

Google Says: Here's What to Look for in an SEO Firm

So, you've invested time and money building a great website. But your fancy website is nothing but a money pit if it doesn't become a revenue generator for your company. It needs to generate a steady stream of qualified traffic, people who are looking for the type of solution that you offer and are likely to become paying customers.

One of the best ways to accomplish this is through SEO (search engine optimization), organically bringing your site to the top of search results for relevant keywords. The SEO process involves a lot of moving parts, so companies that are serious about optimizing their position typically hire a professional SEO company.

But how do you choose? The SEO field is so crowded that it can be confusing and difficult to choose a company to trust with your SEO business. While a good SEO firm can improve your website's rankings and deliver more traffic and potential customers, bad SEO practices can actually depress your ranking, causing damage to your business. Since SEO can be quite involved, you also want to make sure that you're only paying for work that will make a positive difference, not outdated or ineffective strategies. For answers on how to pick the best company for your SEO, we looked to Google, the 800-pound gorilla in the search world, and other experts for their tips.

A common mistake is to think of SEO as a technical area, best done by programmers and other tech geeks. To get some insight into what SEO really is, it's helpful to know how Google evaluates your website for search term rankings. According to Google, successful SEO for your website "ranks appropriately in a spot where an unbiased potential customer would expect your site to be seen." Higher-ranking sites are those where the business itself and the website are customer-centric and provide real value.

CIO Magazine sums it up this way, "Today's SEO needs to understand all of marketing at a deep level, the psychology of the human race, the specific culture to whom they're marketing, the social media landscape, web analytics, web design and development, viral marketing, content, product, business models and more."

Google recommends using this 4-step SEO evaluation process.

Step 1 – Conduct a two-way interview

When choosing various types of vendors for your company, you may be used to one-way interviews, where the vendor pitches you, while you listen and then make a decision. Because SEO is so multifaceted and touches the major aspects of your company's marketing communications, it needs to be more involved. The SEO needs to show genuine interest in your business and concern about making it as successful as possible by asking you big picture marketing questions that will guide their recommendations. These might include questions like:

- What is your unique selling proposition? How do you bring value to customers?

- Who are your customers and how do they currently find you?
- How do you make money and what is the goal of your website? Is it an online sale, an appointment set for a phone call or visit, sales inquiry lead form?
- What other channels do you use for marketing (on- and off-line)?
- Competitive analysis - who are your competitors and what do they offer compared to what you offer (product/service, delivery time, customer service, positioning, etc.)?

Step 2 – Check references

Once the SEO has passed the first test of focusing on your overall success and asking insightful questions, you need to make sure that they have a proven track record of SEO success. Ask for a list of at least three clients that you can contact. Talk to each one and ask about their results and experience. Ask things like:

- Where were their rankings on major key terms before and after the SEO had been implemented (keep in mind that it can take anywhere from four months to a year for the effects of SEO to manifest in higher rankings)?
- Were they easy to work with?
- Did they deliver quality work in a timely manner?
- Did they offer helpful, actionable advice?
- Did they educate you and your team about how search works so you could create additional content, links and navigation with that in mind?

Step 3 – Ask for a technical and search audit

At this point, you have probably eliminated those companies who didn't exhibit curiosity and interest in your business or have impeccable references and you are left with a small number of top companies. It is time to delve deeper into these remaining candidates' capabilities by asking for them to do technical and search audits of your site.

This will be something you will need to pay for and it requires a certain level of trust since you will be letting these companies peek under the hood of your business. Even so, be sure to give them only a restricted view, not full or write access, to Google search console data and analytics data. Larger companies may choose to have several contenders do the audits so they can compare notes, while a smaller business may conserve funds by only selecting its top pick to do the audits.

Search audit

In a search audit, the SEO evaluates the site and its rankings and documents its findings and recommendations, starting with a listing of any issues that are causing the site to not rank as highly as it should. This is followed by a prioritized list of recommendations to resolve the issues, with the actions that will provide the most "bang for your buck" listed first.

Each of the issues and the recommendations should be backed up with references to Google's published documentation like support threads, articles and videos, so you can see that this advice is current and will have a positive impact in rankings. Recommendations should also take

into account any technical constraints, which the SEO will have discovered by interacting with your development team, and these constraints should be noted in the audit.

Also included in the search audit is a plan to put the recommendations in place, including the cost for each step and a timeline for implementation. The search audit should conclude with the anticipated positive outcomes you can expect in ranking and traffic and how long it will take to see the results once the changes have been made.

Technical audit

The technical audit is an evaluation of the nuts and bolts of your site. The SEO will review the site for internal linking issues, crawlability, URL parameters, consistent and sufficient server connectivity and response codes. Each issue will be explained and will include recommendations for fixes, cost and timelines.

Something to look for...

As you read the audits, look to see if the SEO has made a distinction between recommendations for unbranded search queries and branded search queries, where your company name or brand was included in the search terms. For branded queries, searchers are already familiar with your company, so the emphasis should be on providing them a great experience with your website, that is in line with other online and offline communication.

With an unbranded, or generic inquiry, recommendations should focus on boosting your website in relation to the competition. Recommendations for unbranded queries might include updating obsolete content to stay current, improving internal linking to make buried content easier to find, boosting great content by creating buzz on social media and looking at what competitors are doing well and deciding whether to do the same or differentiate by focusing on a different strength or niche.

Step 4 – May the best SEO win

After going through this exercise, you should come out with a clear winner. The winner should be a company that you feel confident knows what needs to be done, has the ability to do it within a reasonable timeframe and charges a fair price.

Once you hire your SEO, it's time to put your plan into action to make a real difference in your business. Be sure you have the financial and manpower resources to execute your plan; the most common barrier to effective SEO at this stage of the game is clients who aren't prepared to work with the SEO to make the recommended changes.

This plan, straight from Google, will allow you to find and hire the best SEO for your business, helping you bring in more qualified prospects. So, get going – we'll see you at the top of the rankings!