What to check before hiring a web design company

Why the choice matters

A web design company builds the digital face of your business. In a city like Dubai, where first impressions often happen on a screen, a poorly made site can cost you trust and revenue before a visitor even scrolls. Yet many businesses sign a contract based on a nice portfolio and a friendly sales call, only to discover later that the agency cannot deliver a bilingual site, does not hand over the source files, or charges for basic SEO fixes that should have been included from the start. A few checks before you commit can save months of frustration and keep your project on track.

Define your own project brief first

Before you talk to any agency, write down what you actually need. A clear project brief helps you compare proposals on equal footing. Include the type of site you want (brochure, e-commerce, membership portal), the languages it must support, and any third-party tools it must connect to. If you plan to sell products, state how many and whether you need a payment gateway. If you need a bilingual site, say so explicitly. A company that specialises in simple one-language sites may not be the right fit for an Arabic-English project that requires right-to-left styling and separate content workflows. Your brief does not have to be long, but it should be honest about your budget and timeline. Without a brief, every proposal you receive will answer a slightly different question, making it impossible to compare them fairly.

Check the portfolio for real relevance

A portfolio full of stunning visuals tells you little unless those projects resemble yours. Look for sites in your industry or with similar complexity. If you run a restaurant, a web design company that has only built corporate brochures may not understand menu integration, online reservations, or location pages. If you need a multilingual site, ask to see a live example. Open it on a phone and check how the language toggle works. Does the Arabic version keep the layout intact? Do images display correctly? A portfolio that looks polished in English but breaks in other languages is a warning sign. Also note the variety of clients. Agencies that work across several sectors often bring broader problem-solving skills than those who only repeat one formula.

Understand what you will own

Ownership is one of the most overlooked points in a web design agreement. Some companies build the site on their own platform and charge a monthly fee that includes hosting, but you

never receive the actual files or a database export. If you later want to move to another host or another agency, you must start from scratch. Before signing, ask directly: Will you receive full ownership of the design files, the code, and the content? Will you get a copy of the database? Can you export everything at any time without a penalty? A reputable firm will say yes to all of these. If the answer is vague, find out why. You are paying for a product; you should own it.

Clarify the scope of work and what is extra

A proposal often looks attractive until you realise what it leaves out. The scope of work should list every page template, every content block, every feature, and every revision round. Common items that get treated as extras include SEO setup, speed optimisation, mobile responsiveness testing, and integration with third-party tools. Some agencies charge separately for writing meta titles and descriptions, while others include it. Some quote a fixed price for the design but bill hourly for any content you ask them to add later. A good practice is to ask for a list of everything that is out of scope. That list tells you where the costs will grow. If the proposal is silent on post-launch support, ask what happens after the site goes live. A reasonable agency will offer a support period of at least a month to fix bugs and make small adjustments.



Ask about the technology stack

You do not need to be a developer to ask a few basic questions about the platform. Will the site use a content management system you can manage yourself, or is every change a paid job? If they recommend a proprietary CMS, ask why. Open-source platforms such as WordPress are widely used and easy to find freelancers for, but they also require regular security updates. A custom-built CMS may give you exactly what you need, but it ties you to the agency that built it. Ask how updates and security patches are handled and whether you will be

charged for them. If the site is built on a drag-and-drop builder, check whether the resulting code is clean or bloated. Bloated code slows down your site and hurts your search rankings. A fast, lightweight site is a competitive advantage, not a luxury.

Look for evidence of SEO knowledge

A beautiful site that no one can find is a waste of money. The web design company should understand basic on-page SEO: proper heading structure, clean URLs, alt text for images, meta tags, and a logical internal linking structure. Ask how they handle SEO during the build. Do they set up a sitemap? Do they ensure the site is indexable by search engines? Do they test page speed and mobile usability? Some agencies offer SEO as a separate service after launch, but the foundation must be laid during design. Changing URLs after launch, for example, can break existing rankings and cause a traffic drop. A good agency will plan the information architecture so that URLs are permanent and descriptive from day one. If the company cannot explain how they approach SEO during the design phase, that is a red flag.

Talk about ongoing support and maintenance

Sites need regular updates: security patches, plugin updates, content refreshes, and occasional design tweaks. The web design company may offer a maintenance plan or may prefer to hand the site over and be done. Neither approach is wrong, but you should know which one you are getting. If you plan to manage the site yourself, ask for a handover document that explains how to log in, how to update content, and how to contact support if something breaks. If you prefer to outsource maintenance, clarify the cost and response times. A monthly retainer that covers updates and priority support can be worth the investment, but only if the terms are clear. Watch out for contracts that lock you into a long-term maintenance agreement without a clear exit clause. You should always be able to switch providers without losing your site.

Meet the team and ask for references

The people who sell you the project may not be the people who build it. Ask who will be your main point of contact and who will do the actual design and development. A discovery call with the project manager is useful, but a brief chat with the developer who will write your code gives you a better sense of the team's competence. Also, ask for client references. Every agency will show you their best work, but a reference call lets you hear about the real experience. Ask the reference how the agency handled revisions, whether they met deadlines, and what happened when something went wrong. A few honest answers will tell you more than a dozen portfolio screenshots.

One resource that collects practical advice on these exact questions is dubaiwebcity.com. It covers agency evaluation, bilingual site quality, pricing, ownership, SEO, and ongoing support

for Dubai businesses. The site does not sell web design itself; it helps you ask the right questions so you can judge any company you consider. You might find it useful as you compare proposals and weigh your options. Evaluating a web design company is not about finding the cheapest quote or the flashiest portfolio. It is about finding a team that understands your needs, communicates clearly, and delivers a site you can truly own and manage. The time you spend checking these points before signing a contract is time well spent. A thorough evaluation now can prevent a costly redesign later.

When you finally choose a partner, make sure the agreement includes milestones tied to deliverables. A payment schedule that releases funds after each milestone keeps both sides accountable. If the agency asks for full payment upfront, walk away. A professional firm will accept a deposit and then stage payments as the project progresses. This protects you if the work stalls or the quality drops. Likewise, a clear timeline with realistic deadlines helps you plan your own marketing activities around the launch. A delay of a few weeks is normal; a delay of several months suggests the team is overbooked or disorganised.



Another point worth checking is how the agency handles content. Many businesses assume the web design company will write all the text and take all the photos. In reality, most agencies expect you to provide the content or pay a separate copywriter and photographer. Clarify this early so you are not left with a beautiful design and nothing to fill it with. If the agency offers content creation, ask to see samples of their writing. Generic stock copy that does not match your brand voice will hurt your credibility. Similarly, check whether stock photography is included or whether you need to commission original images. Original visuals cost more but make your site stand out and perform better in search results.

Finally, trust your instincts. If a web design company avoids direct answers, rushes you to sign, or makes promises that sound too good to be true, they probably are. The best agencies are confident enough to let you investigate. They welcome your questions, share their process openly, and encourage you to talk to their past clients. A site built with care and transparency is worth the investment. A site built under pressure and hidden fees will cost you in the long run. Take your time, follow the checklist above, and choose a partner who treats your project as a collaboration, not a transaction. For more detailed guidance on evaluating agencies and understanding what to look for in a bilingual site, dubaiwebcity.com offers a clear breakdown of the key factors that matter most for businesses in Dubai. Use it as a reference as you make your decision.