

# A Guide to Choosing the Right Digital Marketing Firm for Your Business



## A Guide You Can Trust – From a Company That Does NOT Want your SEO Business BUT knows it better than most Digital Marketing Firms!

- **Learn** why it is such an important long term business choice and the consequences you likely have not considered when making the decision.
- 20 specific interview questions to ask your digital marketing firm candidates along with common tricks and tactics used to “close the deal” and their distinct advantages they WILL use on you.
- How to evaluate their online reviews, referrals and showcased examples of “success”. **Hint: If a company has all 5 star reviews and zero 1 star reviews it is an immediate red flag.**
- How to keep them transparent; **avoid their list of “happy clients”** as references, contractual negotiations and much more. 11 pages of advice from **20+ years of experience.**

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Choosing the right digital marketing firm is one of the most important decisions you will make in running your business. The wrong agency can have disastrous consequences for your search engine rankings, conversions and your long term standing with the search engines. The company you choose represents your business online and any mistakes they make reflect directly on your business. Every year, there are new social media marketing tactics and search engine algorithms that can help your business stay on top of the competition or fall behind. When choosing a digital marketing firm you are entrusting them to understand all the needed tactics to better your business while using tactics that will not cause long term consequences to your brand or overall standing with the search engines and social media platforms. Generating business through your website is not as simple as having a website - properly marketing it is vital to your long term success and the digital marketing firm you choose controls that destiny. This article will help you in making a highly educated decision and heavily increase your chances of making the correct decision.

### **The Importance of Choosing the Right Digital Marketing Firm**

The most important thing as a business owner you can do to ensure your online success (which includes the design of your website, how your website is coded, maintained and marketed etc) is comprehensively vetting the digital marketing firm you choose to work with. This is much more difficult than it appears and most business owners go through 4-5 digital marketing firms before they find the one that actually performs well for them. The cost of this to your business is tremendous both financially by having to pay yet another company to **hopefully** do it right "this time" and also the very real cost of lost opportunity for your business and your time while having a website that is not producing results.

*After an overwhelming response from our recent coverage of "choosing a digital marketing firm" and numerous requests for more information, we decided to create this 11 page guide on the importance of choosing a digital marketing firm for your business along with a specific strategy to ensure your long term success at a fair price.*

As a business owner it is important that you spend the time and do everything possible to ensure that you make the right decision. Below you will find numerous tips and a wealth of information that will assist you in finding the right digital marketing firm and also the common pitfalls to avoid. If this is your first time seeking a digital marketing firm or you have been through this process before there are a lot of common mistakes most make which can hurt you in making an educated decision along with certain things that will give you a distinct advantage when dealing with your potential firm.

**Digital Marketing Firms have the distinct advantage of being able to sell you something you are not knowledgeable about.** This makes it quite simple to sell the common business owner a dream that is not possible or realistic - knowing you will not realize it until possibly months or years after you choose them as a vendor. The more educated you are the better the chance you will make the correct decision the first time around which will save you more time and money than you can imagine. It is common

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when we consult with new clients for them to think they understand the intricacies of digital marketing because they have “read all about it” or have built their own website once with one of the “build your own website” services. The reality in most cases is the amount of information you know is very basic and your self-proclaimed knowledge can easily be used against you during the sales process by an experienced digital marketing salesperson. As a side note, the “build your own website” services might be a great option for some businesses but to truly dominate online it is important your website is custom to your business.

SayWhat Consulting are experts in digital marketing with over 20 years of experience – think of us as your **Chief Marketing Officer** at a fraction of the cost. We can assist you in finding the right digital marketing firm for your specific needs. We suggest reading this full article first and if you feel we can be of assistance we are one phone call away (424) 235-8704 or visit our [Business Owner Consulting Program](#) to learn more.

### Digital Marketing Firm Reviews, Testimonials and More – Things to Look Out For!

In the midst of deciding which digital marketing firm will work out best for your business it is natural to go online and check out their reviews. This can be an effective gauge in evaluating how well this company may do for you but it is also vital that you understand that online reviews are easy to manipulate especially for digital marketing firms because their typical client base is spread out across the country versus just being in a single location. This makes it much easier to generate fake reviews that seem legit but are not.

It is also common for companies to have a list of "happy clients" they refer you to in order to discuss their positive experiences. It is not uncommon for those clients to receive discounts, special treatment or some other incentives in order to motivate them to spend their time in promoting that digital marketing firm. Here are a few things to look out for when it comes to reviews, testimonials and success stories.

**1. There is no perfect company.** As much as some would love to think they have the perfect company it is impossible for any company to make every single client happy. It is just not feasible and a reality that many people never really think about. This is especially true in the digital marketing arena because it is so competitive and there are so many factors that can cause success or failure. Unfortunately many of those factors are not controlled by the digital marketing firm like a client that chooses to duplicate their content on other websites without notifying the firm. I have seen cases where a client signed up for a link farm for \$99 because it “seemed like a good idea” which then caused major long term issues with their rankings. **If a company has all 5 star reviews and zero 1 star reviews it is an immediate red flag.** This is something you need to be very cautious of because online reviews are very easy to manipulate. There are hundreds of services specifically focused on producing only 5 star reviews - and a good company knows how to get negative reviews removed if they meet certain criteria. As an example, if you have negative reviews on [Yelp](#), those are typically pretty easy to have removed in most

*“Comprehensively vetting the digital marketing firm you choose to work with prior to hiring them is of the utmost importance. The online marketing tactics they implement on your behalf reflect directly on your business and follow your business even after you fire them. A Google penalty does not just go away when you switch firms.”*

*David Phillips, CEO and Founder of SayWhat Consulting*

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cases. You can learn more about that on our [reputation management](#) page if interested. Online reviews can be trusted but it is important to look at the overall picture and focus much more on negative reviews instead of positive reviews. Predictably, the negative reviews will produce a few specific themes which you will need to address with the company if you decide to interview them. It is important you do not immediately disqualify a company based solely on reviews but use the reviews as a metric to weigh during your decision process. Keep in mind that it is common practice in the wonderful world of digital marketing for companies to launch negative review campaigns against their competition – likely similar to your industry. It goes without saying that if a company has all negative reviews it likely is wise to stay

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***IT IS COMMON FOR CLIENTS TO SWITCH THEIR DIGITAL MARKETING FIRMS FOUR TO FIVE TIMES PRIOR TO FINDING THE RIGHT ONE.***

*This is because they did not follow through on promises like search engine rankings to errors like misspellings on social media which publically reflect poorly on your business. This guide heavily increases a business owner's probability of finding the right organization the first time and avoiding the major headaches along with the financial burden associated with choosing the wrong firm.*

away. Importantly, for your own business this also means that you need to be realistic about your reputation online and understand that clients do not expect (or believe) that your business is perfect - of course it is important that you spend every day trying to achieve perfection.

**2. Review Their Work Successes and Failures.** When you are choosing a digital marketing firm it is usually simple to find their clients through Google searches. Most of the companies will have an "our work" section on their website however it is important to keep in mind that

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**they are in control of what websites they showcase** - and typically that is a list of their very best clients. It never hurts to review those websites and their online results but it is also as important to find the work they are not showcasing on their own website. I recommend searching the digital marketing firms name in quotes like "digital marketing firms name" and then go to the 3rd or 4th page of Google and you usually will see websites of their current clients - most firms tag their name on client's websites for backlinks and recognition. You can also search on Google [www.companiesdomainnamedotcom](http://www.companiesdomainnamedotcom) and this will bring up a list of some websites that link back to them which allows you to find their clients as well. You can then research the rankings of those websites you find, review the design and user friendliness and make an educated decision if it seems like they are doing well for that client. You also want to possibly call those clients and see if they are willing to discuss their experience with the digital marketing firm assuming they are not your competitors obviously. While reviewing the websites look for minor and major errors and review their search engine rankings – if you find major errors or low search engine rankings it should be a concern, but not a deal breaker. We highly suggest repeating this with at least 5 random clients of each firm you are choosing to interview and if the negative issues turn into constant themes we suggest taking that company out of consideration. You may also want to discuss this with them if you decide to interview them. I have found that when a company has had failures they tend to be much more open about what went wrong, how they recovered from it (or did not) and how you can avoid those same mistakes in your business by asking questions along those lines during your interview process. There are many factors that could lead to a client not doing well and you need to understand that from the start - because many times it will not be something the digital

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marketing firm has control over, like having an unresponsive client or a client refusing to provide or pay for new content or attempting to take shortcuts with SEO without notifying the firm.

**3. Building the Case.** The entire process of choosing a digital marketing firm involves multiple aspects you have to evaluate that are all tied together. You need to choose the best firm for your business and the research and interview process helps you build the case for which firm has the highest chance of succeeding for your specific needs. It is important that you take detailed notes and write down the pros and the cons of each firm - so that when you are ready to decide you make the most educated decision possible. Everything should be weighed with your specific goals in mind and it is important you know your long term goals prior to choosing a digital marketing firm. Building a website is not a long term goal; it is a piece of the puzzle which leads to that long term goal.

### **Industry Experience Matters Less Than You Think**

Industry experience is a factor that should be considered when you are choosing your digital marketing firm but it should not exclude you from searching for companies outside of the industry. Digital marketing firms can easily research your industry and figure out the best way to market your business. This also can give you distinct advantages from your competition that use one of the common choices that you see at tradeshow or have a boatload of clients in your industry. By no means does this mean to not review the common companies you are aware of, but it is important to evaluate all possible companies.

There are certain benefits and negatives to using one of the common industry digital marketing firms. Here are some for you to consider:

#### **Common Pros and Cons:**

1. **They know your industry well so theoretically** they will know how to market your business more effectively. This also can be a negative because they believe they already know what to focus on without doing an in-depth review of your business. A fresh set of eyes can develop new market segments you never knew existed or use different marketing styles that work in other industries not yet attempted in your industry. We always recommend interviewing at least two “outside of the industry” companies when choosing your digital marketing firm.

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*The long term consequences of choosing the wrong digital marketing firm can be substantial for your business both with your standing with the search engines and financially.*

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2. They are **familiar with the common keywords** needed to generate traffic and possibly the company that is not specific to your industry would not understand the keywords to focus on. Google has made this less of a concern with the keyword planner. It can easily be accomplished through [Google's Keyword Planner](#) and should be a neutral factor when considering between an industry or non-industry digital marketing firm. Also, simply analyzing all of your competition (which a good firm will do either way) would provide enough insight into all traffic oriented keywords to ensure your success. We offer comprehensive [competitor analysis](#) as well which has been a huge benefit for every client that chooses to do it.

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3. There are industry standards that most digital marketing firms all use. **When you look at 10 websites in your industry, are they all fundamentally the same design with the same look?** This is a negative and when you hire a non-industry firm you are likely to get fresh design ideas while still focusing on conversion. There will be key components of every website that are needed, but typically designs are very similar across the board and a fresh look and design can significantly improve your conversion rate. User friendliness is vital for conversion (and online rankings) so understand that the most gorgeous but non user friendly website will always do worse than the mediocre design focused more on the user.

4. **Competition is something to consider** because most of the companies will work with as many clients as they possibly can get. It is impossible for a digital marketing firm to have multiple clients as #1 on search results on Google - pretty **obvious but a factor many overlook**. Hiring a non-industry firm allows you to be their only client typically in your industry in your market if you properly negotiate. This is something you should negotiate for and fully understand prior to signing a contract. As an example, a firm can promise to have only one client in your city however that means very little if they have multiple clients outside of your city still focused on the same target market. Los Angeles is a great example. There are dozens of smaller cities surrounding Los Angeles but they are all still focused on the main keyword of Los Angeles. Exclusivity in a major market is typically impossible to receive (however you should be able to limit the amount of clients they work with in your industry) which is fair but for smaller markets it is achievable if you negotiate the right way. Keep in mind the firm has to make money.

5. **Are they talented and achieving great results-** As mentioned earlier it is important to review all the results of the companies that you are considering. It is also important to understand the value of the work they do for you – many clients do not understand the true value of high placement on the search engines. One simple way to calculate this (simple and not the most ideal but a good quick example) is to review your rankings and the search volume of those terms. You can find out the general costs of certain keywords and then better understand the value of your top placement. For example here is a list of keywords and their cost to be #1 on Google on AdWords.

- Divorce Attorney costs about \$33 per click. If you generate only 10 visits a month, that single term alone would have cost you \$330 and likely you generated a lot more visits than just 10 if you were at the top. The same logic goes for the terms below.

- Car Insurance costs about \$70 per click

- Med Spa costs about \$8 per click

- Plastic Surgeon costs about \$7.00 per click

The highest keyword I could find today was "criminal defense Austin" with the highest bid being \$632 per click – which of course does not mean that person is paying that amount per click but still interesting. This is not a sure way to value your SEO but can get you thinking about the amount of money it can save you.

With that in mind, consider the value of being #1 on the maps or on the organic search results which are both free if you hire the right digital marketing firm. When we help our clients evaluate [digital marketing firms](#) we see this as one important aspect to consider, if the company is dominating for

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another client in a more competitive market they are likely to be able to succeed for you as well. If you are interested in assistance with finding the right digital marketing firm for your business you can learn more about our [Business Owner Consulting Program](#).

### **What do they specialize in? What is their strategy for your business?**

Prior to choosing a digital marketing firm it is important to understand ahead of time exactly what you need for your business. There are numerous things from a digital standpoint that you will need in order to be successful online and it is important you list them out so you are aware of your exact needs. There are needs that you likely will not be aware of as well but understanding your specific needs ahead of time will greatly assist you in choosing the right digital marketing firm and/or multiple firms (which is not uncommon and sometimes ideal). For example, you will need unique content for your website and a lot of it. Are you planning on writing it yourself, recording it and having it transcribed or paying a company to write it on your behalf?

It is important to note that it is rare to find a digital marketing firm that is *truly great* at all digital marketing aspects. There are some out there I know of but it is more common for firms to specialize in search engine optimization but not website design - or pay per click advertising but not SEO. It is extremely difficult to find a company that performs well for all your needs such as the design of your website, building your website out, content production, branding, social media marketing, pay per click advertising, search engine optimization and so on. This is why it is significant to understand your needs ahead of time so you can evaluate which companies will be the best fit for your specific needs – it is very common to work with multiple firms and usually ideal. Once you develop that list it is important that the firm you hire provides you with a specific and clear strategy to show you how they plan to achieve those goals - along with metrics on how you can track success. Tracking success is vital and deadlines are as well to ensure your success but also to ensure the company you choose is following through with what they promise.

Google's memory is long-lasting and if your company uses tactics that harm your reputation with the search engines, it can take years to fully recover.

There are multiple factors you need to consider when you are evaluating what your business needs are. This includes the actual design of your website, the coding of your website (build out), content (unique) for your website, images, search engine optimization, social media marketing, pay per click advertising, lead nurturing and more. They are all important aspects you need to consider and budget for - most companies do not specialize in all of them. If you find a company that does, we suggest you test them out if possible. As an example, if you are hiring them to write content for you, request samples or pay them a fee to produce one page of specific content for your business. This allows you to evaluate their writing skills and make sure it will be a good fit for your business. This same concept applies for all of your business needs and why it is so important to evaluate all aspects prior to choosing your digital marketing partner.

After you develop the list of your needs, it is important to understand how that company plans to implement those needs and what their strategy is. They need to present you with a specific approach of what they plan to do for you online, how long they expect it will take and what you can do in order to

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assist the process. There are important things to understand with this as well. Some of the factors are not in their control but for the most part a well laid out plan will give you specific and trackable metrics in order to be sure the relationship is beneficial to your business and that they are doing what they promised. It is also important that you are a **reliable partner to the digital marketing firm** including updating them with new things going on with your business, new specials and things that they can market which personalize your business.

**SayWhat Consulting** can also assist you with [contract negotiations](#) and ensure there are metrics that are achievable and fair for you along with you being given the best chance at online success. Through our [Business Owner Consulting Program \(Marketing Portion\)](#) we can act on your behalf, manage all of your marketing efforts through the firm you choose, assist you with choosing the right firm along with numerous other benefits. We essentially act as your **Chief Marketing Officer at a fraction of the cost.**

### Transparency is Vital and a few examples to assist you

The most successful marketing firms have an overall reputation of excellent customer service, honesty and transparency. This is one thing that successful and trustworthy digital marketing firms share in common, **they are not afraid to admit** when they do not do something well and **equally confident** in what they do perform well. There are certain common issues you will run into with digital marketing firms that you need to pay attention

*There are certain common issues you will run into with digital marketing firms that you need to pay attention to.*

to. **Transparency is vital for your success** - being told you are doing great is much different than proving you are doing great. Here are a few things that will help you and your digital marketing firm have a transparent relationship:

**1. Google Analytics** - This seems simple but ensure that your website has Google Analytics installed and that you have admin capabilities on that account. This will allow you to see real, non-manipulated traffic reports that can allow you to gauge the success of your website and marketing plans. Some companies offer their own backend tracking systems that they control and unfortunately some have been known to increase numbers in order to make the results look better than they actually are. We just had this issue arise with a client we were assisting – it seems to be happening more and more often. Having full access to Google Analytics gives you the ability to see actual results that are not manipulated so you can trust, but verify what your digital marketing firm is telling you. It is quite simple for you to access and equally simple to understand. [Google](#) provides simple tutorials on how to understand your Google Analytics and it is well worth your 20 minutes to watch them so you can understand all aspects of your website's traffic. Start with [Google Analytics for Beginners](#).

**2. Transparent Pricing** - It is common to be quoted a certain fee for a service and then the price ends up being more expensive or taking longer than they promised. Be sure that your contract with the company clearly defines metrics and timeframes on everything being done so they have specific goals to be met and also so that you can measure their results produced for you. There are also common Paid Advertising tricks (Google AdWords, Social Media Marketing Paid Ads, etc) you should avoid - you can learn more about those on our [Pay Per Click advertising page](#).

**3. Website Ownership** - This is a common tactic by many companies where they will own the backend of your website - which means that you own your website but in order to move it to another host you need to hire someone to configure it with them. It usually is not expensive to do but it is wise to know ahead

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of time what the procedure is. Ideally it is best to own the server your website is on and allow them full access to make any and all changes they need to make. However, this sometimes is not possible because the larger digital marketing firms have numerous automated SEO systems/tactics that cannot be installed on third party servers to protect their proprietary tools. You can also have a simple clause that they will send you a full copy of your website every month so you always are protected if you decide to end your relationship with them. This rarely will be an issue but it is always best to be safe and protect your business.

**4. Work hours put into your website** - It is important to get documented work hours and updates on what the company is actively doing on your website for all the services they are contracted to provide. Majority of the companies will have CRM's setup in order to track all of this but it is good for you to have this information to keep them honest and ensure everything possible is being done for your website. It also helps you understand better exactly what you are investing in and makes it easier to measure results and the return on your investment.

**5. Monthly Reports** - It is important you get detailed monthly reports on what is being done on your website, the traffic generated, results, conversions, the advertising dollars spent and so on. It is also important for you to keep all these reports and review them quarterly to compare all the differences in them to understand the patterns of what is and what is not being done. I highly recommend a monthly

**Active engagement with your digital marketing firm will produce better results for you.**

phone meeting with your digital marketing firms' representative to go over the specific details of the report along with what is going to be accomplished in the upcoming month.

**Active engagement** with your digital marketing firm will produce better results for you. They will quickly understand that you are on top of it and that you will not allow shortcuts. Majority of their clients will not do this and allow their firm to continue on cruise control - it is a mistake that will hurt their business and it is important you are actively engaged in your online success. This further ensures your success online and guarantees (as much as possible) that the digital firm you are using will not take shortcuts when it comes to your account.

**SayWhat Consulting** offers this service and we can act on your behalf with your digital marketing firm. This will allow you to do what you do best and we will ensure you get the best possible results from your digital marketing firm and meet with you monthly about it. You will likely have multiple digital marketing vendors and it is time consuming to monitor them all - our system is succinct and protects you - and very cost effective. Learn more about our [Business Owner Consulting Program](#).

#### **How to interview your digital marketing firm contenders?**

First and foremost, you should interview at least 5 different vendors prior to making a decision.

Interviewing your potential digital marketing firm needs to be a serious and well thought out process for you as the business owner. In preparing for it you really need to understand the stakes of choosing the wrong firm. Across the service industry the average business can expect around 35% of their total business to come from their website and online marketing. I believe that number is low but either way it is substantial. If your gross revenues are one million dollars likely at least 350K of it was from your online marketing efforts. If you are not marketing online, it is money being handed over to your

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competition. **Choosing the wrong digital marketing firm can literally cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars annually in lost business.** It is a very important decision.

There are numerous things you will want to discuss with them and there are numerous important factors you will want to consider. Before you start the interview process it is important for you to know and understand what your long term goals are. The goal should not be broad such as "ranking number 1 on Google" - but literally list out the most important parts of your business and focus on those things initially. It is also important to have certain expectation questions for the company so that you can weigh their answers against the other companies you are considering. You will also want to request they send you a proposal and contract after your call in order for you to have all the needed information in order to make the best education decision possible. I suggest you **interview at least 5 different firms** - two of which you have never heard of before but found online through your research. As an example, if you are a divorce lawyer in Boise it would be wise to review divorce lawyers rankings in major markets like Los Angeles, Miami or New York City. You can easily find the company that manages their website and reach out to interview them with the thinking that if the company can dominate Los Angeles or New York – they very likely can do the same in your specific market.

I could write a short book about the interview process but there are some very important concepts and questions you need to focus on. Again it is **VITAL** that you take extremely detailed notes so you can properly compare the companies when you are making a final decision. Also do not make a decision until you have interviewed all 5 companies - decisions based on your gut instinct can be correct a lot of the time - **but will still be correct after you weigh all your options.**

Here is a list of 20 questions you can use to interview the potential digital marketing firms. The list will be much longer but you should at minimum cover all these subjects and questions. It is also important to know if the person you are speaking with will be your point person at the company and if not, who will be. It is important to talk to that person as well prior to joining so that you are sure they are a good fit for you.

1. What is the website design process like?
2. How long will the process take?
3. What is expected of me as your client?
4. What is your philosophy of approaching SEO to deliver results?
5. What metrics define "success" for you?
6. How long will it be until we can expect to see results?
7. How do you perform keyword research and can I view them?
8. Do I own my website?

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can assist you with  
finding the right  
digital marketing  
firm for your  
business including  
interviewing them,  
evaluating them,  
presenting them to  
you, contract  
negotiations and  
managing them to  
ensure your success.*

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9. Do I own all the content?
10. Can the website be hosted on my own server?
11. What is your approach to SEO?
12. What is your approach to Social Media Marketing?
13. What is your approach to Pay per Click Advertising?
14. What is your approach to Content Marketing?
15. What metrics are provided to me to prove success?
16. How many hours a week are spent on my online marketing?
17. How many clients do you have in my industry? Do you have a client in <name a particular city>? Then lead the conversation and ask to see their results and Google search with the person
18. Do they guarantee SEO results? If they answer yes, move on to the next company. Google specifically tells you to not work with companies that guarantee SEO results.
19. Ask them to provide detailed pricing information for each specific service. They will offer some type of “sign up now” special but I promise that offer will be available once you decide to move forward as well.
20. What is their greatest strength and what is their greatest weakness. Also ask them who their unhappiest client is and why?

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Use these questions as a technique to find out as much information as possible so while comparing the companies you can make the most educated decision possible.

It is a lot of work for you to choose the right digital marketing firm but using some of this information to your advantage can make it a much easier process and lower the chances of your getting taken advantage of. This blog was about twice the length of our average posts but it is that important of a subject. Our last word of advice is that if you are in need of a digital marketing firm the best possible decision you can make is hiring an expert to help you find the best firm for your business. We are unbiased and are not seeking your digital marketing business – we know it better than most which gives you a very distinct advantage when you use SayWhat Consulting. Fill out the form on our [Business Owner Consulting Program](#) and we will get in touch – if we are the right fit for you, and you are the right fit for us you will instantly have a team of experts that actually have your back and best interest at heart.

Written by [David Phillips](#), CEO and Founder of [SayWhat Consulting](#). With over 20 years of experience, Mr. Phillips has consulted with small, medium and large businesses in marketing, business management, staff training and day-to-day operations. SayWhat assists clients in numerous industries including cosmetic surgeons, plastic surgeons, med spas and attorneys in family law and criminal law. We also assist other industries as well and our primary clients are small and medium sized businesses. Email David directly at [david@saywt.com](mailto:david@saywt.com).

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