

How to dodge the dodgy

Your guide to hiring marketing partners – who deliver

refresh marketing

Before we dive in

The service providers who keep our business humming face no easy feat.

If their job were simple, we'd do it ourselves.

So, we thought we'd preface this guide by drawing on Brené Brown's assumption that everyone is doing the best they can.

That said, some service providers do the best they can – to take you for a long, bumpy ride.

See the difference?

This guide focuses on the latter.

Why we wrote this guide

In our industry, horror stories of dodgy service providers are awfully common. We hear them daily.

Social media 'prophets' who are more slapdash than strategic with your ad spend.

Web developers who outsource to cheap offshore freelancers and charge you an offensive mark-up without a care.

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) specialists who take big retainers for no transparency (or results).

It's a sad state of affairs. And we're fed up.

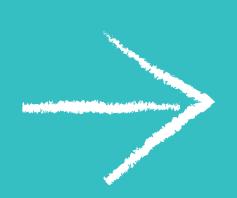
Thankfully though, there are some 'goodies' out there too. Straight-talking experts who give you the right advice – even if that means telling you they're not the right team for you. Decent human beings who genuinely want the best for your business.

The hard part is sorting the diamonds from the dross.

We wrote this guide to help you do just that.

Let's go!

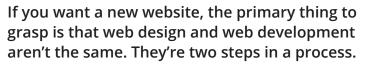
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How to find the right web developer & designer



Each step requires distinct expertise. The first takes creative flair. The second, technical prowess.

For your website to come together seamlessly, you need a person or team with both. (Throughout this guide, therefore, we'll call your service provider your 'web team'.)

Poorly designed and built websites are the most common burn by far. We've seen too many businesses invest time and treasure – only to come away with a so-so site.

To stop this happening to you, ask yourself these questions before hiring a web team.

Do I like their work?

We're amazed how many businesses hire a web team without studying their work.

Any decent web team has a portfolio proving their technical and creative versatility. Make sure you look at (and like) it.

You should also be impressed by their website. Why trust a team to build your website if they can't even do it for themselves?



TOP TIP

Ask a prospective web team to show websites they've created with a similar budget to yours. A \$15K site will likely look and work very differently to a \$5K one. Ensure your expectations are realistic.

A good web team knows their website is the place to showcase their expertise (without the budget limits clients often have).

What platform do they use?

First and foremost, steer clear of any web team that wants to build your site on a proprietary platform. (That is, one they have created themselves.) This makes you wedded to that team until the end of time – since no one else will be able to access or support it.

This leaves a host of other options for you to consider – such as Squarespace, Joomla, Wix and WordPress.

But we're partial to WordPress for a thousand reasons, including:

★ With a few easy instructions, non-technical people can edit WordPress web content. Doing so 'inhouse' means you don't pay each time you want to fix a sentence or two.

- ★ WordPress is more flexible and scalable. This means your website can easily change and grow as you do. And, if it's built with this in mind from the start, it won't cost the earth each time you need a sitewide design or structural change.
- ★ As WordPress is the world's most popular web building platform, a lot of compatible software already exists. So, instead of paying a developer to build a bespoke plug-in from scratch, you'll likely find WordPress has a low-cost, off-the-shelf solution. This will help keep your project budget in check.

Are they local?

Many web companies have a local rep, but their websitebuilding team is offshore.

Why is this an issue?

Typically, it's because the 'front person' is a salesperson who doesn't have the expertise to guide and advise you.

Then, when you seek answers or changes, you must deal with a remote consultant who can't help you directly. This makes the process drawn-out and frustrating. No, thank you!

Instead of working with a middle person, go to the source. A web team that works in your city (or at least your country).

Do they ask lots of questions before quoting?

Beware any web team that doesn't bombard you with questions from the get-go.

A decent team will want to know the scope of your project, so they can quote accurately. This includes getting a crystal-clear understanding of your website's objectives and requirements.

Questions they should ask:

- ★ Do you have brand guidelines?
- ★ How many pages do you need?
- ★ What content will live on these?
- ★ Which features and functionalities do you seek?



TOP TIP

When you get a quote, ensure it's detailed and specific. Single-line items with big numbers next to them are a red flag. Vague quotes make it too easy for a web team to claim something's 'out of scope', then charge you more later.



Do they have a clear process (if so, what is it)?

Before you approve a quote, ask the web team to define their process. If they can't do this clearly, abort.

A good process looks something like this:

Collate. You supply your branding elements (e.g. logo, colours) and images (if available) and your complete website content. That's right: content before design. Think about it. How can a web team design pages without knowing what's on them?

Design. The team gives you 2–3 design concepts to review. Choice is vital, as it lets you give constructive feedback on what you do and don't like about each. The goal is to reach a design you love. If given just one concept, you can't compare. And if you don't like it, you can't give meaningful direction on what you do.

Build. Once you've approved a design, building begins. The web team will want to be sure you are 100% happy before this starts as it's a big effort to redesign a page that's already built.

Test. When the website is done, your team sends a link to a password-protected staging site (invisible to the world) so you can view, test and request any changes before going live.

Launch. When the site's ready to rock, your web team redirects your domain name and liaises with your hosting provider for a smooth transition.

Do they consider SEO?

If you already have a website, there's one crucial factor a reliable web team will consider before launching your new site: SEO.

While they needn't be experts, they should know it's crucial to keep your old website's hard-earned SEO rankings.

To this end, they should ask if you have an SEO expert. They must also do URL redirection (or forwarding) to keep all your precious search engine rankings.



How to find the right graphic designer



Thanks to the many online freelancing platforms such as Upwork and Fiverr now out there, it's never been easier to find a graphic designer.

Yet endless options make it harder to sort the cream from the crap.

It's a joy to see your creative vision come to life, showing your brand in the best possible light. But to get there, you need an ace.

These questions will help you thin the pack.

Do they want a detailed brief?

Good designers know they need all necessary info from you up front. They won't jump in without it.

Things like your:

- ★ Communication goals
- ★ Target audience
- ★ Business and industry background
- ★ Branding guidelines
- ★ Inspiration (i.e. other designs you admire)

By nailing this vital knowledge at the start, a good designer has the best chance to deliver the *right* result – saving everyone time, money and tears.

Have they done similar projects?

It's rare to find a graphic designer who's a true all-rounder.

Some focus on logos and branding. Others do signs, publications or product packaging. They may favour print or digital. Those working one sector may have no interest or confidence in others. (B2B differs a lot to B2C.)

So, if you seek a top designer to champion your brand long-term, know where their skills begin and end.

They needn't know it all, but their expertise must align with your needs.

TOP TIP

Ask the designer for examples of their past projects similar to yours.



Do they communicate and collaborate?

Good graphic designers rarely walk alone. They liaise with copywriters, photographers and web designers to ensure a cohesive result.

A good graphic designer will ask who else you're working with, and how they can contact them.

In your first call, note how they communicate and view collaboration. You can tell a lot from their attitude – and (lack of) questions.

If they see themselves apart from your team, beware.

Do I feel heard?

From studying your sector to probing your brief, good graphic designers make you feel like they 'get' you.

When you describe your project, they won't just *listen*, they'll *care*. And be thrilled to be involved.

They'll ask about your goals, competitors and past graphic designer experiences. Such open, honest dialogue builds trust for a fruitful relationship.

If you're not feeling this, look elsewhere.



TOP TIP

A strong portfolio is a must. Study their work to ensure you like their style. But remember there are many questions a portfolio *can't* answer – such as:

- ★ How well do they respond to briefs?
- ★ Do they welcome and use feedback?
- ★ Is their process efficient, or do results take many rounds?
- ★ Did clients *use* what's in their portfolio?
- ★ What are their repeat and referral business stats?

To learn these answers, ask for client references. Real people you can chat to about their working experience with the graphic designer.



How to find the right **SEO expert**



SEO is the acronym for Search Engine Optimisation. You've likely heard this term too often to count. Yet few people truly know what it involves. This makes it one of digital marketing's darkest arts.

Choosing the wrong provider can lead to lacklustre results at best. At worst, you risk being taken for a ride – seeing thousands of dollars vanish.

So let's light the darkness to help you find an expert you can trust.

Start with these questions.

Is SEO their focus?

We see it all the time. Digital marketers and agencies who tack 'SEO' onto their service list like a side of fries.

Being fluent – and current – in SEO isn't a mere 'add-on'. It's a growing, fast-evolving field that demands constant attention.

True SEO experts get this. That's why SEO is their main – or only – focus.

Think of it this way: If you want a Thai red curry, where would you rather order it from? The pub down the road... or the authentic Thai restaurant?

You need a master of one trade, not a jack of all. The same applies to SEO.

Can they explain their strategy?

Bounce rates, link building, search engine results pages (SERPs). SEO is notorious for buzzwords. But that doesn't mean it's beyond you. Nor should you be left wondering what you're paying for.

A true expert will explain your SEO campaign in plain English. (How will they increase your search traffic? What is the means to this end?)

Shun SEO 'gurus' who pepper their strategy with jargon, or can't articulate it at all.

Do they give a realistic idea of results?

You ask if your website will rank number one. The prospective SEO provider nods, smiles and says 'absolutely!'

Don't walk away, run!

Let's get one thing straight: *no one* can guarantee SEO results. And anyone who does is bluffing.

So what's the answer? Pay money and hope for the best? Certainly not.

Dodgy SEO firms entice with long lists of seemingly relevant keywords. They promise these terms will drive loads of traffic to your site, but this is a common trick. A bit



of digging shows the keywords are duds, with little search volume or commercial value.

Reputable SEO firms give a realistic sense of your expected ROI. They also explain factors that may affect your results, such as keyword competition and algorithm changes.

If you're targeting high-volume keywords with intense competition (like 'fitness' for example) expect to hear that success will take time. If local or niche terms are your goal (such as 'online mat Pilates class Australia'), you can expect results sooner.

TOP TIP

A high ranking means nothing unless it's for keywords your customers use to search for what you provide.

Do they happily share past results and case studies?

An SEO expert should have nothing to hide and a lot to show off.

They should be pleased to connect you with clients past and present (for praise and transformative case studies). If they hesitate or resist doing this, steer clear.

Do they provide detailed reports?

A true SEO expert does an initial benchmark report. This describes how your website is performing now, plus clear KPIs to strive for.

They should also do monthly reports – and explain how they plan to track your rankings, traffic and conversions.

They may even run you through a sample report, which is a great way to skill up. When you see this report, ensure you understand everything in it. If you want more information, ask. It's your expert's job to add it.

If this all seems too hard for them, find someone better.





TOP TIP

Ask if your expert can train you and your team in SEO analytics, so you can confidently check your own results. Information is power.

Are they transparent?

You have your monthly report. Great! But what did your expert do to achieve the results they're trumpeting?

One of the most common frustrations we hear is that clients have no clue what their SEO crew is doing.

Good SEO isn't cheap. If you're forking out hard-earned money each month, you deserve clear, transparent service.

Don't fear asking your expert for an accurate list of what they've done each month.

It's your right to see every link build, page tweak and optimisation they perform. If they're not showing you these, there's likely little or nothing to show.

Are they there when needed?

A true expert is there when clients need them. Tech dramas are bad enough, without unreturned phone calls and emails.

SEO is a marathon, not a sprint. Real results take time. Your expert should give you consistent, timely communication that makes you feel informed and secure.



How to find the right

Google Ads

expert



Google Ads (formerly known as Google AdWords) is an online system that lets you create ads on Google and target people looking for what you offer.

It can promote your business, drive traffic to your site and generate sales. But only if managed *well*.

Unfortunately, confusion abounds – along with the risk of many wrong turns.

This is mainly due to fake 'gurus' leading clients astray. So how do you stop this happening to you? Start by asking these questions.

Do they focus, or do many things?

Some providers offer broad services. Others have specific expertise.

We suggest you find an expert who specialises in Google Ads.

Ask if it's their main game, or just a small part of what they do.

Do they crave the best keywords?

With Google Ads, keywords are everything. They match your ads with what people are searching for.

A true expert knows how much keywords matter, and discusses them from the start.

Since you know your business best, an expert will quiz you to find the best keywords.

They may also use keyword planner tools (such as **Ubersuggest**).

Do they give full results metrics?

True experts give comprehensive results, regularly.

Ask yours if they report 'conversions' (that is, the number of visitors who complete desired actions).

Other metrics – such as 'impressions' and 'click-through rates' – help *manage* your account, but aren't the goal.

If you have a provider, you can see what they're tracking for you. Log in to Google Analytics, click the Reporting tab and look at KPIs. They should focus on conversions, revenue, cost per conversion and ROI.

It may sound crazy, but some providers don't bother to set up Google Analytics for their clients! This *must* be part of their service, as it's the only way they can reliably measure your campaign.





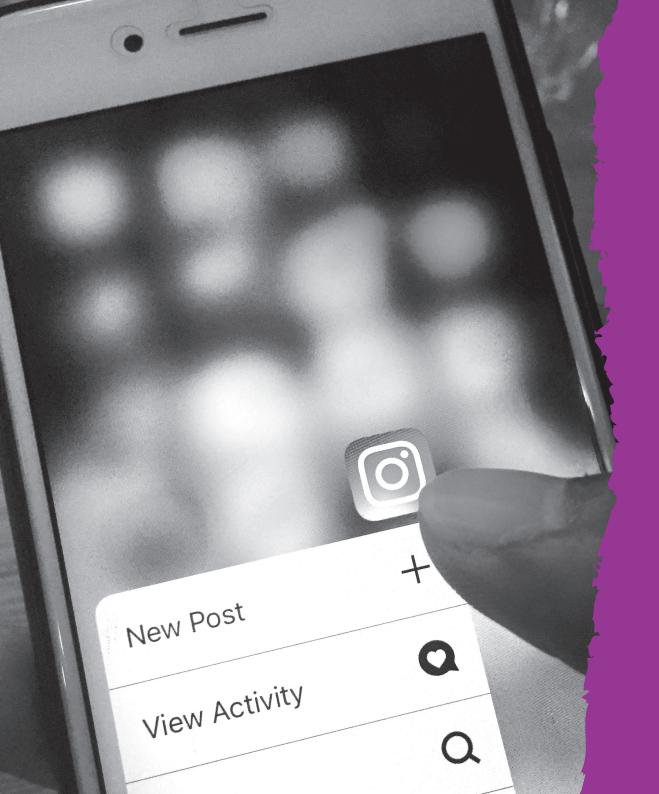
TOP TIP

Instead of just churning out stats, a true Google Ads expert interprets your reports. They then use this intelligence to continually optimise your campaign.

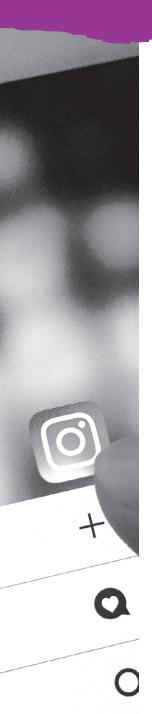
Do they give full data access and ownership?

You want to see how your Google Ads are performing. But you can't, as your expert has full access and ownership of your data. Unacceptable!

To avoid this, ensure your expert is happy to give you ownership from day one of your campaign. Also, confirm they'll hand over historical data if you ever part ways.



How to find the right social media strategist



You know your business *should* be on social media, but *where*? Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok...

Or maybe your business is on social media, but you're unhappy with results or reporting.

You need a social media strategist. To find a true one, ask these questions.

Do they offer organic and paid?

Organic social sees you build a community with free tools. Your content appears in follower feeds, then reaches more people as your community shares and interacts.

Paid social sees you pay to present (or 'boost') your ads to targeted social media users. The fee depends on ad type, but is usually cost per click (CPC).

A good social media strategist can assess your needs, work out which of these options you want, then clearly explain why. If they can't do all the above, unfollow and move on.

Can they prove success?

Beware strategists who dazzle you with their stunning client Instagram feeds.

Pretty doesn't always equal profit. Nor does it translate to leads, conversions, revenue and engagement.

Instead, ask for case studies with detailed metrics and KPIs. You want to see high volume and high quality work.

Can they suggest the right social media?

With so many social media platforms, you may want a presence on each. But they all do different things for different target audiences.

If you try to straddle five chairs, you'll likely end up on the floor.

A good social media strategist will explain which platforms are right for you.

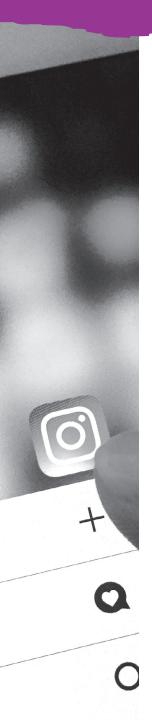
They'll factor your business type (B2B or B2C for starters) and your target demographic (for example, over 40s like Facebook, under 40s prefer Instagram, teens to 20-somethings love TikTok).

Do they give regular reports?

From most-liked photo to least-watched story, you need to know the ins and outs of your social media campaign performance.

So ensure you get a clear idea of what your reports will cover and when.

You may need top-line weekly updates, detailed monthly analyses and recommendations, or both.



Reports should cover broad metrics such as new followers, clicks, visits, engagement, volume and best-performing posts.

Such reports can confuse and overwhelm. If your social media grasp is limited, your provider should make the data easily accessible to you.

Do they know the best time to post?

There are various schools of thought on this.

Think about when you spend the most time on social media (e.g. before sleep, on waking, while commuting, on the loo).

Then ask your strategist when they would post to reach someone like you.

They should have a swift answer, with a good reason, that syncs with your reality.



TOP TIP

Social media management platforms such as Hootsuite and WordStream feature benchmark posting times. While not absolute, you can use these to check if your potential strategist is on target.

Do they A/B test?

A/B (or split) testing lets you try two versions of one variable to see which works better.

A common use is emailing the same ad, under two different subject lines, to see which gets more sales.

Good social media strategists constantly A/B test with various copy lines, ad designs and target audiences to determine the most effective.

This priceless data lets you and your strategist optimise your campaign and ROI.

A/B testing is a strategic must-have. So if a prospective provider doesn't, don't.

How do they track?

Tracking is crucial for any effective social media campaign.

A good strategist will set up all your metrics correctly (including pixel tracking and Google Analytics).

They'll also know how to refine tracking to optimise your reports.

If a strategist can't clear this hurdle, scratch them.



How to find the right commercial photographer



It seems everyone's a photographer these days.

Yet when it comes to commercial photography, there's much more at stake than taking 'Instaworthy' shots.

You need a photographer who cares about your business, understands your style and has the right industry experience.

This 'triple threat' may seem a big ask, but it needn't be. When you know what to look for, you'll be on your way to a winner.

Begin with these questions.

Do they have relevant experience?

At 1,000 words a picture, a photographer's portfolio speaks volumes.

It tells you what sort of photography they specialise in. And the size of the companies they can serve.

If you want food shots, look for food. If you want office shots... you get the drift.

You'll soon sense if they have the right experience and equipment to do your job well.

A photographer's clients should be on their website. If you can't find what you're after, ask for relevant examples.



TOP TIP

Don't just ask who they've worked with. Ask how long. A galaxy of past clients isn't impressive if most relationships were brief.

Do they (take time to) understand your brand and style?

In hiring a wedding photographer, your choice is based on their style.

But when it comes to commercial photography, it's all about your brand and style.

Good photographers ask things like:

- ★ Describe your brand in three words.
- ★ How do you want your business portrayed?
- ★ What should I know about your company before I start?

If they're neither interested in your brand, nor keen to flex to your needs, it's a no.



What's in their package?

A photographer's 'package' lists everything you get for your spend.

It sounds straightforward, but providers differ (e.g. some charge for every shot, others include a set number of edited shots).

Whatever they prefer, it's vital they spell it out before you exchange vows.

You should also nail down image delivery format (e.g. JPEG, TIFF) and publication readiness (e.g. online, print). You don't want to run out of dpi when it's time to hit 'upload'.

Who owns copyright?

Study your photographer's contract to see who owns your images once you pay for them.

Most photographers keep copyright, so they can use them (usually for promotional purposes) without your go ahead.

If that's an issue, ask for a contract clause that gives you exclusive rights to the images.



How to find the right videographer



You want to create a high-quality video for your business. Where do you begin?

You need a communicative videographer, with relevant experience, who's invested in your brand.

Sounds impossible? Not if you ask the right questions.

Who are their clients?

A videographer's clientele gives you a sense of who they are, and the industries and businesses they serve.

But don't make the mistake of just watching showreels.

Look for a video they've done that's similar to your vision (or in your industry). This will give an idea of what your video may look like.



TOP TIP

Some videographers have a loose definition of 'ownership'. Though they claim a portfolio video is theirs, they may only have assisted (rather than filmed and edited it themselves). To ensure you know who did what, check the provenance of each video you view.

What do they specialise in?

Some videographers are whizzes at filming events. Others specialise in product reviews, behind-the-scenes takes, Q&As or animations.

Few videographers do it all.

Ask your prospective videographer if they have a niche, and if there are types of videos they *don't* do.

This will help you clarify if they're right for your project.

What's their process?

Every video production firm has its own process.
You need to know what yours involves before inking any deals.

A good videographer will talk you through their process and give you a detailed document to back it up.

This should outline what all parties (including you) are responsible for and expected to do. Sort this out

TOP TIP

Specify editing and format upfront. If you're thinking polished product but they're thinking raw footage, you could both be in for a shock.

early to minimise nasty surprises along the way.



How to find the right marketing consultant



Keen to define your brand, improve your marketing performance and hit your business goals?

A marketing consultant can help.

Yet many produce complex, overwhelming strategic plans that never get off the ground.

For their advice to be meaningful *and* actionable, you need a marketer who learns about your business and goals first.

Start your quest by asking yourself these questions.

What do I want to do?

Marketing is vast. It may be easier to define your problem (and what you want to achieve) than to identify the marketing *skills* you seek.

Ask what you need support in: branding, positioning, lead generation, or a mix.

Then seek a marketing consultant who's strong in delivering outcomes for businesses like yours.

What's my first impression?

Whether online or in person, you need to meet your marketing consultant. You hope to work together, so initial connection is vital.

Do you like them as a person and grasp what they're saying?

Some marketers blitz you with buzzwords, then rush you into a contract.

Go for someone who's patient and keen for a long-term relationship, not a short-term transaction.

If you feel pressured in any way, steer clear. It'll only get worse once you sign.

Do they walk the walk?

Do they have relevant experience with happy clients? Or do they just sell *themselves...* on empty promises?

While a top marketing consultant should be a natural at promoting your business, they should also have *results* to back it up.

Ask to contact one of their clients to learn more about their working style and capabilities. Be sure to check for case studies and testimonials.



How to find the right copywriter



It's time to add magic to your message. But who do you turn to?

From SEO copywriters and technical writers to editors and journalists, it's not always obvious which type of writer is best for your project.

And now, with online marketplaces like Get A Copywriter and ContentFly, it seems anyone with a laptop and internet connection can say they're a 'copywriter'.

This makes it harder to tell the pearls from the swine. Here's where to start.

Do they want to meet you?

'Just bung through the brief and I'll begin.'

No, no, no!

A copywriter should be curious as hell. They won't just want to meet you, they'll *insist*. Because there's nothing like sitting with a client (virtually or in person), asking questions and distilling their needs.

A copywriter who doesn't want to meet is unlikely to be interested in your business, let alone crafting bespoke copy to suit.

Also, avoid those who charge a consultation fee. You oughtn't pay a cent until you're sure your visions align.

Do they have a relevant professional background?

It could be marketing, communications or journalism.

The important thing is they have a relevant background to back up their writing flair.

A top copywriter is much more than a decent scribe. They're strategic, critical thinkers with strong commercial acumen and a keen interest in your broader business goals.

This means they can advise you on what to say as well as how.

Are they an SEO writer?

Optimising SEO is key for many businesses.

That said, be wary of those who call themselves 'SEO writers'.

SEO expertise is a bonus for digital copywriting. But you want someone who writes for *readers* first. Furiously plugging keywords into copy just makes it clunky and forced.

And importantly, Google loves what readers love.

Plus, content that's on message naturally uses keywords anyway.



Do they have an impressive portfolio?

Top copywriters use an online portfolio. It does most of the talking.

Some may write for a slew of sectors. Others just one or two niches.

What matters is that their writing is concise, compelling and clear.

Does it just do the job – or does it wow? Does it leap off the screen, make you keep reading and force you to act? You'll know it when you see it.

TOP TIP

Ensure you like the writer's website. If their site doesn't do it for you, what hope is there for yours? A top copywriter knows their site is a showcase. It should spotlight their talent, and convince you they're 'the one'.

Are all their communications excellent?

You're happy with their website.

Now, you're swapping emails and reading their proposal. Here are more opportunities to check their writing.

Top writers write well all the time across all communications. They know every word they use demonstrates their expertise.

If you spot disparities, look closer (and possibly elsewhere).

Do they challenge you (or blindly follow the brief)?

'Yep, sounds good. No probs.'

If a copywriter says this after hearing your brief, take care.

While a can-do attitude is nice, you need your copywriter to think critically about your direction. They should be experts, after all.

If they don't give feedback, question some of your ideas or evolve your vision, beware. You may not get the full service you deserve.



Who is writing?

Have they told you exactly who's doing the writing? Or are they hazy about it?

Some providers outsource copywriting to untried and untested overseas freelancers. It's an easy way to pad their margin.

The big costs for you are zero quality control and infinite frustration.

If something goes wrong, or the words ain't right, you can't ring the writer to discuss one-on-one.

While you make a daisy chain of unanswered emails, your content (and business) suffer.

Bonus round

Now you know the ins and outs of each service provider.

Here are universal red flags to watch for – no matter who you seek to engage.

Beware if they:

- X Are suspiciously cheap
- X Don't have (m)any client referrals
- X Take ages to respond to phone calls and emails
- X Hesitate to meet to discuss your project
- Claim to be expert in many things
- Don't ask questions or care about learning your business
- X Aren't clear up front on fees and processes
- X Hurry to lock you in to a long-term contract
- Send confusing proposals and vague quotes
- Love talking about themselves (instead of you and your business)

Ideally, you want a provider with all the 'PERCs'

Performance

They show impressive results, measurement, systems and reporting

Experience

They and their team have years, skills and 'skin' in the game

Relevance

Their project work aligns with what you want

Credibility

Their testimonials and case studies reinforce their integrity

We thank these contributors for their insights

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