Red Flags

How to spot a bad SEO agency before you sign

A plain-English guide for UK small business owners

Before you read this

If you run a small business, there's a good chance there's an SEO agency in your inbox or voicemail right now — someone who "noticed your website isn't ranking" and can "get you to the top of Google." Some of them are good. A lot of them are not, and telling the two apart is genuinely hard when you're not technical. That difficulty is exactly what the bad ones count on.

SEO — search engine optimisation, the work of getting your website to show up on Google when people search for what you do — is one of the best investments a small business can make. Done well, it brings you a steady flow of customers who were already looking for you, without paying for every click. Done badly or dishonestly, it drains £300 to £1,500 a month for months while nothing happens — or worse, leaves your website in a worse state than when you started.

We should be upfront: we're an SEO agency too. ROJ Integrations builds websites and does SEO for small businesses around Manchester and Stockport. So you could fairly ask why we're handing you a guide to spotting bad SEO agencies. The honest answer is that the cowboys make the whole industry harder to trust — every owner who gets burned becomes someone who'll never believe an honest agency again. We'd rather you knew what good looks like, even if you never hire us.

This isn't about fear. Most of the warning signs are simple once someone points them out, and a few plain questions will flush out a dodgy agency fast. What follows is eight red flags to watch for when you're being pitched — what each looks like, why they do it, what it costs you, and the exact question to ask that forces them to show their hand. It takes about ten minutes to read. Keep it next to you on your next sales call.

Red flag 1 "Guaranteed page one of Google"

What it looks like. The pitch leans on a promise — "we guarantee you'll be on page one," maybe even "or your money back." It's the exact thing you want to hear, which is precisely why they say it.

Why they do it. Nobody controls Google's rankings — not even Google's own staff. A guarantee isn't confidence, it's a closing technique, and the "guarantee" is usually hollow: page one for a search term nobody actually types, or buried under so many conditions it never has to pay out.

What it costs you. You sign up on a promise that can't be kept, and by the time you realise, you're months and a few thousand pounds in. Worse, chasing a "guarantee" often pushes agencies toward risky shortcuts that can get your site penalised.

> **ASK THEM**
> ***Can you put that page-one guarantee in writing — naming the exact search terms, and the refund terms if you miss?***

A good answer. An honest agency won't guarantee rankings at all. They'll explain results depend on your market and competition, give you a realistic timeframe (usually three to six months before you see real movement), and talk about enquiries rather than promises.

A bad answer. They repeat the guarantee but go vague on the specifics — which terms, measured how, refunded how. Or it turns out the "guaranteed" terms are ones no customer would ever search for.

Red flag 2 Pricing that's too cheap — or too expensive

What it looks like. This comes in two flavours. The suspiciously cheap: "SEO, £99 a month, cancel anytime." And the suspiciously expensive: £2,000–£3,000-plus a month quoted to a one-van plumber or a single local clinic.

Why they do it. At £99, real SEO is impossible — the work takes more hours than that price could ever cover, so they either do almost nothing or run automated, spammy tactics across hundreds of clients at once. At the top end, some agencies simply charge whatever a nervous owner will pay, padding the bill with work a small local business doesn't need.

What it costs you. Cheap SEO means you pay for nothing, or pay for damage. Overpriced SEO means you're quietly funding someone else's margin. For a typical UK local business, genuine local SEO runs roughly £300–£800 a month; £2,000-plus is for truly competitive or national campaigns, not a local trade.

ASK THEM
At this price, how many hours a month are you actually spending on my account — and doing what?

A good answer. They can tell you roughly where the time goes — technical fixes, content, your Google listing, reporting — and the price sits in a sensible range for a business like yours.

A bad answer. They can't or won't say how the time is spent, wave it away as "it's all included," or justify a big number with jargon instead of actual work.

Red flag 3 Dodgy backlinks that can get your site penalised

What it looks like. This one's invisible in the pitch, which is what makes it dangerous. The agency promises fast results and talks about "building links" or "off-page SEO." A backlink is simply a link to your website from another website — Google treats them a little like recommendations, so they genuinely matter. The trouble is that cheap agencies often buy them in bulk from spammy, irrelevant sites.

Why they do it. Buying junk links is fast and cheap, and it can nudge rankings up briefly — just long enough to look like progress on a monthly report — before Google catches on.

What it costs you. When Google spots unnatural links, it can penalise your site, so you end up ranking worse than if you'd done nothing at all. Cleaning it up costs more than the SEO ever did, and you're left with a website that's actively harder to recover.

ASK THEM
How exactly do you build backlinks, and can you show me examples of the kinds of sites you'd get my business linked from?

A good answer. They talk about earning links from real, relevant UK sites — local press, suppliers, directories that actually matter, genuine content people want to reference — and they're happy to show you examples.

A bad answer. They get cagey, hide behind "proprietary methods," or boast about volume ("500 backlinks a month"). Real link-building is slow, and quality beats quantity every time — big numbers are a warning, not a selling point.

Red flag 4 No clear deliverables, month to month

What it looks like. You ask what you actually get for your money each month, and the answer is fog: "ongoing optimisation," "we manage everything," "it's a continuous process." Plenty of words, nothing you could ever tick off a list.

Why they do it. Vague scope means they can bill you every month while doing very little, and you've no agreed list of work to hold them to.

What it costs you. You pay a retainer indefinitely with no way to judge whether you're getting value, and months slip past before you realise how little has actually been done.

ASK THEM
What specifically will you do in month one, and what will I have to show for it at the end of it?

A good answer. They describe concrete work — a technical audit, specific pages rewritten, your Google listing sorted, a content plan started — and they tell you how they'll report what got done.

A bad answer. They stay up at the level of "optimisation" and "visibility" and can't name a single thing you'd actually receive.

Red flag 5 They won't let you see what they're doing

What it looks like. Once you've signed, the work disappears behind a curtain. No monthly report — or a report that's all upward-pointing graphs and no detail. No list of changes made, no ranking data you can check, no access to your own figures.

Why they do it. If you can't see the work, you can't question it. Keeping you in the dark protects an agency that isn't doing much — or is doing things it would rather you didn't see.

What it costs you. You're paying every month on pure faith, with no way to judge the work or take it elsewhere if it's poor — because you don't even know what's been done in your name.

ASK THEM
What reporting do I get each month, and will I have my own login to Google Analytics and Search Console?

A good answer. A plain-English monthly report, your own access to your analytics (which should be in your name, not theirs), and a willingness to walk you through what changed and why.

A bad answer. Reporting is vague or missing, or they keep your analytics under their own account "to keep it simple." Your data should always be yours to see.

Red flag 6 They chase traffic, not customers

What it looks like. The reports celebrate numbers that sound impressive — "traffic up 300%," "now ranking for 2,000 keywords" — but your phone isn't ringing any more than it was. Lots of visitors, no more enquiries.

Why they do it. Visitor counts and keyword numbers are easy to inflate and easy to dress up. Actual enquiries and customers are much harder to fake, so a weak agency steers you toward the flattering numbers instead.

What it costs you. It feels like it's working because the graph goes up, so you keep paying — while the only number that matters, money coming through the door, stays exactly where it was.

ASK THEM
How will we measure this in enquiries and customers — not just traffic and rankings?

A good answer. They care about the same thing you do: calls, form submissions, bookings, real leads. They'll set up tracking so you can tie the SEO work back to actual enquiries.

A bad answer. They keep pointing at traffic and rankings, and get visibly uncomfortable when you ask to connect the work to real customers.

Red flag 7 They hold your website, Google listing or data hostage

What it looks like. The agency sets everything up "to make it easy for you" — but your website, your domain name, your Google Business Profile (your free listing on Google Maps and search, and the single biggest win for most local businesses) and your analytics all end up under their accounts, not yours. Then you try to leave.

Why they do it. If they own your digital assets, you can't easily walk away — and some will hold them to ransom, demanding a payment to hand back what was rightfully yours all along.

What it costs you. You're trapped with an agency you've outgrown, and leaving can mean losing your website, your rankings, your reviews, even your domain name — or paying to get them back.

> ASK THEM
> ***Will my website, domain, Google Business Profile and analytics all be registered in my name, with me as the owner?***

A good answer. Yes, without hesitation — everything in your name, with them added only as a manager. You can remove their access at any time and keep everything.

A bad answer. They want things under their own accounts "for convenience," or get evasive about who owns what. That convenience is a leash.

Red flag 8 Long lock-in contracts with no way out

What it looks like. The contract ties you in for twelve months (sometimes longer), with no break clause and a penalty for leaving early — presented as "just standard" or "so we have time to deliver."

Why they do it. A long tie-in guarantees their income whether or not they perform. An agency that's confident in its work doesn't need to trap you; one that isn't, does.

What it costs you. If the work turns out to be poor, you're stuck paying for months with no way out — which is the exact situation a lock-in is designed to create.

> ASK THEM
> ***Do you offer rolling monthly terms — and if not, why do you need to lock me in?***

A good answer. Most reputable UK agencies work on rolling monthly terms, or a short initial period, because SEO genuinely does take a few months to show. They earn your continued business month to month, and they're comfortable with you being free to leave.

A bad answer. They insist on a long contract and reach for pressure — "this price is only if you sign today," "everyone signs twelve months." Urgency is a sales tactic, not a reason.

What to do with this

None of this means SEO is a scam, or that every agency is out to get you. Plenty are honest, skilled and genuinely good value. The point of this guide is simply to even things up — so you can walk into the conversation able to tell the difference.

You don't need to interrogate anyone. Just keep these questions to hand and ask them plainly. An honest agency will welcome them — good ones are usually relieved to meet an owner who knows what to ask, because it means they won't be lumped in with the cowboys. The ones who turn defensive, vague or pushy when you ask simple, fair questions are telling you everything you need to know.

A decent rule of thumb: if an agency is confident, transparent, and happy for you to understand and own your own digital presence, you're probably in safe hands. If they trade on promises, pressure and keeping you in the dark, walk away — there are better options out there.

> **Want a second opinion before you sign?**
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> If you'd like an honest view of where your website actually stands — no strings, no sales pitch — we offer a free SEO check at rojintegrations.com/free-check. And if, after reading this, you decide we're not for you either, that's completely fine. Knowing what to look for is the real win.