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Digital marketing and strategy: 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.

D1

What problem are we solving, and how did you establish it?

WHY YOU ASK

A strategy that starts with channels instead of a problem is a service list. This question shows whether anyone looked at your business or opened a template.

A GOOD ANSWER

Asks more questions than they answer in the first conversation. Wants numbers: where customers come from now, what sells and what does not.

A BAD ANSWER

Arrives with a finished proposal at the second meeting without having asked you for a single number.

HOW TO CHECK

Read the first page of the strategy. If you swap in another company name and the text still holds, it was not written for you.

D2

What assumptions sit behind these numbers?

WHY YOU ASK

Every forecast rests on assumptions. When they are not written down, the number looks like a fact but is an opinion with a decimal point.

A GOOD ANSWER

Lists them without hesitation and says which are least certain. Gives a range rather than a single value.

A BAD ANSWER

"These are industry averages." Industry averages know nothing about your catalogue, your city or your prices.

HOW TO CHECK

Pick the largest number in the document and ask what happens if it is half that. If the whole plan collapses, the plan is fragile.

D3

What are we not going to do, and why?

WHY YOU ASK

This is the question that separates judgement from a catalogue. Every business has limited budget and attention. A strategy with nothing excluded made no decisions at all.

A GOOD ANSWER

Excludes channels by name, with reasons: no audience there, no resource to sustain it, does not pay back at your average order value.

A BAD ANSWER

The plan includes everything: SEO, ads, social, email, video. It looks thorough and means the prioritising is still yours to do.

HOW TO CHECK

Count the channels in the document. If there are more than three for the first six months, ask who executes them and with what budget.

D4

Who executes this after you hand it over?

WHY YOU ASK

The most common ending for a good strategy is a drawer. If nobody can execute it, the document is a cost with no result, however good it is.

A GOOD ANSWER

Asks early what team you have and shapes the plan around it. Clearly separates what your own person can do from what needs an outsider.

A BAD ANSWER

The plan assumes a marketing department you do not have. You will discover this in month three.

HOW TO CHECK

Take the first task in the plan and hand it to the person who will do it. If they cannot tell what is being asked, the plan is not executable in your company.

D5

How will we know in three months that it is not working?

WHY YOU ASK

A strategy with no stop condition can never officially fail, which is why it keeps absorbing budget. This question is the fuse.

A GOOD ANSWER

Names a specific signal and a date: if this number has not moved by month three, we stop and reconsider.

A BAD ANSWER

"Marketing takes time." It does. That is still not an answer to the question, it is a way of not answering it.

HOW TO CHECK

Put the stop condition in your calendar with a date. On that date check it, whatever the conversation says.

D6

What research does the price include: who will you talk to and what data will you look at?

WHY YOU ASK

A strategy without research is an opinion with a cover, and the price difference between the two is exactly this work.

A GOOD ANSWER

Lists the sources: conversations with you and your customers, your numbers, search demand data, and says how long this takes.

A BAD ANSWER

A finished proposal at the second meeting, without having asked for a single number from your business.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask how many of your customers they will talk to. Zero is an answer that says everything about the method.

D7

How many competitors will you examine, and what exactly will you compare?

WHY YOU ASK

"Competitor analysis" without a list and criteria usually means looking at three websites for one afternoon.

A GOOD ANSWER

Names the competitors and says what is compared: channels, positioning, prices, content, and in what form you will see it.

A BAD ANSWER

"We will look at the market." A market is not looked at. Specific companies are examined on specific criteria.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask for the competitor list in advance and add one they missed. The reaction is the test.

D8

Is the description of my customer based on data or on assumptions?

WHY YOU ASK

A customer portrait invented in a meeting room leads everything after it in the wrong direction.

A GOOD ANSWER

Stands on real traces: who buys now, what they ask, where they come from, and separates knowledge from assumption explicitly.

A BAD ANSWER

A persona with a name, an age and a hobby, composed without a single conversation with a real customer.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask: which of this do we know and which do we assume. A good document makes that distinction by itself.

D9

How will the budget be split across channels, and why that way?

WHY YOU ASK

The allocation is the strategy itself: the numbers per channel are the decisions, everything else is preamble.

A GOOD ANSWER

Gives a breakdown with the logic behind every number, and says which will be revisited after the first data.

A BAD ANSWER

Equal percentages, or gut feel, without one reason that could be challenged.

HOW TO CHECK

For every line ask one question: why this and not half of it. The answer should be arithmetic, not conviction.

D10

Which indicators will we track, and who defines them now?

WHY YOU ASK

If "results" are not defined before the start, in three months everyone will call something different a result.

A GOOD ANSWER

Defines a small number of indicators with an exact formula and data source before anything begins.

A BAD ANSWER

Many indicators without formulas. The more numbers in a report, the easier it is for something to always be growing.

HOW TO CHECK

Pick one indicator and ask: where exactly will I see this number and how is it calculated. A vague answer now is a dispute later.

D11

In what form do I receive the strategy, and how many revision rounds are included?

WHY YOU ASK

An unspecified format breeds disappointment: you expect an execution plan, you receive a presentation of principles.

A GOOD ANSWER

Describes the document: length, structure, month-by-month plan, and the included number of revisions after your notes.

A BAD ANSWER

"You will see, it will be thorough." Thorough without structure is long, not useful.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask for the document’s table of contents in advance: just the section titles. One page that aligns expectations.

D12

What input is expected from my team, and how much time will it cost us?

WHY YOU ASK

A strategy needs your data, your people and your decisions, and unannounced involvement turns into waiting and then into an excuse.

A GOOD ANSWER

Gives a list: which data, which meetings, how many hours on your side, and when exactly they will be needed.

A BAD ANSWER

"You need to do nothing, we handle everything." Then everything stalls waiting for access nobody requested.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask how many hours of your time the whole process will cost. An answer under an hour means nobody will ask you anything, which is worse.

D13

What happens if after the first month the data contradicts the plan?

WHY YOU ASK

A plan is a hypothesis, and the attitude to contradicting data separates method from stubbornness.

A GOOD ANSWER

Says in advance: which signals we watch, when the plan gets revisited, and what is not touched over one weak month.

A BAD ANSWER

"The plan is long-term, have patience." Patience is a virtue only when there is data that the direction is right.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask for an example where they changed their own strategy because of data. Whoever has no example has no method.

D14

Can my business handle the results you are planning?

WHY YOU ASK

A strategy that brings more enquiries than you can serve produces disappointed customers instead of growth.

A GOOD ANSWER

Asks about capacity: how many orders or clients you can absorb, and paces the plan to it, including in stages.

A BAD ANSWER

Plans the maximum, because the big number sells the strategy. What happens afterwards is not their problem.

HOW TO CHECK

Do the maths yourself: if enquiries double next year, who handles them. If there is no answer, tell the strategist now.

D15

Does the strategy include a calendar: what starts when?

WHY YOU ASK

Without order and dates a strategy is a wish list, and the order is half of the decision.

A GOOD ANSWER

Gives a month-by-month plan with sequence and dependencies: what starts first, what waits for the previous result.

A BAD ANSWER

Everything is important and everything starts immediately. Meaning nobody prioritised.

HOW TO CHECK

Look at month one of the calendar. More than three new things in it means the plan was written for a team you do not have.

D16

Do you stay available after handover, and at what price?

WHY YOU ASK

Questions begin at execution, and a strategist who disappears after handover leaves the document an orphan.

A GOOD ANSWER

Includes a support period: agreed hours per month for questions and execution review, with a clear price afterwards.

A BAD ANSWER

Delivers the document and is done. Formally correct, practically insufficient.

HOW TO CHECK

Ask what one hour of consultation costs after handover. No answer means no afterwards was planned.