6 Essential Questions to Vet an Agency Before Hiring Them for Your Website Design

Essential queries that your business needs to be bringing to the table before putting your most essential marketing asset in an agency's hands.

Website Know-How to Know Now

If there's anything a business needs to be willing to pour a little extra marketing dollars into, it's a well-designed, professional company website (after all, 81% of customers decide whether they want to make a purchase based on a company's website alone). But with your limited website tech knowledge and so many different web design companies, agencies, and developers touting themselves as the latest and greatest, how do you know you're going to get a top-notch website design (or re-design) that's optimized for web search and on brand and within budget, to boot?

Just ask Ally — Ally Cardello, that is, Hawthorn Creative's web strategist. Here, she outlines the most essential questions — and subsequent follow-up questions — that your business needs to be boning up on and bringing to the table in order to best vet an agency before you hand them the keys to your most essential marketing asset.

Ally Gerlach Cardello

Web Strategist & Client Services Manager

Ally holds 10 years of web development experience, working with clients that run the spectrum from a bioplastic company and wedding and event venues to hotel and travel brands and real estate investment companies.

Table of Contents

A pretty design is one thing, but do their examples show that they were built with the user experience in mind?

Who They Work With

01.

Who Are Some of the Agency's Previous Clients?

Are their clients in a similar or comparable industry as you? It's certainly not a deal-breaker if they're not, but it is more likely they'll have a leg up (and make your life easier) if they are already knowledgeable about your industry, your type of consumers, what has worked for their past clients, what hasn't, and what's on-trend in design and functionality, etc.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

If They Don't Already Work with Clients in a Similar Industry as You, Who Do They Work With?

You might find that despite different goals, the styles and designs needs may be similar.

How Might Some of Their Past Website Experiences with Other Clients Serve You?

If they've worked in more technical/functionality heavy industries (like finance/banking) they may have the resources to develop custom plugins and functionality to perfectly suit your needs.

Review the Portfolio

02.

Can They Share Currently Live Examples of Other Website Work They've Done?

The most obvious reason is to allow you to evaluate their design skills (read: Is it eye-catching or feel kind of ho-hum?). But it's just as critical to evaluate…

01. ## User Experience

The user experience (which goes by the acronym "UX"): Does it take forever for the landing page to load? Can you determine exactly what the business does when you land on the homepage? (Find more specific flaws to pay attention to in our blog post, 10 Little Things That Can Derail Your Website's Design).

02. ## Design Aesthetic

Do all their websites look, well, pretty much the same? That might be a sign that they're a bit more of a "one-trick pony" (see question number five, page 15) and not able to truly give you a unique and custom website solution based on your unique needs and goals.

03. ## Consistency

Do the examples match what they're actually showing in their deck presentation or their portfolio section of their website? If what's actually showing up online looks drastically different, it likely means that their client had to since start fresh with a new agency and new website – and it's important for you to find out why. It could mean that the website simply wasn't performing well enough or the template was handcuffing the client as the business grew.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

What Were Some of Their Clients' Goals and How Did Their Website Deliver?

If they have trouble tracking success/coming up with metrics to share that probably indicates that they don't have a lot of on-going experience/services that will continue to drive success for your business moving forward. Which leads to our next question…
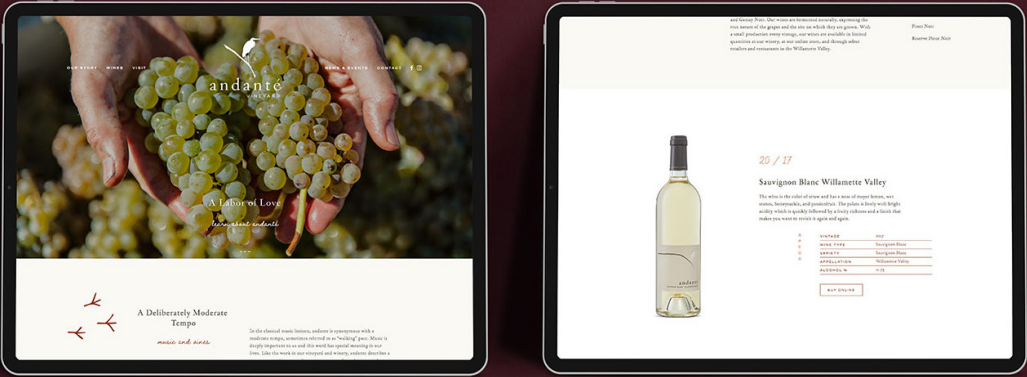
Google Analytics's insights are critical to determining whether or not your website is accomplishing its purpose.

03
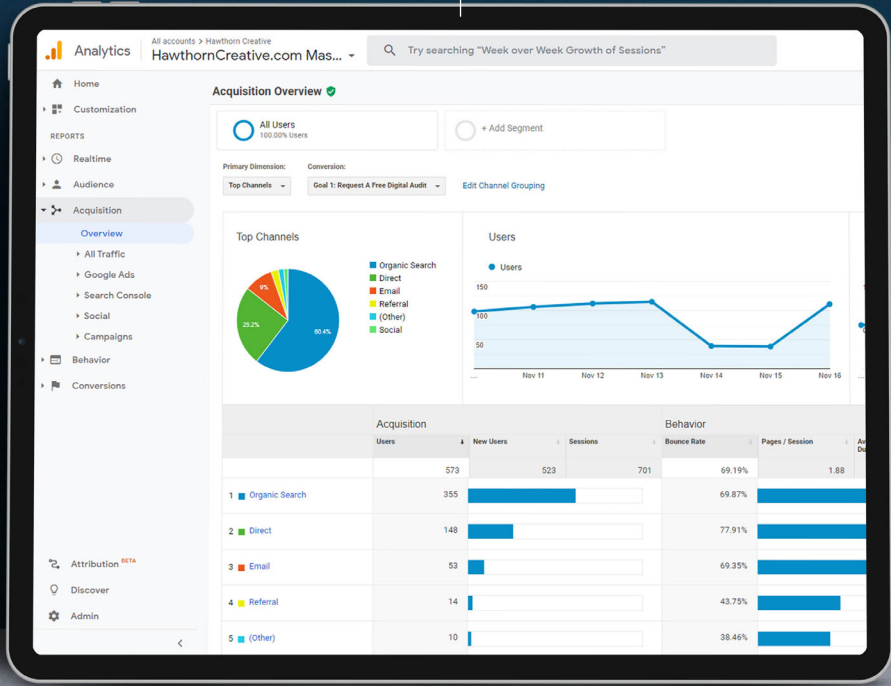
Track your ROI

How Will They Measure the Success of Your Website?

Consider it a red flag if they're too focused on touting examples of great design and not asking about your specific goals and what you want your website to achieve. Because only once they know and understand your specific goals should they strategize a unique design and structure around you, then explain how they will measure those results. Performance metrics jargon they should definitely be dropping: web traffic, completed forms, time spent on page, bounce rates, etc.
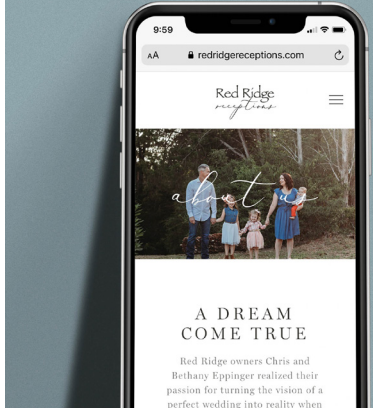
FOLLOW-UP QUESTION:

### Will the Project Include Some Sort of On-Going Reporting Plan?

A good agency won't launch your website, then leave you hanging. You should expect some on-going reporting on your website performance from the agency, even if that's as little as once a quarter for the duration of a year post-launch. Because a truly effective website shouldn't be a static thing, it should take into account what pages/features/CTAs perform well, then be adjusted/altered based on what the reports are showing.

04

Platforms with Purpose

What Content Management Systems (CMS) Do They Work In?

While there are many CMS options out there, any agency worth their salt should know – at the very least – the two website building platforms that are most widely used: WordPress, followed by Squarespace. No, not every system is, of course, equally suited to every individual purpose. And, yes, because they are open-source (meaning they are maintained by a community of developers, not developed and owned by a single company), they do start with templates. But, thanks to custom plugins and having a web agency confident in coding, it's amazing how customizable these particular systems can be – and at a fraction of the price of having to build a website totally from scratch.
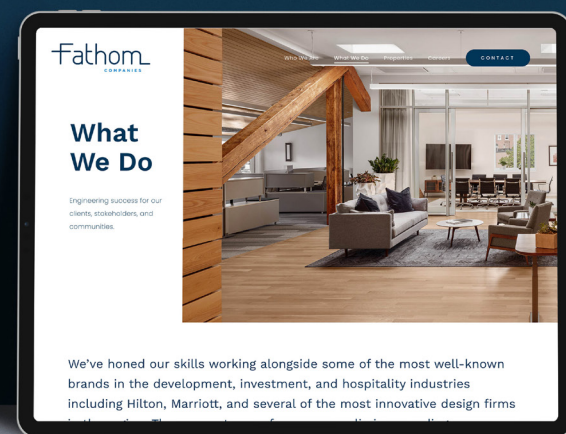
Both Squarespace and WordPress offer a wide library of ready-made templates to build your unique site from.

Our take on Proprietary CMS

At Hawthorn Creative, we stay entirely away from proprietary CMSs because we've known one too many of our own clients who were previously burned by them. That's because if an agency owns the CMS outright, it can be very difficult, and potentially expensive, to go elsewhere if you're not happy with the results. You won't be able to simply bring your present website to another agency; rather, you'll need to have your entire site rebuilt in a different CMS. Not to mention, if that previous agency owns the copyright to that design, it could also require a complete website redesign. This can be a huge headache, often leading to organizations remaining with an agency they are not happy with.

BLOG INSIGHTS:

A Website Redesign Success Story for the COVID Age

A Dream Design on a Budget

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

If They Don't Work in One (or Several) of These Open-Source Systems, Does that Mean They Work in a Proprietary CMS?

A proprietary CMS is built and maintained by a particular agency or web company, meaning they own the CMS, and you'll pay a license fee (often on a monthly basis) to be able to use it.

If They Work in a Proprietary CMS, Can They Talk About the Benefits of Doing So for You?

Websites built using an existing framework or template are often less expensive and quicker to build because the functionality is already set up. However, this also means that they're less flexible and not custom to your business or your needs.

What Do They Know

05.
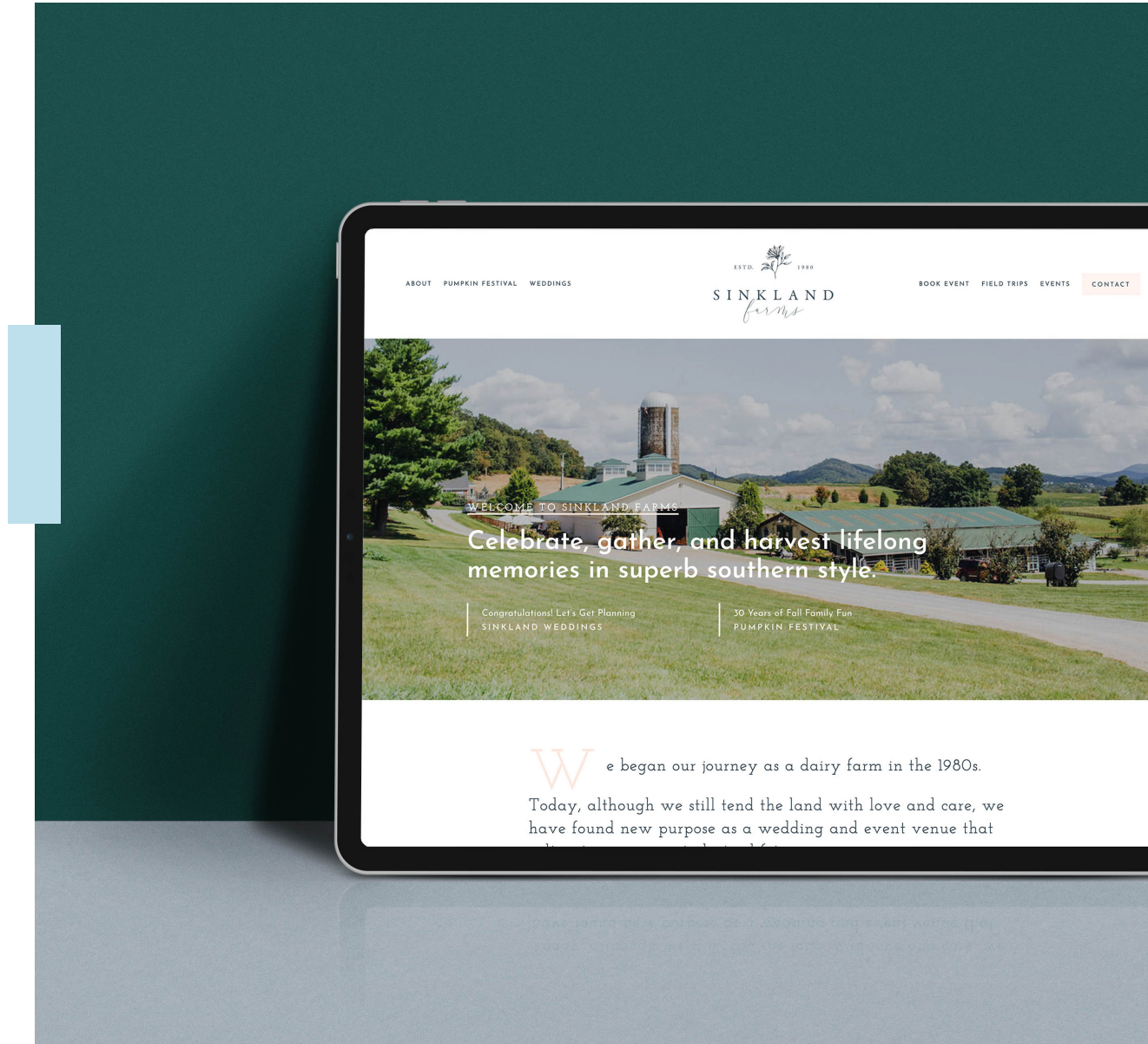
Are They a Swiss Army Knife or a One-Track Pony?

Meaning: Is the agency or developer well-versed in doing all things website-related — not just design, but writing content that is on-brand and primed for SEO, knowledgeable in SEM (Google ads and other paid search), etc. Depending on your needs, working with an agency that has an entire team of in-house website pros is a huge asset to have at your disposal. And that's precisely what every website project — large or small — that signs up with Hawthorn Creative receives.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

How Do They See Potentially Incorporating New Features Down the Road?

Again, a good website will be able to be flexible and grow with your company: What additional elements or features would this agency recommend doing down the road to continue to improve your website's traffic and conversion rate? I.e. Introducing or managing your website blog? What other content marketing elements might they suggest (like paid social media management to drive more people to your website)?

06

Launch Essentials

What Does Their Pre- & Post-Launch Process Look Like?

When it's finally time to go live, agencies and their clients can be so eager to get a project complete and out the door that they may forget essential steps that will inevitably impact future performance. Common mistakes we've seen include: missing optimized title tags and meta descriptions on all pages, forgetting image alt tags, not adding a favicon, forgetting to install Google Analytics, not ensuring that all links from your old site will now lead to your new site through 301 redirects, among others. Be sure to ask if once the website is live, will they be enabling indexing, installing automatic backups and security, monitoring results in Google Analytics, etc.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION:

What Level of Guarantee Do They Provide Post-Launch?

Will they guarantee all design and functionality for at least 30 days from launch? Will they train your staff on using/updating your CMS (if so, ask to see a training manual provided to a past client). Lastly, what level of support does the agency provide on an ongoing basis?

FREE WEBSITE AUDIT:

Is Your Website Truly Going to Work for You?
Let Us Peek Under the Hood

Good Web Jargon to Know

We decode some common "web speak," so you'll be able to understand the ideas driving good website design – plus, why it all matters when it comes to converting consumers.

UX Stands for "User Experience."

It's a key component of all website design because it doesn't focus on how something looks, but instead on how something works. Your consumer needs to be able to find what they're looking for quickly and easily. If they don't, they won't stay on your site for long.

IA Stands for "Information Architecture."

It's basically how people get around your website. Think of the options you see at the top of the homepage when you go to your favorite sites that lead you to different pages when you click on them. You want your navigation, or menus, to be clearly visible and well organized so people can get to where they need to go.

PSD is a File Format

Adobe Photoshop's, to be specific. When building website designs, designers typically use PSDs to create and manipulate layout, images, and content.

CTA Stands for "Call to Action."

A crucial part of any website, a CTA is a design element, frequently a button or link, that serves to highlight what you want people to do on your site. Some common examples include "Book an Appointment," "Subscribe to Our Newsletter," and "Contact Us." See our blog post, 5 Keys for Writing Irresistible CTAs Every Marketer Should Know to take your CTAs to the next level.
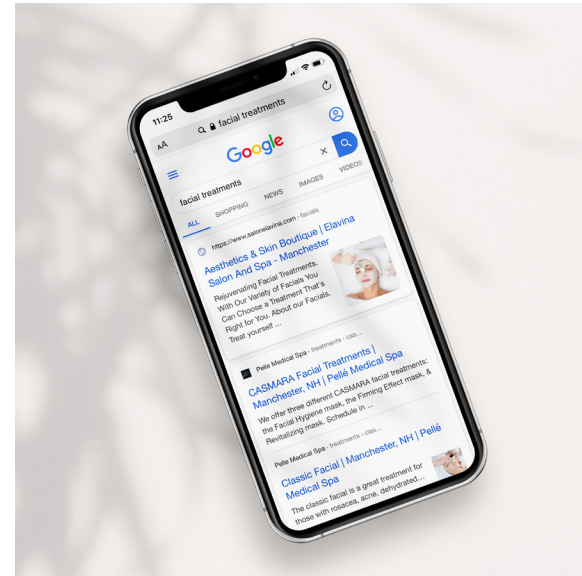
SERPS Stands for "Search Engine Result Pages."

SERPs are the pages that Google and other search engines show in response to a user's search query. They're made up of organic and paid search results.

SEM Stands for "Search Engine Marketing."

This is a form of internet marketing that seeks to promote websites by increasing their visibility in SERPs, whether that means you're doing it through paid search campaigns (think purchasing and running Google Ads to rank your business above your competitor) or organic search (see SEO definitely below). However, most marketers tend to associate SEM with solely paid search marketing.

SEO Stands for "Search Engine Optimization."

There are a lot of ways to get people to your website, but the biggest driver of traffic for many company websites is through organic search – people simply plunking in search terms into engines like Google or Bing. SEO is the term for a set of tactics that will move your site up in the rankings so that you appear higher in SERPs when people are looking for businesses like yours.

Like What You're Hearing?
Want to Hear More?

Our team of designers, writers, and strategists
are at your digital disposal.

Let's Connect

HAWTHORN
CREATIVE

33 Jewell Court
Portsmouth, NH 03801
P 603.610.0533
W hawthorncreative.com

BRANDS WE'VE BUILT WEBSITES FOR

360dg.com   twentymilehouse.com   fathomcompanies.com