

SEO: 16 questions to ask before you pay

Not every question applies to every project: the right questions depend on what you are aiming for as an end result. Pick the ones that directly relate to the final product or the goal you want to achieve. Asking all of them without relevant judgement is more likely to confuse the person on the other side.

S1

Which metric will you report to me on, and why that one?

WHY YOU ASK

The answer to this tells you almost everything. Traffic and rankings move easily and do not mean revenue. Whoever offers them as the primary measure either does not know, or is counting on you not knowing.

A GOOD ANSWER

Ties the work to something the business counts: enquiries, orders, calls. Admits the first months are reported on intermediate signals, and says which.

A BAD ANSWER

"We will increase traffic" or "we will get you into the top 3". Nobody can guarantee a position, and anyone guaranteeing one knows it.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask to see a sample monthly report from another client with names removed. If it contains only rising graphs and not one sentence of reasoning, that is what you will get.

S2

Whose account will Search Console and Analytics live in?

WHY YOU ASK

This is your site's history. If it sits in the agency's account, ending the relationship costs you not the service but every year of data before it.

A GOOD ANSWER

Your account is the owner, they get access you can revoke. They say so before you ask.

A BAD ANSWER

"We manage them and send you reports." A report is an interpretation. The data is a fact and it should be yours.

HOW TO CHECK

Log into Search Console with your own email. If you cannot see your site, or cannot remove someone else's access, you are not the owner.

S3

Who implements the changes on the site, and is that included in the price?

WHY YOU ASK

A large share of failed contracts fail here. Recommendations are written, nobody is available to implement them, six months pass and nothing on the site has changed.

A GOOD ANSWER

States clearly who touches the site, how many hours a month are allocated, and what happens if your developer cannot keep up.

A BAD ANSWER

"We will hand recommendations to your team." If you do not have a team, that is an offer for a document, not a service.

HOW TO CHECK

At the end of each month ask one thing: what specifically changed on the site this month. If the answer is general, probably nothing did.

S4

How do you choose the topics you write about?

WHY YOU ASK

This is where the difference between content and filler hides. A hundred articles with no demand behind them are not an asset, they are a cost that later has to be cleaned up.

A GOOD ANSWER

Explains that topics come from real searches and from your customers' questions, and prefers fewer, deeper pieces over volume.

A BAD ANSWER

A fixed number of articles per month with nothing about how they are chosen. The count is the only certain thing in that offer.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask for three proposed topics and the reason behind each. If the reason is "people are interested", ask where that is visible.

S5

Do you buy links, and what happens to them if we stop?

WHY YOU ASK

Rented links disappear the month you stop paying, and take the result they were holding with them. That is the difference between an asset and a rental.

A GOOD ANSWER

Answers directly. If they buy, they say where, how many, and that stopping removes part of the effect. An honest answer here is worth more than a perfect one.

A BAD ANSWER

Dodges the question or talks about "natural authority building" without saying whether money changes hands.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask for a list of every link acquired in the last three months. A refusal is itself an answer.

S6

What exactly will happen in the first month?

WHY YOU ASK

The first month reveals the method: serious work starts with a review and a plan, not with publishing from day one.

A GOOD ANSWER

Describes specifics: a technical review, analysis of search demand and competitors, a prioritised plan, and what you receive from it in writing.

A BAD ANSWER

"We start with articles and optimisation right away." Work without a diagnosis is activity, not a service.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask for a sample first-month plan from another client, names removed. You are looking at structure, not secrets.

S7

How will you check my site's history before promising anything?

WHY YOU ASK

A site with penalties, bad links or technical legacy needs a different plan, and a promise without a review is a promise made blind.

A GOOD ANSWER

Asks for Search Console access before the offer, and says final timelines come after the review.

A BAD ANSWER

Gives deadlines and numbers at the first meeting without having seen anything. Confidence is not expertise.

HOW TO CHECK

Flip the question: ask what could ruin the plan. A specialist lists risks; a salesman has none.

S8

What share of the work is technical and what share is content, and how did you decide?

WHY YOU ASK

The balance must come from the state of your site, not from what the agency happens to sell.

A GOOD ANSWER

Ties the split to the review: says which is the bigger problem in your case and why they start there.

A BAD ANSWER

The same package for everyone: two articles and a monthly report, whatever the site is.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask them to explain in one sentence why this split for this site. The sentence either exists or it does not.

S9

How do you choose the searches we will target: by volume or by intent?

WHY YOU ASK

Big numbers impress in a report, but the buyer is the one searching with intent, and those searches are often small.

A GOOD ANSWER

Talks about intent and closeness to purchase, gives examples from your industry, and accepts that a smaller search can be worth more.

A BAD ANSWER

Shows a list of the industry's biggest keywords and promises you will be there. There is expensive, noisy and often useless.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask for the ten searches they would start with, and for each ask yourself: is the person typing this a buyer.

S10

Does the work include Google Business Profile and local presence?

WHY YOU ASK

For a business with a physical location the map often brings more calls than the site, and it is separate work that gets silently skipped.

A GOOD ANSWER

Asks whether you have premises and includes the profile, reviews and local data consistency in scope, or says honestly that it is not included.

A BAD ANSWER

Never asks whether you have a physical location at all. Then the offer is a template.

HOW TO CHECK

Search your service plus your neighbourhood from a phone. If competitors appear on the map and you do not, that is a measurable gap.

S11

Who owns the texts and materials created under the contract?

WHY YOU ASK

You pay for their creation, but without an explicit clause the rights may stay with the agency, along with the right to take them away.

A GOOD ANSWER

One sentence: everything created under the contract is your property from the moment of payment.

A BAD ANSWER

"That is standard practice, do not worry." Standard practice is exactly what is easiest to put in writing, if it is true.

HOW TO CHECK

Search the contract for the word "ownership". If it is not there, ask for it to be added and watch the reaction.

S12

Do you use AI for the content, and who checks what is written?

WHY YOU ASK

The problem is not the tool but publishing without review: a wrong fact about your product carries your name, not theirs.

A GOOD ANSWER

Answers without evasion: yes, we use it, here is who edits, fact-checks and takes responsibility for accuracy.

A BAD ANSWER

"Everything is one hundred percent hand-written." Usually untrue, and someone who lies about the method will lie about the results.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask for three published articles and check three facts in them. Accuracy is easier to verify than origin.

S13

How many pages will actually be changed each month?

WHY YOU ASK

Reports are easily filled with analyses and plans, but rankings move from changes to the site, and those can be counted.

A GOOD ANSWER

Commits to an order of magnitude: how many pages will be created or reworked monthly, with the caveat that priorities shift.

A BAD ANSWER

Only words: optimising, improving, working. Not one number that can later be checked.

HOW TO CHECK

At the end of the month ask for the list of changed addresses. A three-line list after a full month speaks for itself.

S14

What do you do when rankings drop after a Google update?

WHY YOU ASK

Algorithm updates are regular, and the response to a drop is what separates a specialist from a report subscription.

A GOOD ANSWER

Describes a procedure: identify what is affected, wait for data to stabilise, analyse and plan, plus an extra report to you.

A BAD ANSWER

"Our clients do not get hit." Everyone gets hit. The difference is who admits it and who hides it in the chart.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask about the last time a client lost visibility and what they did. A story with details is a good sign.

S15

How long is the contract, and what do I owe if I stop early?

WHY YOU ASK

A long lock-in is acceptable only against clear commitments; otherwise you are paying for the right to be unable to leave.

A GOOD ANSWER

Proposes a reasonable term with notice, explains why results take months, but does not lock you in with penalties against zero promises on their side.

A BAD ANSWER

Twelve months with no exit and a penalty, and not one measurable commitment from their side in the same document.

HOW TO CHECK

Read the termination clause before the price clause. It says more about their confidence than anything else.

S16

Will I have permanent access to the data, or a report once a month?

WHY YOU ASK

A report is an interpretation; access is control. Whoever sees the data only through someone else's eyes knows only what they are shown.

A GOOD ANSWER

Gives you permanent access to Search Console, Analytics and the work plan, with the report merely summarising what you can see yourself.

A BAD ANSWER

"We will send you everything important." The important part, selected by the person being evaluated, is a genre with a poor reputation.

HOW TO CHECK

Log into Search Console today, unannounced. If you cannot, go back to the access question.

