



# 10 Questions to Ask Before Hiring a Digital Marketing Agency

## Introduction:

# The Cost of Choosing the Wrong Agency

Hiring a digital marketing agency is one of the most consequential decisions a business owner can make. The right partner accelerates your growth, fills your pipeline, and frees you to focus on running your business. The wrong one drains your budget, wastes months of irreplaceable time, and can leave you in a worse position than when you started.

The problem is that most agencies look the same from the outside. They all promise results. They all have polished websites. They all say the right things on a sales call. And by the time you realize the fit is wrong, you've already spent thousands of dollars and signed a contract that's difficult to escape.

This guide exists to change that. We've distilled over a decade of experience in digital marketing into the ten questions every business owner should ask before signing anything. These aren't gotcha questions. They're practical, revealing inquiries that separate agencies who deliver results from those who deliver excuses.

Whether you're hiring your first agency or replacing one that didn't work out, this guide will help you evaluate your options with confidence and avoid the most common traps.

 **Question 1:**

## "Do You Lock Clients Into Long-Term Contracts?"

This is the single most important question you can ask, and you should ask it first.

Many agencies require six-month or twelve-month commitments before they'll begin work. On the surface, the reasoning sounds logical: "SEO takes time," "we need runway to show results," "our onboarding investment requires a minimum commitment." These explanations aren't entirely wrong, but they shift all of the risk onto you, the client, and none onto the agency.

Here's the reality: if an agency is confident in its work, it doesn't need a contract to retain you. Results retain clients. Communication retains clients. Demonstrable progress retains clients. A long-term contract is often an insurance policy for the agency, not for you.

### What to watch for:

- Contracts that auto-renew with 30-, 60-, or 90-day cancellation notice requirements buried in the fine print
- "Setup fees" that are really early-termination penalties in disguise
- Language that gives the agency ownership of your assets (website, ad accounts, content) if you leave before the term ends
- Vague deliverables that make it impossible to evaluate whether the agency is actually performing

### What a healthy arrangement looks like:

A month-to-month agreement with clear deliverables, transparent pricing, and the freedom to walk away if the relationship isn't working. The agency earns your business every single month. That structure keeps both sides accountable and aligned.

 **Question 2:**

## "Can I See Real Results From Businesses Like Mine?"

Every agency claims they get results. Very few can prove it in a way that's specific and relevant to your business.

When you ask for case studies, pay attention to the details. A case study that says "we increased traffic by 300%" tells you almost nothing without context. What kind of traffic? Over what timeframe? Did that traffic turn into phone calls, form submissions, or revenue? And was the business remotely similar to yours?

### What to ask for:

- Case studies from businesses in your industry or a related vertical
- Before-and-after metrics that go beyond traffic: leads generated, calls received, revenue attributed to the marketing effort
- The timeline it took to achieve those results (this tells you whether the agency sets realistic expectations)
- References you can actually contact. A confident agency will gladly connect you with current clients who can speak to their experience

If an agency hesitates or can only show you vague testimonials without measurable outcomes, that's a signal. It doesn't necessarily mean they're bad at what they do, but it does mean they can't prove they're good at it.



 **Question 3:**

## "Who Will Actually Be Doing the Work?"

This question catches a surprising number of agencies off guard.

Many agencies, especially mid-size and large shops, outsource significant portions of their work to freelancers, offshore teams, or white-label providers. There's nothing inherently wrong with outsourcing, but you deserve to know who is touching your brand, writing your content, building your website, and managing your advertising.

### Why it matters:

- Outsourced teams often work from templates and have little understanding of your local market, your customers, or your competitive landscape
- When problems arise, the telephone game between you, your account manager, and the subcontractor creates delays and miscommunication
- White-label providers serve dozens of agencies simultaneously, which means your account competes for attention with every other agency's clients

### What to look for:

- An agency that can introduce you to the specific people who will work on your account
- In-house specialists rather than generalist account managers who farm work out behind the scenes
- A team structure where the people on your strategy calls are the same people executing the work

The best relationships happen when there's no gap between the strategists and the doers. When the person on your call is the same person in the platform, adjustments happen faster, context is never lost, and quality stays high.

 **Question 4:**

## "What Does Your Reporting Look Like?"

Reporting is where transparency lives or dies. And the difference between useful reporting and performative reporting is enormous.

Many agencies send monthly PDF reports packed with charts, graphs, and numbers that look impressive but don't answer the question that actually matters: is this making my business money?

### Vanity metrics to question:

- Impressions (how many people saw something, not how many took action)
- "Keyword rankings improved" without specifying which keywords, by how much, and whether those keywords drive qualified traffic
- Social media follower counts or engagement rates disconnected from business outcomes
- Website traffic without conversion context

### Metrics that actually matter:

- Phone calls and form submissions generated by marketing efforts
- Cost per lead and cost per acquisition
- Revenue or pipeline value attributed to specific channels
- Ranking improvements on keywords your actual customers search for
- Local visibility metrics like Google Business Profile views, direction requests, and calls

### What to expect from a good agency:

Reports that connect marketing activity to business outcomes in plain language. Dashboards you can access anytime, not just when the agency decides to send you a report. And a willingness to walk you through the data, explain what's working, what isn't, and what they're doing about it.



## Question 5:

### "Do I Own My Website, Accounts, and Data?"

This is one of the most damaging traps in the industry, and business owners fall into it more often than you'd think.

Some agencies build your website on proprietary platforms. Some register your domain under their own account. Some create and manage your Google Ads account under their master account, meaning you lose access entirely if you leave. Some even retain ownership of content they create for you.

#### Ask specifically:

- - Is my website built on a standard platform (like WordPress) that any developer can work on, or is it on a proprietary system I can't take with me?
- - Is my domain registered in my name, under my account?
- - Do I have admin access to my Google Ads, Google Analytics, Google Business Profile, and social media accounts?
- - If we part ways, do I keep everything: the website, the content, the data, the accounts?

The answer to every one of those questions should be an unequivocal yes. Your digital assets belong to you. Full stop. Any agency that holds your assets hostage as a retention strategy is telling you everything you need to know about how they view the relationship.

A reputable agency will set up all accounts in your name from day one and provide you with full admin access. They'll build on open platforms that don't lock you in. And if you ever decide to leave, you walk away with everything you paid for.










## Question 6:

### "What Is Your SEO Strategy Beyond 'Content and Links'?"

SEO is the service where the gap between good agencies and bad agencies is widest. And the easiest way to spot a bad one is to ask them to explain their strategy in detail.

If the answer boils down to "we'll write blog posts and build backlinks," that's a red flag. Content and links are components of SEO, but they're not a strategy. A strategy requires diagnosis, prioritization, and a clear connection between activity and objectives.

#### What a complete SEO approach includes:

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**Technical foundation:** Site speed, crawlability, indexation issues, schema markup, mobile performance, Core Web Vitals. If the agency isn't auditing and fixing technical issues first, they're building on a cracked foundation.
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**Local strategy:** For businesses serving a geographic area, local SEO is an entirely different discipline from national SEO. Google Business Profile optimization, local citation management, review strategy, and geo-targeted content all require specialized attention.
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**Data-driven keyword research:** Not just finding high-volume keywords, but identifying the terms your actual customers use when they're ready to buy. This requires real data from platforms like Google Search Console, competitive analysis tools, and search trend data, not guesswork.
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**Content that serves a purpose:** Every piece of content should target specific search intent, address a real customer question, and move the reader toward a conversion. Content for its own sake is a waste of your budget.
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**Ongoing analysis and adjustment:** SEO is not set-and-forget. Search algorithms change, competitors adjust, and market conditions shift. A strong agency is constantly analyzing performance data and refining the approach.

Ask the agency to walk you through their process from onboarding through the first ninety days. The specificity and clarity of their answer will tell you whether they have a real methodology or are improvising.

 **Question 7:**

## "How Do You Handle Communication?"

Poor communication is the number-one reason businesses fire their marketing agency. Not poor results. Communication.

When you're spending thousands of dollars per month on marketing, silence is unacceptable. Yet many agencies are notorious for going dark between monthly reports, being slow to respond to emails, and making clients feel like they're chasing their own vendor.

### Questions to pin down:

- What is your typical response time for emails and calls?
- Will I have a dedicated point of contact, or will I be routed through a support queue?
- How often will we have scheduled strategy calls or check-ins?
- If something urgent comes up, how do I reach you?

### What good communication looks like:

- A dedicated contact who knows your account inside and out
- Proactive updates, not just reactive responses when you ask
- Regular strategy calls (biweekly or monthly at minimum) where both sides review performance, discuss priorities, and plan ahead
- Same-day responses to routine questions, same-hour for urgent issues
- A willingness to pick up the phone, not hide behind email

The way an agency communicates during the sales process is usually the best communication you'll ever get from them. If they're slow, vague, or hard to reach before you sign, it only gets worse after.

 **Question 8:**

## "What Happens If It's Not Working?"

This question reveals character. Every agency talks about success. Very few are willing to have an honest conversation about what happens when things don't go as planned.

The truth is that not every strategy works perfectly on the first attempt. Markets shift, competitors respond, and sometimes initial assumptions turn out to be wrong. That's normal. What matters is how the agency responds.

### Red flags:

- "Just give it more time" with no explanation of what they're changing or why they believe the current approach will eventually work
- Blaming external factors (algorithm updates, your industry, your budget) without taking ownership of what they can control
- Refusing to adjust strategy because "this is our process"
- Disappearing or becoming defensive when you ask hard questions about performance

### What accountability looks like:

- Honest timelines set from the start. A good agency will tell you upfront that SEO typically takes three to six months to gain traction and that PPC requires a testing and optimization phase.
- Transparent analysis when results are below expectations. What did we try? What did the data show? What are we changing?
- A willingness to pivot. If a strategy isn't working, the agency should proactively recommend adjustments rather than waiting for you to notice.
- No ego. The best agencies care more about your results than being right about their initial recommendation.



## Question 9:

### "Can You Show Me What You're Doing and Why?"

Marketing should never feel like a black box. If you're paying for a service, you should be able to see exactly what's being done, understand why it's being done, and evaluate whether it makes sense.

Some agencies deliberately keep their work opaque. They use jargon-heavy reports, restrict access to platforms, and frame their methods as proprietary secrets. This isn't sophistication. It's a lack of accountability.

#### What transparency actually looks like:

- Live dashboard access where you can see your data anytime, not just when the agency chooses to share it
- Plain-English explanations of strategy and tactics. If the agency can't explain what they're doing in a way you can understand, they either don't understand it themselves or don't want you to
- Detailed task-level visibility into what work was completed each month
- Open access to every platform, tool, and account being used on your behalf

You don't need to become a marketing expert. But you should never feel confused about where your money is going or what it's producing. A good agency treats education as part of the service. They want you to understand the work because informed clients make better partners.





## Question 10:

### "What Makes You Different From Every Other Agency?"

Every agency will have an answer to this question. Your job is to evaluate whether the answer is substantive or just marketing fluff.

#### Generic answers that mean nothing:

- "We're passionate about results"
- "We treat your business like our own"
- "We're a full-service agency"
- "We have a great team"

These are things every agency says. They don't differentiate anyone.

#### Substantive differentiators to listen for:

- ✓ **Specialization or deep experience** in your industry or market. An agency that understands your customer, your competition, and your local landscape will outperform a generalist every time.
- ✓ **Proprietary tools or data capabilities** that give them an analytical edge. Agencies that invest in building their own data infrastructure are making decisions from better information than those relying solely on basic tools.
- ✓ **Structural advantages** like month-to-month agreements, in-house teams, or founder involvement that directly affect the quality of your experience.
- ✓ **Skin in the game.** Agencies that tie their business model to your satisfaction, rather than hiding behind long contracts, are fundamentally incentivized to deliver.

The best way to evaluate an agency's differentiation is to talk to their clients. Ask those clients what's different about working with this agency compared to others they've used. That answer is worth more than anything on the agency's website.

 **Bonus:**

## Red Flags Checklis

Keep this list handy when evaluating any digital marketing agency. If you encounter more than two or three of these, proceed with caution.

- Requires long-term contracts with no month-to-month option
- Cannot provide case studies with specific, measurable results
- Won't let you speak with current clients as references
- Outsources most work to freelancers or white-label providers without disclosing it
- Builds websites on proprietary platforms you can't take with you
- Registers your domain or creates ad accounts under their name
- Reports focus on vanity metrics (impressions, follower counts) rather than leads and revenue
- Can't explain their SEO strategy beyond "content and links"
- Slow to respond during the sales process
- Defensive or evasive when asked about underperformance
- Won't provide dashboard access or platform logins
- Uses excessive jargon and resists explaining things in plain language
- Guarantees specific rankings or results (no ethical agency can guarantee Google rankings)
- Has no physical presence or verifiable team
- Pressures you to sign quickly with "limited-time" pricing

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## Conclusion:

# Make the Right Choice for Your Business

Choosing a digital marketing agency doesn't have to be a gamble. Armed with the right questions, you can cut through the noise, evaluate partners objectively, and make a decision you feel confident about.

The best agency relationships are built on transparency, accountability, and mutual respect. You deserve a partner who earns your business every month, communicates openly, and treats your growth as their mission, not just their contract obligation.

If you're currently evaluating agencies or considering a change, we'd welcome the chance to have a straightforward conversation about your goals. No pressure, no hard sell. Just an honest assessment of where you stand and what it would take to get where you want to go.

### Schedule a free consultation:

 (772) 444-8879

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## About Spilt Media

Spilt Media is a full-service digital marketing agency based in Port St. Lucie, Florida, serving businesses across the Treasure Coast and beyond. Founded in 2020 by Max Jennings, who has been working in digital marketing since 2015, the agency was built on a straightforward principle: deliver real results without the industry's typical friction.

Spilt Media offers SEO, web design, pay-per-click advertising, reputation management, and creative services, all handled by an in-house team that knows your account by name. The agency operates on month-to-month agreements because the team believes that results, not contracts, should keep clients around.

What sets Spilt Media apart is a deep investment in data. The agency maintains a proprietary analytics platform integrating data from Semrush, DataForSEO, Google Trends, Google Search Console, Google Analytics, and the Google Transparency Center. This infrastructure means every recommendation is backed by real numbers, and every strategy is built on a foundation of competitive intelligence, not guesswork.

Whether you're a local service business looking to dominate your market or a growing company ready to scale, Spilt Media's approach is the same: clear communication, total transparency, and marketing that actually moves the needle.

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