end things.

Ambiguous scope that lets the agency redefine "included" later
If deliverables aren't itemized, "included" can quietly shrink over the life of the contract.

Long lock-in periods with no performance review checkpoint
A 12-month commitment with no defined check-in point removes your leverage if results are poor.

Hidden fees not disclosed in the original proposal
Ad platform fees, tool costs, or "setup fees" that appear only after signing should have been disclosed upfront.

Penalty clauses for early termination beyond a reasonable notice fee
A steep financial penalty on top of the notice period is designed to discourage leaving, not to cover real costs.

No named individual accountable for delivering the work
A contract signed only with "the agency" as a whole makes it harder to hold anyone specifically responsible.

> **Worth doing:** Ask for the contract in advance and take 24 hours before signing. Any agency that pushes back on that request has just answered one of your most important questions.

WHAT GOOD CONTRACT LANGUAGE LOOKS LIKE

× VAGUE	✓ SPECIFIC
"Services may be adjusted at the agency's discretion."	"Any change to the deliverables listed in Schedule A requires written client approval."
"This agreement renews automatically."	"This agreement renews automatically unless either party gives 30 days' written notice."

04 The Interview: Questions to Ask

What actually separates a real agency from a polished sales pitch.

RESULTS & REPORTING

Q1 "Can you show me results for a client in a similar industry?"

Q2 "What exactly will I see in my monthly report?"

Q3 "How do you personally define success for this engagement?"

PROCESS & COMMUNICATION

Q4 "Who will actually be working on my account day to day?"

Q5 "How often will we communicate, and through what channel?"

Q6 "What happens if I'm not happy with the direction after a few months?"

TEAM & EXPERTISE

Q7 "How many other clients does my account manager handle?"

Q8 "Do you have direct experience in my industry?"

Q9 "Is any of the work outsourced, and if so, to whom?"

CONTRACT & PRICING

Q10 "What exactly is included in this price, and what costs extra?"

Q11 "Who owns the accounts, content, and assets if we part ways?"

Q12 "What's the process and notice period to cancel?"

Q13 "Can I see the actual contract before our next call?"

ONE MORE WORTH ASKING

Q14 "What's a campaign you ran that didn't work, and what did you learn from it?"

Every real agency has one. An answer that insists nothing has ever gone wrong is its own kind of red flag.

COMPARE ANSWERS ON PAPER, NOT FROM MEMORY

Your interview scorecard

Bring this into every call. Score each answer 1–5 against what a genuinely good answer sounds like, not just how confident it was delivered.

QUESTION	A GOOD ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE	AGENCY A	AGENCY B	AGENCY C
Similar client results (Q1)	*Specific names, numbers, and industries — not vague success stories.*	___ / 5	___ / 5	___ / 5
What's in the report (Q2)	*Tied to leads or revenue, with an example report shown.*	___ / 5	___ / 5	___ / 5
Day-to-day team (Q4)	*A specific named person, not "our team" in general.*	___ / 5	___ / 5	___ / 5
Account manager's client load (Q7)	*A reasonable, specific number — not deflected.*	___ / 5	___ / 5	___ / 5
Industry experience (Q8)	*A real, specific example — not a generic "we work with all industries."*	___ / 5	___ / 5	___ / 5
What's included in price (Q10)	*An itemized answer, not a vague "everything you need."*	___ / 5	___ / 5	___ / 5
Asset ownership (Q11)	*A clear, immediate "yes, it's yours" — no hesitation.*	___ / 5	___ / 5	___ / 5
Cancellation process (Q12)	*A specific, reasonable notice period stated plainly.*	___ / 5	___ / 5	___ / 5
TOTAL		___ / 40	___ / 40	___ / 40

DECIDING BETWEEN FINALISTS

- [ ] **The highest total isn't automatically the right choice**
  A candidate that scored lower overall but higher on ownership and cancellation terms may be the safer pick.
- [ ] **Sleep on it before signing anything**
  A 24-hour gap between the final call and the signature rarely changes the right answer — but it catches the wrong one.

> **Trust the gaps, not just the total:** A low score on ownership or cancellation terms is worth weighing more heavily than the total number — some answers matter more than others.

WANT A SECOND OPINION ON A PROPOSAL?

Know what to look for.
Now let's review your options.

Book a free 20-minute call. We'll help you evaluate a proposal you've already received, or point you toward what to ask next.

BOOK YOUR FREE REVIEW CALL →

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