EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW *before* BUYING A WEBSITE

We know most people are baffled by all things web.

This guide will give you practical advice to keep you safe from website sharks including shed loads of useful hints and tips, specific questions to ask web developers and how to spot potential warning signs.

We'll steer you clear of content disasters & set you on the road to a fantastic and user-friendly site.

Whether you're about to take the leap with your first ever website or you need to upgrade an existing one, this guide will help.

THIS WEB GUIDE

This guide has been designed to help save you time, money and endless frustrations. It will help you to find a web developer that suits your needs and helps your business thrive.

This guide is split into five sections:

- **Part 1: The Introduction** - We'll introduce ourselves, our expertise and ethos, testimonials and examples of the website nightmares we've encountered.

- **Part 2: The Foundations** - this covers the important choices you need to make before you even think about spending any money, including domain name and website platforms.

- **Part 3: Your Website** - focuses on content, images, on page SEO and best practice and your responsibilities.

- **Part 4: Web Hosting** - explores the differences between self hosting, partially managed and fully managed hosting allowing you to choose the most suitable for your website. Also covers SSL certificates.

- **Part 5: Questions** - This section lists the questions you need to ask all potential web developers so you can decide if they are able to provide the type of service you need.

EXPERIENCE & EXPERTISE

Swell Pixel is owned and run by us, Lorna and Andrew Crystal. We've owned and run a successful web and digital consultancy business for over 10 years and we each have over 15 years experience working with websites.

Andrew is an experienced server administrator and IT network specialist. He splits his time between his role within Swell Pixel and his long standing role as a senior project and IT manager for a chemical company, overseeing and implementing six-figure projects. During his time with the company it has grown from a start-up business to having a multi-million pound turnover and extensive global trade.

Lorna worked in senior administrative roles for international companies before moving into the world of websites. Starting as a content manager for a nationwide training organisation, she progressed to software testing and optimising user experiences. Learning about websites from the ground up, across a variety of different platforms, means Lorna is skilled at providing advice that works and ensuring that pitfalls are avoided.

OUR ETHOS

Most people understand very little about websites and the online world and many web developers seem to take advantage of this.

With our combined expertise covering all areas of websites, hosting, IT, content management, SEO, project management and business management we can help.

Our ethos is to provide trustworthy, honest, easy to follow advice to all businesses, without obligation.

Even before we started our own business, friends and acquaintances would come to us for web advice.

Everyone who came to us did so because they felt they'd been let down or ripped off by their web company.

They felt that they were being held to ransom and were frustrated, upset, angry and in some cases fearful that problems with their web developer were going to force their business to close.

TESTIMONIAL & PRAISE

As the greatest testimony to our success, in over 10 years, we have never needed to advertise our web, hosting and digital consultancy services*. All of our clients have come from word-of-mouth recommendations or from organic conversations held in random places - we don't do networking events!

We set up business social media accounts when we relocated over 300 miles away, we (wrongly) assumed we'd lose clients and need to get established in the new area. The accounts weren't needed and we closed them within months - we're not keen on doing extra work when we don't have to!

> *Invaluable dealing with technical aspects of the website and helping to grow our online presence*
>
> *Director of Wavehunters Ltd*

> *I always recommend Swell Pixel to my clients*
>
> *Paul Yearsley, PC Rite, Network & server administration specialist*

**Only now that we have launched guides and courses have we begun to advertise these using google ads and our existing network of satisfied customers so that we can help as many people as possible.*

WEBSITE NIGHTMARES

These are some of the ***common*** website nightmares we've dealt with on behalf of our clients, or provided advice about, over the last 15 years.

Sadly, these are not rare examples, we get emails about similar experiences every week.

Web developer bought a domain name on their client's behalf and then refused to give them access. It wasn't clearly labelled on invoice so they struggled to prove ownership. After a lengthy dispute the client '*won*' the right to their domain. This wasted their time and money when they wanted to be expanding their online presence.

Client had a bespoke website built and then their relationship with the web developer broke down. The web developer refused to hand over the website because the code was their 'intellectual property.' A lengthy dispute, involving legal teams, occurred before the client managed to get a copy of their website.

Web developer took a gap year to travel the world without telling their clients! They were un-contactable, and clients were unable to make any changes to their website (no CMS access), renew domain names or move websites to new hosting.

Web development company closed for business unexpectedly.

Their clients didn't have access to any of their assets and had to start from scratch.

WEBSITE NIGHTMARES

Bespoke CMS system was built and then web company closed.
Client was able to move to a new web company but because the system was bespoke (and sloppily coded) the time involved in making changes and rectifying errors by the new company meant unexpected expense for the client.

Website built and hosted by a company that didn't manage software and security updates.
By the time the site was moved to a new hosting company the many large updates that were needed conflicted with the website styling and the client had to pay for the website style to be fixed.

A business was bought complete with website but they didn't ensure the domain name was transferred into their name.

The original owners could not be traced and as such they were unable to make any changes to the website (and as a result the whole company brand) was useless.

We can help prevent you from making costly mistakes and wasting your time, reduce your frustration and arm you with the knowledge to ensure you choose a web company that will produce positive results for your business.

PART 2 - THE FOUNDATION

Before you even start looking for a web developer you need to have a grasp of the very basics - don't worry this is nothing too technical and we will explain everything.

Without this knowledge it's easy to end up with a website that isn't suitable for you needs, or worse, having a 'nightmare' story of your own to tell.

This section will cover:

- Domain Names
- Platform choices
- Platform pros & cons
- 'Free' websites
- Our platform recommendations

Once you understand the options available you are able to make an informed choice about what type of website is best for your business.

DOMAIN NAMES

A domain name is the name of your website plus the suffix eg, .com, .co.uk, .org etc

There are hundreds of millions of websites live and even more domain names registered and therefore taken. The chances your first choice of domain name is available are slim. Keep an open mind and be prepared to be flexible.

When it comes to choosing a domain name there are now many different suffixes available but where possible stick to the best known ones eg, .com, .org or a country suffix such as .co.uk.

Access to your domain name is needed to put your website & emails live. You will need to provide your web developer with access to the domain account unless you are confident enough to do it yourself.

You need to choose a name that your customers can remember and spell easily. A complicated or difficult to spell domain means that potential customers will easily forget about you and are more likely to use one of your competitors.

IS THE NAME IMPORTANT?

If the name reflects the nature of your business then great but don’t be ruled by this – it isn’t as important as it once was.

Whereas at one time it was a major factor if you could get the business type (and if appropriate the location) in the domain this is no longer as important. For example people may search for 'dog walker Cornwall' but having the domain name dogwalkercornwall.co.uk doesn’t mean you will automatically feature at the top of the search results or even on the first few pages – there is a lot more to it than that. Focus on choosing a domain that you like.

Depending on your business you could choose a ‘vanity’ domain, such as your name, but you need to think about the future of your business. If you/ your expertise are the central point to your business then choosing a vanity domain is a good idea but remember if you ever want to sell your business having a vanity domain could cause extra complications as your name will always be associated with it.

DOMAIN REGISTRARS

Buying a domain name is very easy. There are hundreds of companies that offer this service, called domain name registrars. Domain name registrars are authorised to register new domain names and manage existing ones.

Your first step is to choose a registrar. The most popular ones include names.com, domain.com and godaddy.com.

We'll use godaddy as the example because it's one of the biggest and best known registrars and is usually fairly good on price.

It can pay to shop around as prices change all the time and many registrars run special promotions but might be expensive on renewals.

Often you will see domains advertised at a very low price - this is often for 1 year when you are required to buy 2 or more years. So be aware that the price at checkout will be higher!

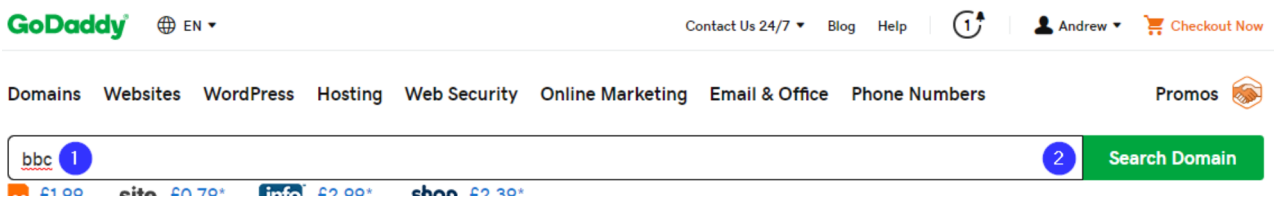
BUYING A DOMAIN

Once you've chosen a registrar and decided on a rough idea for your domain name the first step is checking whether it's available. All registrars will check this as part of the registration.

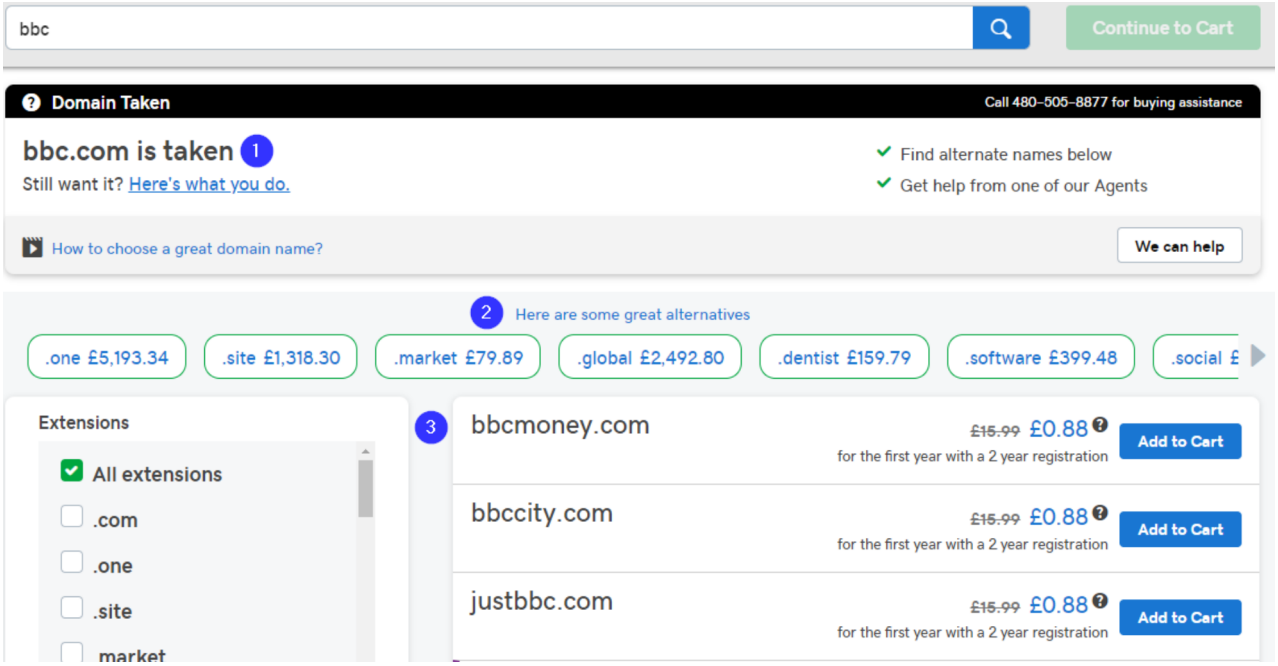
The screenshot below shows the process on godaddy.

Step One - enter the domain name (you don't need to add the extension but it can help if you want to check something specific like .co.uk).

Step Two - hit 'Search Domain' to see what is available.



As expected the domain is taken, as shown below.

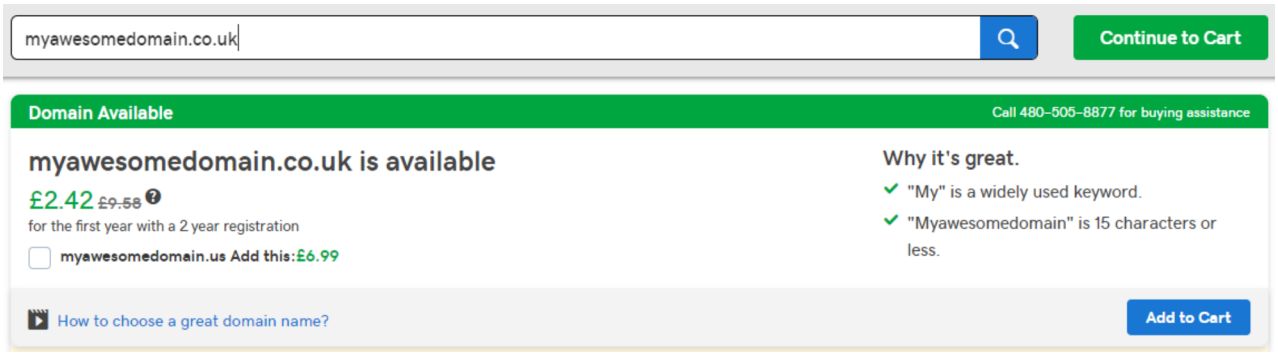


As well as confirming that bbc.com is already taken (1) it also shows some other available extensions (2) and some alternative suggestions (3) such as bbcmoney.com.

Under the confirmation that the domain is taken there is also a link saying “Still want it? Here’s what you do” – this offers a service to contact the domain owner to see if they are willing to sell it. We’d only recommend this if you have very good reason to want a specific domain name, have checked that there doesn’t seem to be an existing website there AND are prepared to pay (potentially) quite a lot of money. It’s almost always quicker, cheaper and easier to come up with an alternative domain name.

You can alter the domain name, add extensions and search again until you find an available domain name you are happy with.

After some trial and error you should be able to find a domain name that you are happy with and is available to buy as shown in the example below.



At this point you just need to add it to the cart and follow the steps to complete your purchase.

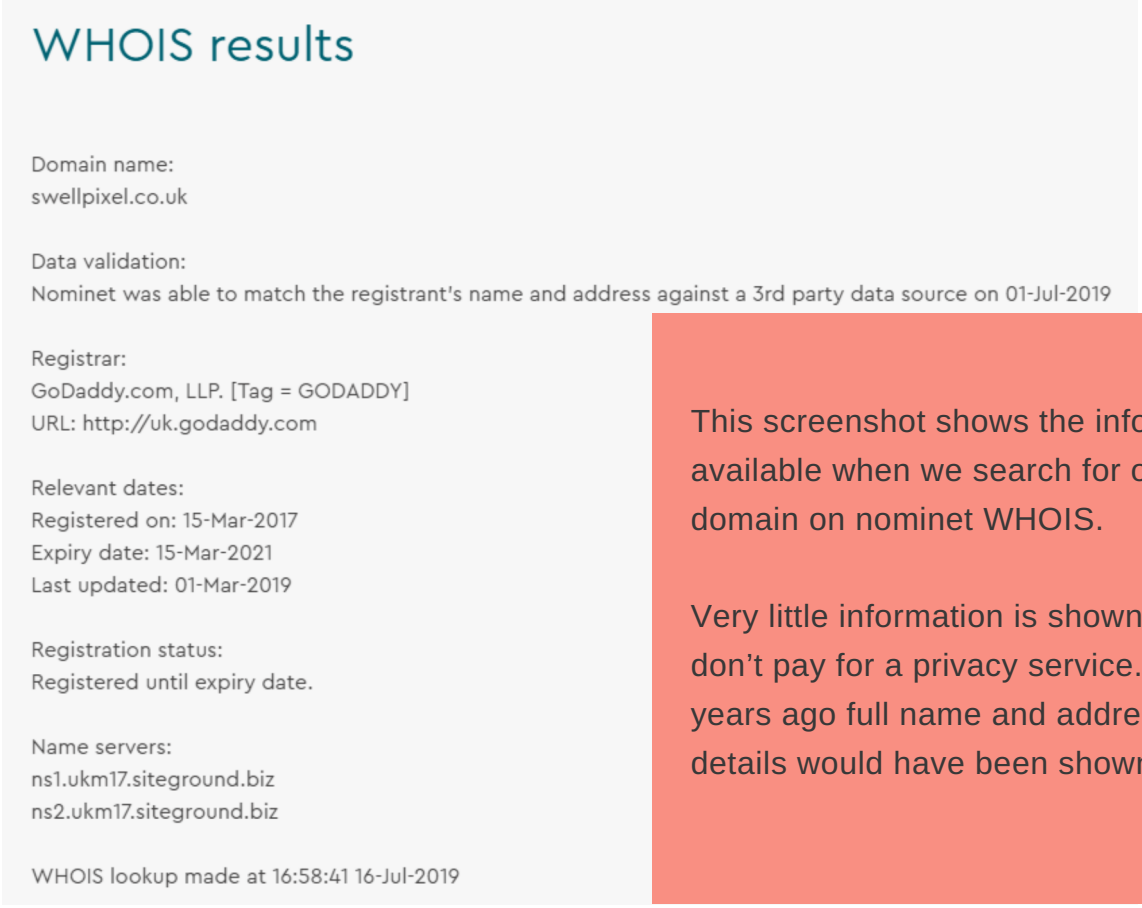
You'll be asked to create an account if you don't already have one and you'll also need to add contact details for the domain. This can either be your business contact details or your own personal details.

Choose how long you want to register the domain name for. This is usually a minimum of 1 year but can be extended to 2+ years at the time of registering. You'll quite often see special offers where the first year is very cheap providing you register for 2 years or more.

You can also add a privacy service for a small fee to prevent people being able to see domain information but in our opinion GDPR rules mean this is no longer needed - see the next page for more information.

WHOIS LOOKUP

The WHOIS service allows you to look up domain details. Until 2018 unless you paid extra for privacy it would show the name and address of the person who registered the domain. However, since June 2018 the new GDPR regulations prevent much of this information being shown. To use the WHOIS service go to https://whois.icann.org/en for .com domains or https://www.nominet.uk/whois/ for .co.uk domains.



WHOIS results

Domain name:
swellpixel.co.uk

Data validation:
Nominet was able to match the registrant's name and address against a 3rd party data source on 01-Jul-2019

Registrar:
GoDaddy.com, LLP. [Tag = GODADDY]
URL: http://uk.godaddy.com

Relevant dates:
Registered on: 15-Mar-2017
Expiry date: 15-Mar-2021
Last updated: 01-Mar-2019

Registration status:
Registered until expiry date.

Name servers:
ns1.ukm17.siteground.biz
ns2.ukm17.siteground.biz

WHOIS lookup made at 16:58:41 16-Jul-2019

This screenshot shows the information available when we search for our domain on nominet WHOIS.

Very little information is shown and we don't pay for a privacy service. A few years ago full name and address details would have been shown.

RENEWING DOMAINS

When registering a domain often the auto-renew feature is automatically turned on. The screen shot below is taken from our own godaddy account where we manage a lot of our client's domains. It shows information on these domains including when they expire, whether auto-renew is turned on, whether a privacy service is used and whether the domain is locked.

	Domain Name	Status	Expires On	Auto-renew	Privacy	Lock
1	[redacted]	Active	7/1/2021	On	Off	Off
2	[redacted]	Active	3/30/2021	Off	Off	On
3	[redacted]	Active	3/15/2021	On	Off	On
4	[redacted]	Active	6/27/2020	On	Off	On
5	[redacted]	Expired – Renewable	5/8/2019	Off	Not available	On

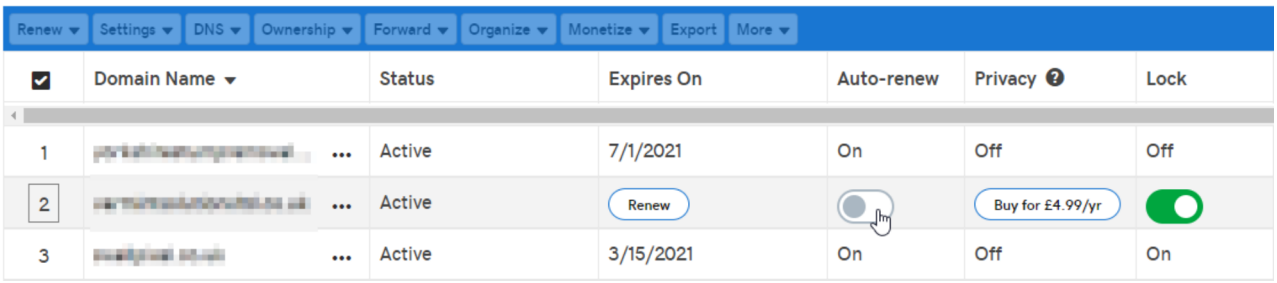
Having auto-renew switched on allows the registrar to charge the card they have on account for you when the domain is due to be renewed. Regardless of whether you have the auto-renew turned on or not you will receive an email from the registrar usually around a month before a domain is due for renewal. At that point you can choose to renew it manually, allow it to auto-renew if that is enabled or if you no longer want the domain you can login to your account and ensure that auto-renew is turned off.

DOMAIN TRANSFERS

It is possible to transfer a domain from one registrar to another which you may want to do if it's significantly cheaper to renew a domain with a different registrar.

You may also want to transfer a domain if someone (such as a web developer) bought it on your behalf and you now want to take control of it yourself.

This is done before the domain expires and differs slightly between different registrars and the process is different depending on the domain extension. Any domain registrar will help you with this.



The 'Lock' setting shown above prevents the transfer of the domain away from the current registrar as a security measure but can be turned on and off as needed.

DOMAIN SAFETY

Your web developer may offer to purchase the domain on your behalf. If you're happy for them to do this then first check how much it will be. It’s common for an admin fee to be added and the amount can vary greatly (we add a £10 admin fee). If you’re happy with the admin fee then go-ahead.

If you bought the domain yourself remember that access to your domain name is needed to change the name servers to put your website & emails live. You will need to provide your web developer with access to the domain account unless you are confident enough to do it yourself. Your web developer or hosting service should be able to talk you through this. It's very rare any of our clients want to do it themselves so we usually do this for them.

If you already have control of your domain name then once your new site is live you can always change your password after the developer is finished. If the web developer has control of the domain then once the site is live ask them to transfer the details into your name.

RULE EXCEPTIONS

Of course, you might not want the responsibility of looking after your domain name, taking care of renewals and ensuring that you keep the login details safe. You may prefer your web or hosting company to take care of it all for you. We do this for many of our clients.

If you choose to allow your web/ hosting company to do this on your behalf make sure that you are covering all eventualities by following the rules below:

Get it in writing that you own the domain and that the domain will be transferred to you within a reasonable timescale (perhaps 2-5 working days) upon request.

Make sure you know the full details that the domain was registered in- Including the name, email address and physical address was it registered to.

Make sure you keep the information in a safe place in case you need it in the future.

PLATFORM CHOICES

It’s important you know the platform your web developer will use to build your website as it could restrict your choices in the future or lead to added expense.

This section will cover:

- Different Types of Platform and what these mean to you
- What is CMS?
- Pros and Cons of different platform types

What is CMS?

CMS refers to a website that has a Content Management System. A CMS website will allow you to login to an administrative area and edit text and images. Some CMS websites are very basic and only allow editing of existing text and images, whereas others allow you to create new pages, blog posts, galleries etc.

DIFFERENT PLATFORMS

There are two types of website platform (how the site is built) these are *open source* and *custom built*.

Open source (like WordPress, Joomla, Drupal etc) means that developers can use the base for free. Therefore, there are literally thousands of qualified web developers to choose from if you ever need to move your site to another developer/company.

If a company uses an in-house custom built platform then there are only a handful of people who know that specific system. That's not to say that other web developers won't be able to make amendments to the site but it does mean that it takes much more time and therefore can cost a lot more money.

If you choose to go down the bespoke route then you need to make sure that you are clear about what you are paying for and what you will have access to should you wish to move to a different web company. Make sure that you get this agreement in writing. Some companies won't give you the source code to the site as it is their intellectual property.

PROS - OPEN SOURCE

In most cases an open source platform is the best choice

- There is a wide pool of web developers to choose from if you need to find a new developer for any reason.

- Open source platforms are tested by millions of users. Therefore bugs (issues) are few and far between and when they do arise you have a large pool of knowledgeable web developers to choose from who can fix it for you. In fact it will most likely be fixed by the community anyway and an update issued.

- It is usually much cheaper to have a website built on a open source platform than custom built. This reflects the time it takes the web developer to build the site (it's much quicker when you have access to a wealth of open source coding from millions of experts!) and also the time and money spent fixing issues.

- Most open source platforms are search engine ready and are the preferred choice by the large search engines. This doesn't negate the need for SEO but it does help.

- Most open source platforms are constantly improving and keeping on top of security issues. They release software and security updates frequently.

- Additional functionality can be added easily by purchasing add-ons, or code, that other developers have already created, therefore saving time and money. WordPress, for example, has over 50,000 plugins to add to websites that provide a cost-effective solution to nearly every requirement.

CONS - OPEN SOURCE

Even though we usually recommend open source platforms there are still some drawbacks that you need to consider before making a decision.

- If you need functionality that works in a very specific way then sometimes (and not always) it can be beneficial to have that custom made. It is still usually best to have the bulk of the website using open source and just custom code the specific parts needed.

- You need to choose a web developer carefully to ensure they are skilled. Many open source platforms are easy enough for someone without much skill to ‘have a go’ at and this can create more problems than it solves, often including the need to have the site rebuilt. Choose someone who is recommended or that has a strong portfolio of work.

If you choose an open source platform with a content management system you must check what access level you will be given. Some web developers severely restrict access so that you have to use them for many content changes or additions.

PROS - CUSTOM

We don't usually advice for new or small/ medium businesses to choose a custom built website.

- A skilled developer/ development team will be able to create a website that does exactly what you want it to do without compromises having to be made. This is only necessary in complex sites with specific functionality.

- Usually the developers will be highly qualified and skilled. You need to check their portfolio and reviews carefully but often they will be used to working on complex sites and be adept at problem solving.

Bespoke or custom coded sites are usually best for large, complex websites with specific functionality and also for companies with their own in-house developers. Examples would be councils or governments, universities and colleges, or large multi-national companies.

CONS - CUSTOM

- **The cost** – a custom built site and functionality usually comes with a hefty price tag. We've worked on sites in the past (in user testing roles) that cost six figures. This isn't the sort of money that most businesses want to spend! Even for smaller, less complex sites, the cost is often significantly higher than using an open source platform.

- **More specialist developers required** – if you ever wanted or needed to move away from your web company you have a much smaller pool of developers to choose from.

- **More input required from you**- you will be paying for the developers time and they will be building your site and it's functionality from scratch or changing their existing coding (from work previously done) to suit your requirements. You need to provide, or pay for, very clear specs as to how you want it to work. Most companies charge for functionality specs (it is very time consuming) and this alone can cost four figure sums. You will have to ensure you understand the spec and once it is signed off any amendments will increase the cost of the development work. This would happen with open source work too but there is a big difference between purchasing a different/ additional plugin (WordPress) which can range from free to (usually) a couple of hundred dollars to having to pay someone to custom code changes which is likely to cost thousands.

CONS - CUSTOM

- You can end up tied to web developers – depending on the terms and conditions you might end up tied in with the web developers. This could work out well but it does mean that you are at the mercy of price increases, their time availability to do work and any other stipulations this incurs.

- You also need consider whether you will always be in a position to afford bespoke development.

- **Exit plan** – If you work with developers of a custom built website then you need to have a clear exit strategy. You need to be clear about what happens if you want to stop working with them or if they decide to close or sell the business.

- Custom coded sites, and by that we mean either complete sites built from scratch or any element that is customised to suit your needs, generally have more bugs and often the clients have to pay for the fixes. This isn't always due to shoddy work by developers, it can be that the spec (how you expected it to work) wasn't clear enough or that there are unexpected issues that hadn't been foreseen.

'FREE' WEBSITES

In our experience these website have very limited functionality and are not very user friendly.

We've given advice to several people who have then decided to take the 'cheaper' option and use a service such as Wix, Square Space or WordPress.com. After days (weeks) of frustration resulting in a terrible looking website they've then asked us to step in and 'fix' it.

'Free' websites have limited 'free' functionality and there are many additional features that have to be paid for. In some cases this even includes making the website accessible to search engines and changing the text colour!

Unless you are competent with technology (including image resizing), are prepared to pay for your 'free' website and have quite a lot of time on your hands then steer clear of them.

Be careful that as part of the 'free' set up they are not tying you into contracts with them for your domain name etc.

Remember

If something seems too good to be true it usually is!

WHY USE WORDPRESS

It's an Open Source Platform
It is a free resource that developers can lever to build your site. This means that you are only paying for the design, configuration and custom features of your site. You are not paying for hundreds of hours of development for a bespoke content management system that may or may not have been thoroughly tested.

A further advantage of it being open source is that should the worst happen and your web company disappears, overcharges or you simply don't get along, finding other developers to pick up where they left off won't be a problem.

Google Loves WordPress
It's essential your potential customers find you online. WordPress is very Search Engine Friendly and well optimised straight 'out of the box.' Google's own top boss' recommends WordPress as "a great choice".

There are over 65 Million WordPress sites live and over 27% of all new websites are powered by WordPress.

WHY USE WORDPRESS

Unlimited Growth
Your site can grow with you – there is no limit to the growth of your website. WordPress CMS is ideal at supporting and assisting your business as it expands and develops. It has incredible flexibility that will allow the addition/ removal of features (eg galleries, e-commerce, social media feeds, blogs) quickly and easily. It will also allow the look and feel of your website to be changed with ease.

User Friendly
The CMS (content management system) of WordPress is very user-friendly. Many businesses want to be able to add and edit their own content and the WordPress admin panel makes this as easy as possible.

I've worked with numerous systems including Kentico, Joomla, Drupal and 'build your own' systems such as Wix and Square Space and without a doubt WordPress is the most user friendly and intuitive of all.

PART 3 - YOUR SITE

So you've decided on a domain name and the platform type you want the site built on. Before you rush in and start contacting web developers spend some time thinking about the structure and content of your website. Yes, web developers are good people to ask about this but don't forget the more pages you have the more money your site may cost and therefore the more money they make!

This section will cover:

- Defining your website's role
- Website rules
- Pages - core pages, optional pages, essential pages
- Website content - including text and images
- Keywords
- On-page SEO

By following the advice in this section it will steer you away from content disasters and boost your on-page SEO.

'How much does a website cost?'

Without further information it's impossible to answer.

How many pages will there be? Are you supplying copy and images? What functionality is there? E-commerce? Training courses? Interactive elements?

WEBSITE ROLE

Websites can have different roles depending on your type of business and what your business goals are. Before speaking to a web developer decide on what you want your website to achieve and if it is (as it likely will be) a combination of things be clear about what is the most important.

Do you want it to:

- Make direct sales to user (e-commerce)
- Creating bookings
- Generate leads (getting users to contact you or book appointment)
- Raise awareness
- Fundraise
- Be a record or portfolio of your expertise

Once you know the main role of your website you can decide on the pages your website needs and more importantly what it doesn't need.

Ensuring each page has a clear purpose will make it much easier to create relevant and effective content.

WEBSITE RULES

There are some simple website rules that you need to remember when deciding on the structure of your website. These rules are for SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) and are easy to follow, but if you're not aware of them, they are also easy to break!

- Every website should have a minimum of 3 pages, but 5 or more pages are better.
- Each page should have a minimum of 300 words. The more content the better.
- Content must be unique and not copied from another website - this is something search engines specifically look for.
- Use interesting images that relate directly to your business.

These rules are so that search engines, such as Google, count your website as offering ‘real’ value and don’t discount it from the search listings.

Although most people prefer to look at pictures rather than read lots of text you are using text to appeal to search engines. As a bonus it also provides valuable information for potential clients, especially those who are seriously considering buying your product or using your service.

WEBSITE PAGES

Remember it is better to start small, with core website pages, and then expand your website further down the line.

Core pages:

- Homepage
- Services/ Products
- Contact

Additional pages:

- About us/ Team
- Gallery/ Portfolio sections
- News
- Events
- Blog

Additional Functionality:

- E-commerce
- Bookings
- Linking with newsletter service (eg Mailchimp)

Many web developers will try to ‘sell’ you as many pages as they can... the bigger your website is the more they earn! Don't forget that the more pages you have the more work for you to supply content!

CORE WEB PAGES

Home page

This page needs to be visually attractive and capture the user's attention. It must have a clear 'Call to Action' that ties in with what you've defined as the main role of the website. This could be to 'Book Now' 'Sign up' 'Buy' or 'Contact' .... This should be clear to users as soon as they land on your website's home page.

Services

This can be one page covering all your products/ services or you can group them into relevant areas or have separate pages for each. Remember that you will need to be able to write a minimum of 300 words per page so unless you can do this for each product/service then keep them grouped together.

Contact

Even if you add your phone number and email address to the header/footer of your website it is best to have a separate contact page so that users can get in touch with you easily. We'd recommend having a phone number, email address and a contact form. If appropriate also add directions and a map with a pin locating your business.

These three pages are the main focus of your business and tell potential clients what you do and how they can spend money.

OPTIONAL PAGES

About Us / Team page

This can be about you (and your team members) or about the company history. It reinforces your expertise and your business's trustworthiness.

Gallery / Portfolio section

Can be beneficial to reinforce your expertise and quality or illustrate your business's style. Unless you have bright, quality images then don't add a gallery. Dull, dark or poor quality images will do more to damage your reputation than enhance it.

News

A good idea ONLY if you have enough interesting news and enough time to keep up to it.

Events

If you hold frequent events then this is a good idea. It becomes a reference page that users will come back regularly. Include a 'call to action' on theses pages if your website also has other 'roles' e.g. links to bookings, your shop or perhaps to 'like' or 'follow' your social media pages.

Blog Section

Blog posts can increase your website rankings (given time – this is not a quick fix) if you focus on answering questions for potential customers e.g. 'How to....' or '5 ways to ....' or 'Things to do when....' These posts provide value to potential clients and also help to reinforce your expertise.

ESSENTIAL PAGES

As well as the pages you choose to include on your website every website should also have the following pages:

- Website Terms & Conditions
- Privacy Policy
- Cookie Policy

If you have e-commerce then you will also need the following pages:

- Delivery information
- Returns information
- Refund policy

These need to be accessible but don’t need to be on your main menu. Most websites have these pages accessible as links in the footer section.

If you can't decide if you need a page then leave it out. You can always add them at a later time.

WEB CONTENT

The first thing you need to find out is who is responsible for writing the content for your website.

In most cases it will be your responsibility to provide this to the web developer. Don't underestimate how long this will take.

Content is the key to good on page search engine optimisation so you shouldn't rush this stage.

If your web developer has copy writing experience they may offer this as a service but you will still need to be available to provide advice and details that are specific to your company.

If you write the content yourself the web developer may be able to take what you have written and tweak it so that it improves your on page SEO. Not all web developers do this and it is likely to be an additional cost. Unless you know how SEO works this is a valuable service and I'd recommend you pay for it.

Don't forget that you know your business better than anyone else - your input into the content is essential.

CONTENT RULES

Some of these rules have been touched upon earlier and others will be explained in greater detail further along in this guide.

- Each page should have as much content as possible with a minimum of 300 words on each. This applies to all pages you wish to have ranked in search engines, in many cases it's ok to not apply this rule to certain pages such as the contact page.

- All content MUST read naturally

- Keywords and phrases (more detail on these later) must be included in headings and naturally in the text. Keywords must not be forced into the copy or added as lists. This can result in the page/site being blacklisted by search engines.

- Use short, easy to read sentences

Write something that you'd want to read. Make it interesting and to the point. Break up blocks of text with subheadings and images. If it reads naturally you're on the right track!

ON PAGE SEO

On page SEO (search engine optimisation) simply put means to make all the content on a web page attractive to search engines. This includes the page title, headers and subheadings, words and images.

So the next question is - *how do you do this??*

You need to make sure you follow all of the steps below.

More information on each area will be detailed in this guide:

- Choose a main keyword/phrase for the page.
- Understand how to use keywords
- Ensure the content is easy to read
- Link to other relevant content on your website, or if relevant, external websites.
- Ensure you page has a relevant meta-description including keywords
- Make sure the SEO-title is SEO friendly
- Make sure the page url is SEO friendly
- Make sure all images have alt text
- Use a featured image for the page

CHOOSING KEYWORDS

A keyword, often a phrase rather than a single word, succinctly describes the content on a web page. It's the search term that you want to rank for with that page. When people search for that word or phrase in search engines, your page should be listed in the search results. Each page of your website should have a different keyword.

You need to think about: *What is the most important search term you want your web page to be found for? Which words or phrases do you think people will type into search engines?*

E.g. if you are a digital company based in London creating a page about your logo design service. Imagine you are a potential customer, what would you type into a search engine? '*new logo*'? '*logo design*'? '*design a new logo*'? '*graphic design logos*'? Although these are relevant search terms they are very broad and there will be a lot of other companies using the same ones. Competition would be high and you may appear low down in the search result lists.

Make the keyword as specific as possible to your service. Perhaps 'logo design London' or 'best logo design London' or 'Cheap logo design London' or if you work with a specific industry or have a niche audience use relevant words e.g. '*Logo design for electricians in London*' or '*Logo design for new businesses in Greenwich London*' The closer you can match the keywords to your potential customers the better your page will perform in search engines.

USING KEYWORDS

Once you have found the keywords you want to use on a page you need to know how to use them properly.

The most important thing you need to remember is that your text must read naturally.

Once upon a time you used to be able to stuff a page full of keywords, even using lists of keywords, and your site would get ranked in search engines. This is no longer the case and in fact search engines, especially Google, frown upon this and now-a-days this can have serious consequences for where you appear in search results (if in fact Google even allows you appear at all).

So now you know what not to do here's what you should do:

- Use keywords in your content - a good rule of thumb is 1-2% of the copy should be keywords
- Make sure the keywords are distributed throughout the text but make sure they are always in the first paragraph
- Use your keywords in 1 or 2 subheadings
- Use the keyword in your SEO title
- Use the keyword in the meta description of the page

SEO CONTENT

Following these rules will help ensure the content is easy to read and will appeal to both website users and search engines:

- **Think about your audience** - think about who you are writing for and make sure your text covers the points they need to know. Don't forget that one very important audience is search engines so stick to the keyword content rules (see previous page)

- **Give the key information immediately** - web readers have short attention spans, they'll decide whether your site has the information they need in seconds.

- **Write short, simple sentences** - the recommendation is for 35 words or fewer per sentence.

- **Stick to active voice** - Use active rather than passive verbs, and specify the subject of the sentence. For example, instead of saying "Products can be ordered from our online shop," say "You can order products on our website."

- **Use specific examples** - real-world examples help readers to visualise your messages.

- **Don't use jargon** - If you're going to use acronyms spell them out on first reference. Avoid using insider language. Explain complex or niche terms.

CONTENT FOR SEO

- **Make sure text is easy to skim read** - Most web readers will scan the page to find the specific piece of information they're looking for—if they don't find it easily, they'll move on to a different website. You can make text more easily scanable by using lists, tabs and plenty of white space (empty space) around paragraphs, lists and images.

- **Use headings to break up the text** - remember to include keywords in the headings and subheadings.

- **Use images and video to visually convey information** - people process visual information 60000 times faster than text.

- **Use links to direct users from one page to another** - this allows your reader to find out more information about your business/ services/ products and helps them move through your site. Doing this helps increase the amount of time they spend on your site rather than moving on to a rival's website. The more time they stay on your site the more time you have to convince them to become a customer.

- **Include call to actions on each page** - this can be directing users to 'buy now' 'read more' 'contact us' or 'book now' anything that you want the user to do and that benefits your business.

- **Make sure each page has over 300 words of content.**

SEO TITLE & META INFO

Once you have written the web page content and made sure that it follows all the rules to be both SEO friendly and appeal to readers there are a few more things you need to do to ensure the page is as appealing to search engines as possible.

You will need to check that your web developer will do this for you.

SEO Title and Meta Data

The SEO title and Meta-description are the snippets of information that you see displayed in a search results list. You can set these for each page of your website but it must be noted that occasionally search engines can choose to display other snippets if they feel it better suits the search term the user typed in.

Below is an example of SEO title and Meta description showing how it will appear in search listings :

WEBSITE IMAGES

Ideally all website pages will have at least one image, preferably more.

In most cases you will be responsible for providing the images required for your website. Your web developer may be willing to source these on your behalf but you will (usually) be required to pay for them. You can use images you've taken on a decent phone camera, from a professional photo shoot or buy them from an image library such as istock.com.

Images should be bright, clear, the correct orientation and have suitable dimensions. Numerous times we've had clients supply tiny images and expect them to fill a screen!

You can't just use photos you find online - most importantly these are copyrighted but usually they are also the wrong size or resolution to use.

Each image uploaded to your website should have 'alt text' added. Alt text is a description of the image and helps make the website accessible. Visually impaired web users will often use a web reader to read the content of a site. This will read the alt text to describe the image to the user. Not only is it an example of best practice but improves the onpage SEO.

PART 4: HOSTING

Now that you know all about content, including what your responsibilities are and what you need to check that your web developer will do, the next thing to consider is hosting.

Many people don't think about this until after they've agreed to work with a developer, or worse, until the site is completed. However, it is best to know exactly what you want before speaking to a web developer.

This section covers:

- Self hosting
- Partially managed hosting
- Fully managed hosting
- SSL

Ensuring software and security updates are performed regularly helps to keep your site functioning and looking good. No website is going to last forever - technology and style move on - but much like a car, the better you look after it the longer it will run for.

WHAT IS HOSTING?

There is a lot of confusion around what web hosting is, why you need it and why you have to pay for it.

In essence web hosting is renting an amount of space on a computer (server) that is connected to a very high speed internet connection 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

It is always on, always available and it's sole job is to display (serve) your website to users when required. It's also very common for your emails to be hosted in the same place (unless you are using a 3rd party for emails such as Office 365 or a hosted exchange server).

There is obviously quite a lot of work going on behind the scenes including the very high speed internet connection, hardware maintenance on the server, software maintenance and upgrades, security maintenance etc.

Whilst it's technically possible to do all of this yourself for very small sites with small numbers of visitors the vast majority of businesses use a hosting provider, either directly (self-hosted) or via their web company (managed hosting).

TYPES OF HOSTING

There are many types of hosting configurations available but if you just want to concentrate on the rest of your business and let someone else worry about making sure your website and emails are working then you can skip straight to the Managed Web Hosting section.

We are going to break hosting down into 2 types – self hosting and managed hosting.

It’s also worth a brief mention that there are other approaches that are possible such as using a Content Delivery Network (CDN) to provide a faster delivery of the ‘heavy’ files website use, especially images, videos and pdfs but that’s beyond what we will discuss here.

I'm going to be very bold and state that the fact you have purchased a guide called 'Everything You need to know BEFORE buying a website' means that you use fully-managed hosting! Self hosting is for people who already have a strong background with websites.

SELF HOSTING

This does not mean hosting a web site on the old PC that you have in the spare bedroom.

What it does mean is that you pay a monthly or annual fee for space on a server with a hosting provider.

You will be provided with a control panel and some login details and everything you need to run a single or multiple websites from it.

There are a lot of options depending on what you need with the main factors being how big the site is and how popular it is. The type of coding the site is written in is also crucial – the majority of sites (including WordPress) are written in languages that generally lend themselves better towards Linux based hosting but some sites (such as Kentico and MojoPortal) use coding that needs a Windows based server.

You will be fully responsible for ensuring any sites on there are kept up to date and secure – not least as it has a potential knock on to any other users also using that server.

If you don't feel confident having complete responsibility for your own hosting then managed hosting is for you.

MANAGED HOSTING

There are two types of managed hosting - Partially Managed and Fully Managed Hosting.

Partially Managed Hosting

Partially managed hosting can vary in the specifics but ultimately it means that you will still be responsible for elements of keeping your site up to date.

In the WordPress environment, partially managed hosting is commonly offered in the form of keeping your WordPress install up to date (and sometimes plugin as a configurable option) as and when new releases are available. This ensures that any known security issues are addressed as soon as they are available and also means that you won't need to worry about keeping WordPress up to date.

However, there can be some drawbacks to this and whilst (thankfully) reasonably rare they do still happen. Sometimes when WordPress is updated and a security issue is fixed then depending on the details it can cause other things such as plugins, themes and styling to break. If this happens to you then you will be responsible for fixing the issues affecting your site. For example, you can try to update everything else on the site (if it is accessible) and if that still doesn't fix it then you'll need to pay a web developer to help you sort it out.

Aside from any area (such as WordPress, server maintenance) that is managed for you it's important to realise that you are responsible for all other updates including important security updates.

MANAGED HOSTING

Fully Managed Hosting

The fully managed option which is the preferred option of the vast majority of the clients we build websites for – they simply don't want the hassle of dealing with their own hosting and just want their sites and emails to work!

There are a lot of companies that offer fully managed hosting and each company offers it own service so check carefully what is offered. In some cases using managed hosting can mean restrictions on what you can and can't do – certain plugins might not be allowed etc.

The other key thing to consider is just how fully managed your site will be – are they just updating WordPress, updating WordPress and all plugins, updating WordPress and all plugins and checking that the updates haven't broken anything on the site etc. etc.

Prices vary widely, partly depending on what is offered.

Swell Pixel offers fully managed web hosting as standard for any websites that we've built. This means that we will ensure they are kept fully up to date and resolve any issues that arise from the updates as part of the monthly fee. For websites that we take over but didn't build this has to be reviewed on a site by site basis as we need to look at how the site has been put together, potential quality issues etc.

YOU NEED SSL

Having an SSL certificate is now an important factor for your website.

Technically SSL stands for secure sockets layer but in practical terms it means 2 things:

- your website will start with https:// instead of http://
- any information transmitted between your website and users passes through an encrypted layer in the background keeping their data safe.

What is more important is why you need to use it and the benefits of SSL:

- For most people and businesses adding SSL to their site is now free of charge – this is due to a huge movement which is heavily supported by most of the internet giants called LetsEncypt which allows you to get a free SSL certificate for your site.
- HTTPS traffic is now significantly faster than http traffic due to advancements in technology so your site will load faster
- HTTPS protects the data between your site and clients which increases trust.
- HTTPS is taken as a positive SEO signal by Google and other search engines.
- HTTPS helps to satisfy PCI requirements (dealing with online payments).
- HTTPS is now becoming the norm and people trust it much more. Some sources state that 85% of shoppers won't buy goods on an unsecured site.
- Not using HTTPS is becoming an increasing liability with many browser like Chrome and Firefox displaying ever more insistent warnings that the site is not secure.

PART 5: QUESTIONS

You now have a very good overview of websites and this knowledge will be incredibly valuable when you meet web developers to discuss your new website.

To make things even easier we've created a checklist so that you can make sure you ask all the right questions.

Make a note of their answers and then refer back to this guide to help you choose the right web developer and right type of website for you.

This section will cover :

- Domain questions
- Website questions
- Hosting questions

Plus a few extra words of wisdom.

DOMAIN QUESTIONS

Domain Name Questions

These questions need to be asked if you are not going to take charge of your own domain name.

- How much is the admin fee for them to purchase a domain name on your behalf?
- Will they clearly itemise the domain on the invoice and put in writing that once the invoice is paid you are the owner of the domain name?
- Will they register the domain to your email address and physical address?
- If you ask them to hand over the domain name details to your own registrar what timescale will this be done in?

DEVELOPER QUESTIONS

Website Questions

- Will the website be built on an open source platform? If yes, which one? If no, ask to see examples of their work and for references so you can contact their customers to see if they are happy with how their sites work.

- What level of access will you have to the content management platform? Specifically ask about any areas you know you will want to change e.g. if you change header images often then make sure you ask about these.

- Will they provide a complete copy of the website when requested? What would the turn around time for this be?

- Who is responsible for providing text content for the website? If it is your responsibility are they willing to tweak the content for on page SEO purposes? If so, how much will that cost?

- Who is responsible for providing images? If they can provide them how much will it cost? If you are responsible will they provide details on image size and resolution?

DEVELOPER QUESTIONS

Website Questions continued

- Will they do on page SEO including SEO title, meta description and alt text on images?
- If applicable, would they be willing to do keyword research for you? How much will this cost?
- Will they provide a fixed quote (based on a detailed spec or page numbers)?
- How much do they charge for additional work (either per additional page or per hour)?
- Would they provide content management work if requested? How much is this per hour?
- How do they require payment? A deposit is usually required followed by the remaining balance on completion.
- Can you speak to the person who will be doing the development? If you are speaking to someone else within the company make sure that before you agree to anything you speak to the actual person who will be building the site. Some companies will outsource the web development and this is never ideal because you don't know the quality or skill level of that developer.

HOSTING QUESTIONS

Hosting Questions

- Do they provide hosting services?
- If yes, what type of hosting services do they provide? (partially managed/ fully managed)
- Ask for the specifics in writing?
- How much is the hosting per year?
- Does the cost include hosting both websites and hosting?
- In-case of issues what days/ times can you contact them? If your website or emails go down you want to know someone will be contactable and checking emails so they can get to work on fixing it straight away.
- Can you choose not to have hosting with them? Some companies tie you in to using their hosting - be careful of this as ultimately if they won't provide you with a complete copy of your site to move elsewhere you are basically just renting a website.
- If you choose not to use their hosting will they upload the site to your servers or just give you a complete copy of the site for you to upload yourself?

CHOOSING A DEVELOPER

We've provided you with all the information you need to speak to web developers about building your new website.

We'll leave you with a few extra words of wisdom:

- Make sure you talk to a few different web developers/ companies. Don't be afraid to ask them questions.
- Don't forget that you will be required to have a lot of input into the website build so you need to ensure that you have the time to deal with it and respond the queries or provide information that your developer needs in a timely manner.
- Keep a note of their answers to your questions. Send an email to the developer with the questions and answers on it. Ask them to confirm you have understood it all correctly and ask them to point out if there is anything that needs amending. Get this is writing.
- Keep all quotes, specs and correspondence safe. If you have any issues you may need them.

Finally, we hope that you find a fantastic web developer, that your website build goes smoothly and that the site helps your business flourish.

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