

The smart buyer's guide to SEO

How to avoid SEO cowboys:
the 10 questions you **need to ask**

PLUS...

The 5 essential things you must
do **before** speaking to a provider!

Introduction

As a business owner or marketing leader, your focus is likely to be on boosting leads, sales, and profitability. With so many marketing options available, devising the right strategy can be a daunting task.

Should you hire a salesperson, increase your advertising spend, adjust pricing, launch a new website, or start cold calling? The answer depends on your specific goals, budget, and what is right for your target market.

If your business wants success online, achieving visibility in search engines is key. If you want people to do business with you, being easily found is crucial. In the UK, a staggering 81% of consumers use search engines to find new websites when making buying decisions¹.

“If your business wants success online, achieving visibility in search engines is key”

Within the search engine results pages themselves, the top 20 results for a search query capture over 75% of the total traffic generated by that particular search term. And more importantly, the top three results alone receive over 49% of all the traffic².

If you aren't there, your customers can't find you!

What is SEO?

Many people assume that search engines are smart enough to know exactly which website a visitor should be directed to. However, it's not quite that simple. Have you ever wondered why a website appears on the first search engine results page (SERP)?

That's SEO at work. SEO is an acronym for “search engine optimisation”, a digital marketing technique that aims to improve your website's position in search engines such as Google.

¹ Source: https://videos.brightedge.com/research-report/BrightEdge_ChannelReport2019_FINAL.pdf

² Source: <https://www.advancedwebranking.com/ctrstudy>

All those websites that have first page ranking among the major search engines have been carefully crafted with SEO in mind, ensuring that as many potential customers as possible visit those websites.

In essence, SEO involves the process of establishing trust and authority with search engines like Google. SEO works through a combination of technical and creative techniques that position your website as the most relevant for an end users' search. The objective of SEO is to improve keyword rankings related to your product or service, and therefore overall visibility in Google.

The aim of this guide

SEO often carries an air of mystery due to its ever-changing nature as search engines continually refine their algorithms. To develop great results through SEO, ongoing learning and personal development is required to stay at the front of the continually changing industry. Experience is needed to determine (in the specific context of your website) tactics that are effective, what is a waste of time, and which techniques could potentially be harmful.

Attempting to procure SEO services can be a daunting experience. You may be confronted with technical jargon, a range of pricing, and promises that may be hard to keep. Can you handle SEO on your own? Anything is possible with the right resources, skills, and time. But great SEO requires a wide skill set and dedicated, continual focus.

It is crucial to realise that you are competing with lots of other companies, all vying for rankings on the first page of search results. Not only do you need a good SEO strategy, you need one that is *better than your competition*. Inevitably this needs an investment of time and money to gain success.

So if you are looking to purchase SEO, how do you know you are bringing on a provider you can trust? This buyer guide uncovers the 10 questions you need to ask potential suppliers before you decide. Use these to cut through the noise and identify reputable professionals who know what they're talking about.

But before picking up the phone or firing off an enquiry, it is wise to do some initial desk research. Follow the 5 steps below to make sure you have a shortlist of suppliers to approach.

The **5 things** you must do before speaking to a provider

Everything starts with a search, and your efforts to find the right SEO provider should be no different. Rather than just diving in and randomly firing off enquiries, it pays to take a little time to consider things.

Make sure you do your research before you sit down to meet with someone. By conducting some research from your own desk, you will be more informed about the range of providers that are out there, and the potential of them to be the right fit for you.

Follow these 5 vital steps before committing to a sales call.

1. Check if they can rank themselves

The SEO world is relentlessly competitive. At the time of counting, there are over 4,600 SEO agencies alone in the UK³!

So check if an agency practises what they preach. Google terms such as the ones in the table below. If you can see your potential provider on page 1, it's a great sign that they know what they are doing in a heavily competitive market.

Example searches		
SEO Company	Search Engine Optimisation Services	SEO Services
SEO Agency in [location]	UK SEO Company	[Your sector] SEO services

³ Source: <https://clutch.co/uk/seo-firms>

2. Look for the team behind the brand

Check their website and socials. Do they have a faceless agency, or is it easy to find the humans behind the brand? Ultimately you will be working with people, not robots, and reassurance that people actually work there is important. If the website hides away from this, they could potentially be outsourcing their services overseas, or just using a network of freelancers.

3. Check for a physical presence

Despite the rise of home and hybrid working, most good agencies still rely on some form of office space. There is nothing like an office hub as a space for collaboration, communication and culture. Not to mention the odd face to face client meeting! Check if the agency has a physical presence - and not just a virtual office address.

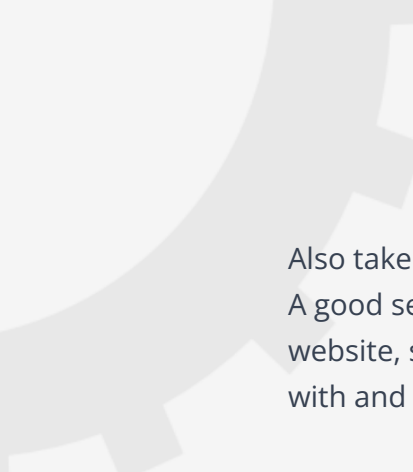
“There is nothing like a physical office hub as a space for collaboration, communication and culture”

4. Look for evidence of the quality of their work

So, you've found an agency online and their website looks great, with real people that generally look really cool. An agency can look as 'cool' as you like - but what matters is what they can deliver.

A good way to determine the general quality of work at an initial glance is by checking the agency's lists of achievements and awards. If they've won anything, they'll want to shout about it and should have a section of their website dedicated specifically to their achievements. Most of these accolades are given from impartial organisations and are not testimonials (which are easier to manufacture). When looking at the company's award/achievements page, it may be worth bearing in mind the following:

- What kind of awards have they won/been shortlisted for? Local, regional, national, international?
- When was the last time they won an award or were shortlisted for an award?



Also take a look at what client testimonials and case studies they have. A good service provider will happily have proof of their work on their website, so you can get a feel of the types of clients they generally work with and the results they have achieved.


5. Research what customers say about them

In today's age online reviews are the norm. And people reviewing your potential supplier should be no different. Searching for them on Google should bring up their Google reviews, and you should be able to find any reputable service provider also on Trustpilot.

Other ways of checking credibility is to look at impartial review sites such as www.clutch.co. This particular site is good as it's kind of like the "Which?" for the B2B sector, and each agency is assessed independently.

Another really useful site is recommendedagencies.com - another impartial organisation who assesses agencies on various credibility metrics.

When checking reviews, pay attention to their quantity, quality, and recency. A regular stream demonstrates that the agency has consistently served its clients well. Be cautious if there is a distinct lack of reviews, or just a handful that could have been generated from friends and family.



“When checking reviews, pay attention to their quantity, quality, and recency”

Avoid the SEO Cowboys: 10 questions to ask before you invest

Unfortunately, the digital marketing sector, like the majority of industries, has more than its fair share of cowboy operators. The amount of self-proclaimed 'SEO Experts', 'Web Gurus' and 'Digital Ninjas' shouting about how great they are is staggering and growing every day.

By now hopefully you've done some research and come to a shortlist of a few potential suppliers. How do you cut through the noise and select the professionals who know what they're talking about? Here are the 10 questions that will help you decide.

The process

1. How do you conduct keyword research?

In the past, keyword research involved plugging a search term into a tool to generate a list of keywords and incorporating them into content. Or downloading a list from Google's Keyword Planner tool.

Nowadays modern keyword research has evolved significantly — requiring a more comprehensive approach that focuses on understanding user intent. The goal is to try and understand the specific information that users seek when they search for a particular phrase, and to create content that aligns with the underlying intent behind those searches.

A reputable SEO company will invest time in understanding your business and conducting thorough intent-driven research to identify the most suitable keywords to target. These keywords will typically include a combination of high, medium and low competition phrases, that will help drive relevant traffic to your website.

During your discussions with potential SEO companies, pay attention to whether they reference user intent and discuss the tools and

methodologies used to determine keyword intent. If the conversation predominantly focused on the number of searches for a keyword and keyword density, it is likely that they are relying on outdated practices.

2. Do you use any secret or black hat methods?

It is important to ensure that any SEO company you are considering adheres to Google's best practices.

The search engine optimisation process should be completely transparent and within Google guidelines. Steer clear of consultants who hint at secret or undisclosed strategies. In most cases, they likely don't possess any exclusive secrets.

In the worst case, they could be involved in unethical practices. Any techniques designed to deceive or manipulate search engines, commonly referred to as "black hat" SEO, can result in penalties for your website.

So ask about the ranking process when reviewing your potential supplier. A reputable agency will be more than willing to discuss the strategies they employ, in a way you can understand.

"The process should be completely transparent. Steer clear of consultants who hint at secret strategies"

3. What information will make you more effective?

Reputable SEO companies will present you with an extensive list of questions and requirements. To carry out their work efficiently, they will need in-depth information about your target audience, industry, goals, and your key performance indicators (KPIs). They will ask about other digital marketing platforms and channels you use that may impact your content. Additionally, they will request access to your Google Analytics account.

Effective SEO requires collaboration between various teams and company stakeholders, depending on your size of company. And the best campaigns we deliver work on a team-based approach, where the

client is also present for key decisions to help give the campaign momentum. Agencies that require minimal input from you are unlikely to develop an SEO strategy that can drive long-term success for your business.

4. Who will I be in contact with, and how do you report on progress?

If you haven't been told you will be assigned a designated point of contact, it's advisable to seek services elsewhere. Establishing a successful partnership hinges upon strong communication and a mutual understanding of the values and priorities held by both companies.

The frequency at which an SEO agency provides progress reports will generally depend on the scale of your project. Typically, most brands can expect to receive monthly updates. However, larger companies or projects that are short-term and specific may require more frequent updates on the ongoing work.

It's important to note, though, that closely monitoring week-to-week progress is often ineffective and can be misleading, as search results tend to fluctuate due to many factors. SEO should be approached as a long-term strategy, and companies that obsess over short-term ranking fluctuations often make impulsive decisions that ultimately hinder their overall efforts.

You could ask to see a sample report, and enquire about how it could be tailored to align with your specific objectives and KPIs. Be cautious of companies that fail to provide detailed information regarding how progress will be measured and reported.

“Establishing a successful partnership hinges upon strong communication and a mutual understanding”

The proposal

5. What does *that* mean?

Albert Einstein famously said, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." This holds true not just for digital marketing as a whole but especially for SEO. SEO is often perceived as a mysterious and complex art, but in reality, it is not. While optimising your website requires skill and experience, it is not nuclear physics, and should be able to be explained in simple terms to anyone.

If an SEO "expert" is confusing you or overwhelming you with technical jargon, especially after you have requested a simple explanation, be sceptical about their abilities or motivations. They might:

a) Be attempting to cover up their lack of up-to-date knowledge by using buzzwords and complex terminology (e.g., "latent semantic indexing")

b) Have substantial knowledge on the subject but lacking effective communication skills. This can cause a lot of problems as communication is an important part of delivering SEO.

c) Failing to follow basic instructions. If you have explicitly asked them to explain things simply and they haven't, it raises concerns and doesn't bode well for a productive working relationship.

While we are on the point of communication, ask the company how they deal with communication. Can you easily contact them via phone or in-person/virtual meetings? Are they used to using collaboration tools such as Slack or Teamwork? Will you have a dedicated account manager or a designated point of contact for day-to-day stuff? Clarifying these aspects is essential for establishing a smooth working relationship.

"If an expert is confusing you with technical jargon, be sceptical about their abilities or motivations"

6. Is this proposal a boilerplate approach?

Any SEO company that wants to help you should perform a comprehensive analysis of your website and outline the necessary steps to improve its performance in search results. It is essential that they can explain their analysis to you using plain language, ensuring you understand the proposed work.

If an agency arrives with a one-size-fits-all proposal filled with generic content, it reflects their lack of value placed on your campaign.

On the other hand, if they have taken the time to analyse your market and develop specific insights and strategies tailored to your company's goals, it indicates their expertise and, more importantly, their desire to earn your business and leave a lasting impression.

7. What pricing model do you use?

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to SEO pricing and there are multiple, interlinked factors that go into providing an accurate quote for SEO services. Every agency, freelancer, or consultant will charge their own rates and have their own methods for their SEO pricing and quotes.

Ultimately, the cost of SEO is heavily linked to the quality of the service your company wants to receive and the budget you have available. If you have the budget to invest in your online marketing, for those that don't understand the value, it can be tempting to dedicate as small an amount as possible to SEO.

However, lower budgets generally lead to lower quality and more basic services, which won't get you the results you are looking for.

What factors can affect SEO costs?

- **Level of experience.** Generally, the more experience and level of expertise a sole trader or agency has, the higher they will

charge, as those skills will benefit your business. For example, professional SEO consultants charge higher rates on average than freelancers and agencies.

- **Reputation, credibility and accolades.** One of the first places people go when researching service providers is their reviews. Generally, if a company has a vast number of glowing reviews, is highly credible in the industry and has won many industry awards, this can generally mean they will be sought after and can charge higher prices.
- **Company size.** Generally speaking, the larger and more established a company or provider, the more it can charge for its services. For example, SEO agencies charge higher rates on average than those working independently, such as freelancers.
 - If engaging with a freelancer, check how many clients they're working with currently. They could be the best digital marketing expert in the world but will not be able to deliver a good campaign if they're over capacity. A freelancer should be working with a maximum of around 10 clients to avoid campaign quality issues (fewer if they're big campaigns, slightly more if they're all small campaigns).
 - Also double check with sole traders what their back up contingencies are in the event they're on holiday or ill. We all have holidays and get a cold occasionally, so there should be some backup available.
- **Location.** The location that an SEO provider is based in can affect the prices they charge, due to differences in the average SEO pricing across the UK. For example, suppliers based in the centre of London or large cities will generally charge more to match the average pricing in that area and their competition, whereas SEOs based in smaller cities or towns may charge less.
- **Locations served.** Similar to the size of the company, the locations a provider offers its services in can affect pricing. For example, large agencies that serve nationally or internationally, charge more on average than local agencies or sole traders that may serve smaller businesses in specific areas.

- **Scope and goals of your SEO project.** Generally, before you are provided with a quote, the agency or provider will consider the scope of your project, the size and type of website, and the goals you want to achieve with SEO, which will all feed into their costs.

What pricing models are there?

There are three main SEO pricing models to be aware of in the industry, including:

- **Hourly rates**, where the provider will charge you per hour of SEO work. This pricing model is more often used by freelancers or consultants who work individually, rather than by SEO agencies.
- **Monthly retainers**, where the provider will charge you a monthly (usually recurring) fee for SEO work. This is the most commonly used pricing model in the UK among agencies, where you will pay a set amount each month and the provider will implement their strategy on an ongoing basis. Contract lengths and conditions will vary so it's important to do your research.
- **Project rates**, where the provider will charge you per specific SEO project or campaign. This SEO pricing model involves an agency or individual professional quoting you for a full project or campaign upfront, rather than this being broken down into a monthly or hourly fee.

In addition to the above three main pricing models for SEO, an agency or individual's costs can also be affected by other factors such as the volume of keywords you want to target and monitor and one-off fees for the amount of time required to get your campaign setup or moved over from a previous provider.

Many businesses may be reluctant to budget enough for SEO services, however in the SEO industry, the saying 'you get what you pay for' is undeniably true. If an SEO professional or agency quotes you a low price that seems too good to be true, it likely will be.

High quality, experienced and skilled SEOs will charge more due to the refined skills and knowledge they have to offer you and benefit your business' visibility.

It's tempting for businesses, particularly those with tight budgets, to opt for cheap SEO services. Remember that the cheapest is unlikely to be the best.

The results

8. How long will it take to see results?

While it is possible to achieve rankings for websites in a short space of time, obtaining high rankings for competitive search terms that people commonly use is generally not a quick process. Beware of buying services from individuals or companies that promise to rank your site within 24 to 48 hours, as this will likely result in ranking for irrelevant search terms with no search volume (IE nobody actually searches for them).

Developing rankings for competitive keywords takes months of dedicated effort. Remember - if it was easy, fast, and cheap - then everyone would rank number 1 for the terms they want.

As a general rule, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Dishonest SEO consultants may tell you what you want to hear, but reputable ones will always provide a realistic picture.

If your SEO company guarantees quick results, it's important to ask why. If they identify technical factors that need to be addressed and improved, that's a positive sign. However, if they cannot provide a valid explanation, caution is advised, as they might be using spammy techniques that could eventually lead to penalties for your website.

9. Do you offer any guaranteed rankings?

No one can provide guarantees for specific keywords or rankings in Google or any other search engine. It is advisable to avoid companies that make such claims or suggest they are part of Google / have special access to the algorithm.

It's one thing offering a projection based on data and assumptions, it's another guaranteeing certain progress. Remember, if it sounds too good to be true, it often is.

Some unscrupulous companies employ the "guarantee" tactic as a means to take your money without delivering on their promises. They may resort to other tactics, such as focusing on rankings in less popular search engines that people rarely use, utilising temporary paid listings through sponsored links, or targeting non-competitive search terms that literally have zero search volumes.

Google itself cautions against such practices, stating, "No one can guarantee a #1 ranking on Google. Beware of SEOs that claim to guarantee rankings."

Nevertheless, there are other ways to assess the quality and potential for results from your provider - read our next point.

10. Can I see results from your other clients?

Certain agencies may emphasise their "innovative" SEO strategies, but their website may be light on evidence. It's important to recognise that "innovative" can sometimes translate to "ineffective" or even "nonexistent."

Before entering into an SEO agreement, it's crucial to ensure that the provider you're considering has some evidence of delivering. Seeking social proof in the form of customer testimonials, awards and case studies is essential. Whilst seeing another company's success does not guarantee you will get exactly the same results, it should offer some reassurance.

What matters is that you can relate to these results, confirming that the agency has experience in achieving organic growth for companies similar to yours. This similarity could be in terms of size, industry, location, scale of website, or other relevant factors.

A reputable agency may even be willing to share the details of existing clients who are happy to have a phone conversation and talk through how they have worked and added value.

Conclusion

Selecting an SEO provider can be overwhelming, but it doesn't need to be. By taking a structured approach to researching potential providers, and asking them the right questions when you meet, you should be able to make your decision with confidence. We hope this guide will help you in your search, and if you would like to find out more about our SEO services just [get in touch](#). Happy hunting!



About the author



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With over 24 years of digital experience in a variety of disciplines, settings, and industries, there's not much Ben doesn't know about digital marketing!

About The SEO Works

We are the Digital Growth Experts.

As an award-winning provider of digital marketing and websites to leading brands, we've worked for more than a decade with one key goal in mind - to get businesses more customers online.

Our team of content pros, techies and experienced digital marketers consistently deliver measurable results for businesses, through intricate technical knowledge and cutting-edge creativity.

This focus on providing a real return on investment is the foundation of our agency, and it's what motivates us. But this focus on ROI has also caught the attention of awards panels, earning us prestigious accolades... like being named SEO Agency of the Year three times!

So whether it's SEO, PPC, digital PR, paid social, or web... why not [get in touch](#) and find out how we can help you grow?

