9 Key Questions to Ask Before You Hire an SEO

Hiring an SEO company or SEO for short (for search engine optimizer) is a major decision, not only because of the cost in dollars and time involved but also because of the outsize impact it can have on your business. Ideally, you want the SEO you hire to be highly effective, easy to work with and good at communicating with you and your team. To that end, there are some key questions you must ask before you make your final decision.

What strategies will you use to improve my search engine rankings?
Knowledgeable, professional SEOs will have no problem explaining their methods in detail. After all, they have done it numerous times. Less experienced SEOs are more like stage magicians, trying to keep their "tricks" secret from the audience. More times than not, that's because they don't know what they are doing.

Beware, however, of "one size fits all" SEO companies who employ the same strategies, regardless of client, industry or technical environment. A good SEO will explain a variety of methods that can be used, but will suggest a search and technical audit to give you recommendations for your specific site.

What tools do you use for SEO and data analysis?
A good SEO company will employ a variety of tools to analyze your site to spot problems and potential areas to strengthen. One type of tool is a crawler, which automatically crawls your site to examine it for common SEO issues. Crawlers are able to do this much faster than manually checking each URL, and are especially useful on large sites. Every SEO firm should use at least one crawler, such as Screaming Frog, Deepcrawl or Botify. Next, they should mention one or more on page SEO program, which can point out opportunities for higher rankings, build reports and track growth. These include the Google and Bing webmaster tools at a minimum, and also Searchmetrics, Moz and SEMrush.

Make sure your SEO also concentrates on off page SEO which includes links to your site from other websites, but also guest blogging, digital PR, infographic social sharing and commenting. Even having your brand mentioned on other sites without a link can help your rankings. SEOs track this with tools like Ahrefs, Majestic and Open Site Explorer.

Finally, the SEO should mention some data analysis tools. Google Trends compares trends in search terms so you can keep ahead of curve, while GTMetrix looks at your pages' load speed and Google Analytics shows you where your traffic is currently coming from. Omniture is similar to Google Analytics and provides some flexibility and superior tracking.

Can you guarantee a number one position on Google or other search engines?

This one is a bit of a trick question, because if the SEO answers "yes," it should immediately disqualify them from the project. No one can guarantee a #1 spot on Google or anywhere else. Search engine algorithms are complex and changeable and competition for common keywords is fierce, making the top spot a moving target.

A professional SEO can give you examples of past clients and their search engine position before and after their work. After delving into your site through an audit, they should be able to give you some idea of the expected results, but without any guarantee.

Do you have 3-5 past or current clients I can speak to about their experience with you?
If the SEO is not happy to share this information with you, it's a giant red flag and means that either they are new and don't have that many clients or the clients they have done work for wouldn't have good things to say about them. Ideally, past and current clients should be raving about them. In addition to asking the references about their search ranking results, be sure to also ask about how well the SEO communicates, how trustworthy the SEO is, how professional the SEO is and how easy the SEO is to work with.

What do you know about our industry?
While some SEO practices are universal, others have nuances that are specific to different industries. If the SEO has experience doing work for companies in your industry, they may have built relationships with websites, blogs and industry groups that can be beneficial to you. They will also have experience writing for your industry, which will reduce the learning curve and get results quicker.

Look out for SEOs that work for your competitors, though. If a large competitor is a client too, they may be paying more and getting more work and attention than your account. There's also the possibility of the SEO unwittingly communicating strategies and other important information to your competitor that you would prefer to keep confidential.

Who owns the design, development and content?
Considering the value of your company's digital footprint, the actual ownership of the elements of your website can be very important, particularly if you stop doing business with the SEO at some point in the future because you will want full access to every element of your website to make changes down the road. Make sure you know who owns the design (if it was custom designed for your company, then typically you own it, but if you used a theme or template, you may only have a license to it). Development includes the code, which again, if you paid for custom code, should reside with your company, but if not you may just have a license. The default for content ownership is whoever created the content, whether that is images or text. If the SEO created this content, you can have them transfer ownership to you in your contract.

How do you prioritize tasks for your teams and ours?
Although it might be counterintuitive, the order in which the SEO tackles various tasks can make a big difference. Doing things out of order can eat up precious time (and money), so it's important to prioritize properly. Generally speaking, it is good practice to start with the basics and build on that, so identifying and removing duplicate content, fixing navigation and user experience issues and making sure your design is responsive to various devices needs to come before more advanced and technical tasks. Next, the SEO should focus on setting up Google Analytics and Webmaster tools, making sure your site is indexed and doing preliminary keyword research. If you are not churning out a continuous stream of quality content for your audience, start now. Optimize your title tags, start using the more advanced tools and work to create backlinks last.

How much time and other support will you need from our in-house executive, marketing and technical personnel?
SEO is not a solo game; it requires a good amount of interaction with your people. Time spent with SEO people is time your staff isn't working on achieving other goals. On the other hand, you want to make sure you are giving the SEO all the resources they need to be successful.

Ultimately, it comes down to the issues of trust and planning. In the beginning when the relationship is new, you will want to maintain more oversight on the SEO activities, both to avoid problems and to gain an understanding of what is being done. As time goes on and you build trust, you may give the SEO more leeway to make changes without approval.

Even once you have a comfortable relationship with the SEO, however, there are some things that you will need to get more involved in. SEO companies are not the place to entrust your company's overall marketing positioning or strategy, for example. You will need an executive or someone handling marketing to step in to make some decisions. SEOs are also typically not trained to be gifted copywriters or graphic designers, so you'll need to plan for your in-house experts to interface with the SEO for a certain number of hours per week to get optimal results.

What services will you provide and how much time per month will be spent on each?
You're the one paying for SEO, so you should be crystal clear on what you will be getting for your money. The SEO will have an excellent idea of what they need to do after they do a site audit, but keep in mind that this may change over time in response to changes in your goals and needs, the competitive environment and search engine algorithms. Still, the SEO should be specific about what they will be doing at this point in time and how many hours they will dedicate to each task on a monthly basis, and give you a line item list.

Will you let me know about all changes you make to my site?

Since for your website is an important part of your company's public face, it is important to have full transparency about any work done on it. In the beginning, in particular, you may want to review recommended changes and give the SEO permission before any changes to code or content are made. If the SEO suggests new content or navigation based on search queries, it can be an opportunity for you to launch an email, social media or print campaign that will reach potential customers in a more effective way.

How do you monitor, analyze and communicate campaign results?
Like with any marketing campaign, you need to continually monitor your SEO results to find out what is working and what needs to be changed. A professional SEO will track your site's traffic and where it is coming from, your search engine rankings, the keywords used to find your site, and much more. They need to know how to interpret these results and, based on them, how to implement needed changes. All of this information should be communicated with you on a regular basis, either in person or via easy-to-read reports.

Once you've gotten satisfactory answers to these ten questions, you will have effectively weeded out inexperienced, shady and unskilled SEO firms and you will be left with a short list of viable candidates.