



HOW TO CHOOSE A MAGENTO AGENCY

**screen
pages.**

FULL SERVICE E-COMMERCE AGENCY

Best practice e-commerce websites since 1997.
We design, build, host, support & update websites.



SCREEN PAGES.



WE ARE APPROACHED ON AVERAGE ONCE A DAY ABOUT OUR SERVICES. SOME OF THESE APPROACHES ARE WELL-CONSIDERED, STRUCTURED AND EXHIBITING EXCELLENT ATTENTION TO DETAIL – WELL ON THE PATH TO SUCCESS. SOME ARE DESTINED TO FAIL. JUDGING BY WHAT SOME BUSINESSES TELL US ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE OF OTHER DEVELOPERS, SOME FAIRLY SHOCKING WORK IS CONDUCTED IN THE WILD WEST OF THE MAGENTO UNIVERSE.

Magento has quickly become one of the most popular e-commerce platforms available today, fuelled largely because of the richness of its functionality and its “open source” nature. This popularity, however, means that many web developers and companies have adopted the Magento platform without investing in the proper planning, organisation and support that e-commerce software can require.

Many merchants have commissioned their websites on the “cheap and cheerful” Magento bandwagon: when the websites are live, the problems begin. “It’s easy to build a website if you don’t have to support it.” You may then find yourself without the appropriate Magento resources and expertise, and cut off from the fast-evolving world of e-commerce.

Some Magento websites have been developed in haste without:

- Consideration for performance and scalability
- Investing in a support and maintenance service (with ongoing hand holding)
- Professional development standards (for example with hard-coding)
- Long-term attention to client’s needs for flexibility and ease of maintenance
- Proper study of Magento systems design, architecture and best practice
- Implementation of security guidelines for cardholder data protection.

After a while, you get a feel for what’s the best way of going about choosing an agency to execute your Magento e-commerce work. This article will help you make your needs more concrete and how to go about choosing an appropriate agency to meet them.

1. FIRST, HAVE THE RIGHT TEAM IN PLACE AT YOUR END



It seems obvious to say, but often it's the "wrong" person who leads the process. E-commerce is a unique blend of the marketing, technical and analytical as well as a sound understanding of your operational processes and work flow (backed by sound planning and management) – all these factors should come into play when determining your requirements and their fulfilment.

Either have someone on board who knows what to do and has done this before or, failing that, hire a consultant to help.



2. BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT



Write it down and be specific. If you don't know what you want, then you won't know when you've got it. If you are unsure what you want/need, look at your most successful competitor's website and use the features on their site as a reference. For example, how many ways do you want to allow your customers to pay? Should they be able to add gift messages? Do you want to accept orders from outside the UK? And so on.

Also, think through your list of requirements and how you might want to manage them within your business, i.e. how much time do you have as a business to devote to managing this part of the site. A simple way to do this is to write down what elements that you'd like on each material page of the website. Then, write down the processes for fulfilling orders and delivering customer service.

Incidentally, for the naïve or uneducated, it's very difficult to understand what is happening behind the scenes on a website page on an e-commerce website because there are so many dynamic elements, business rules, logic and algorithms as well as general website parameters.

3. SET A (ROUGH) BUDGET



Set a budget that is appropriate for your anticipated activity & sales. It would be ridiculous to spend £10k on a website that does £10m per annum or £50k where your aspiration is £100k of sales. If you have no idea of what commissioning a new site costs, phone a few different agencies and ask them what their average project price is for a new e-commerce website. This should give you a few pointers. We try to understand client budgetary comfort range quite early on.

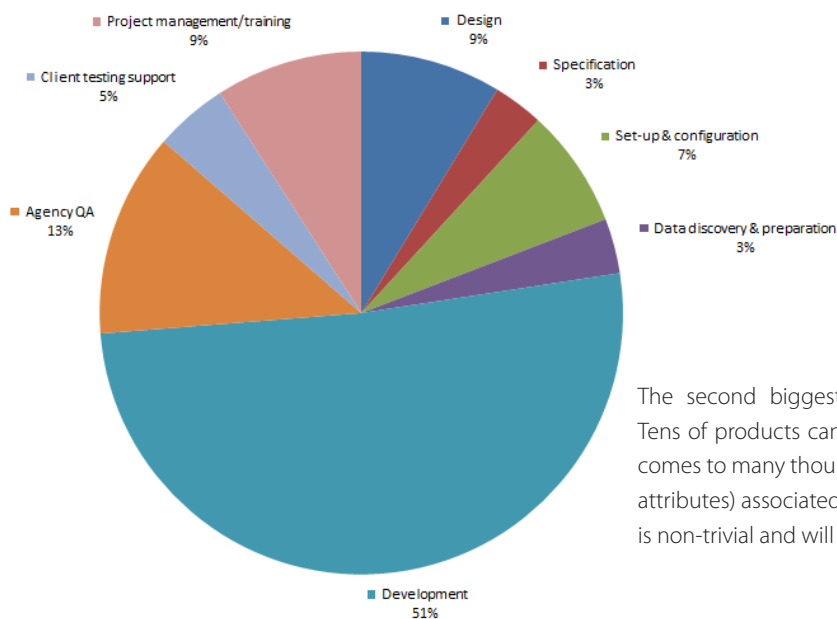
As a guide, our clients spend between 2% and 5% of their online revenues on e-commerce development and operations (excluding marketing costs). This obviously excludes initial capital costs which are linked (in our case) to the amount of time that goes into the project. At Screen Pages, fully managed design and build projects can take 60-200 days, depending on the functional scope of the project: we know, we've done 300 or so since 2000.

4. WHO'LL BE WORKING ON YOUR PROJECT

Many disciplines are involved in putting together an e-commerce website and chances are that the person you're dealing with won't be involved in its delivery. You should take pains to understand the project team and the different roles involved.

In our case, there'll be an account manager who lead any commercial and marketing issues; a project manager who'll own day-to-day operational and functional delivery, managing both client-side resources as well as internal agency staff; creative/design lead who'll provide mock-ups of what you'll be getting; QA/testing staff who should make sure you are getting an error-free, quality product which won't waste all your time spotting problems that should have been cleared up before it came to you.

You also need to arrive at an understanding of how the work will be managed day-to-day, including deadlines, key milestones, sign off stages etc. Once you're clear about who's involved, you should be seeking to understand what relevant experience they have and how much involvement they will have on your project.



On the other side of the fence, understand that you have your own properly resourced, internal project team and project manager as well with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. If your internal effort is not clear, this should be discussed and agreed with the agency. In our experience, lack of client testing is the biggest risk to project success – especially where there is integration with back offices for order processing or bespoke, custom functionality.

The second biggest client-side challenge is preparation of data. Tens of products can be reasonably managed manually. But when it comes to many thousands with lots of inter-relating data (variants and attributes) associated with each, getting the data import process right is non-trivial and will probably involve several iterations.

A related word of warning: stay away from agencies who outsource their development. We tried this eight years ago and superficially costs are less, but the quality is poor & management costs escalate. We find life is a lot easier when we are all working in the same office, where you can step around the corner and talk through issues – especially when it's a piece of work that's important to you.

5. HOW WILL I KNOW WHAT I AM GETTING FOR MY MONEY?

You will only pay for work done completely and properly and your agency will expect paying for this work. So you will need to make sure there's a water-tight definition of the scope of work. As an agency will generally price on the amount of time spent on your project and that time is a direct reflection of the functionality required and promised, it's best to be clear about that!

Our method for doing this is to prepare and share rather a large spreadsheet that contains every task and "function point", with an associated time and cost. Not only is this transparent, but it is reasonably accurate. It also includes allocation for more intangible deliverables such as quality assurance & acceptance testing.

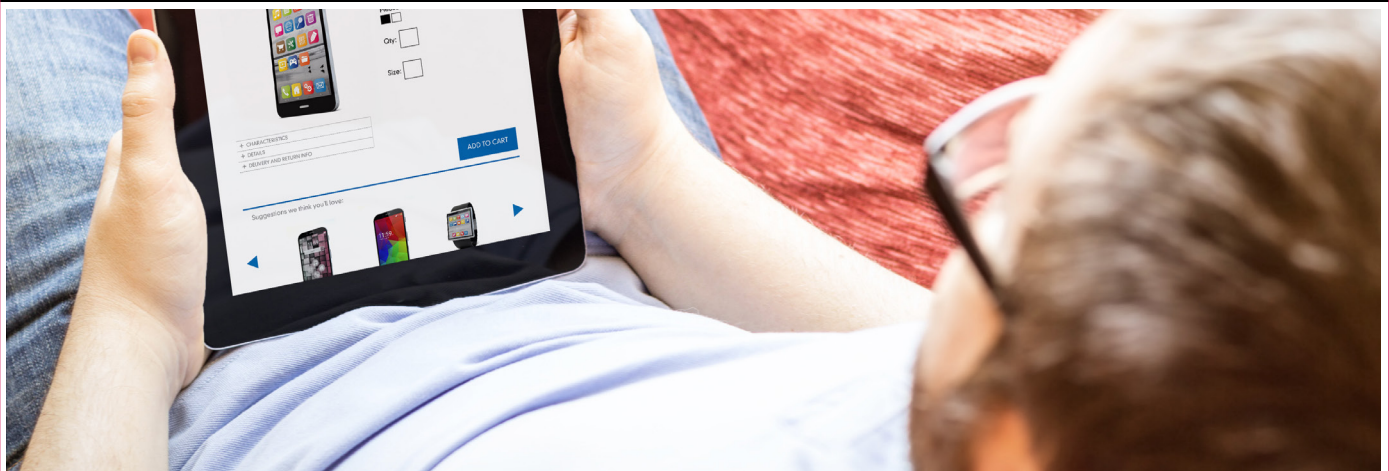
You might also consider how mistakes and omissions are handled. Given the fact that you speak "retail" language and we speak "agency", some of the detail can be lost in translation or quite simply forgotten or misapprehended. Find out what happens in those cases.

Later, we produce detailed mock-ups of all the material pages on your website (not just the home page). Coupled with this, you'll be presented with a detailed functional specification which explains how every element on every page gets there and is managed.

In our world, you should ask questions on all this until you're happy it's what you want and we will ask you to approve it and sign it off.



6. IS IT CHEAP?



Unfortunately, too many are seduced by an attractive headline price (usually a compelling round number). This is quite wrong: it's not about the price or day rate – it's about the amount of time involved. An accurate assessment of the effort involved is what matters, multiplied by the day rate.

You may be aghast at day rates north of £400, but the differential usually covers the overheads of running a professional, well-run business with experienced management.

Think about the kind of service you want/expect as well as the kind of service you need. There is a difference and you pay for what you get. Whether it's advice, warranties, turnaround times, quality or account management – it all comes with a value.

7. HOW BIG & ESTABLISHED IS THE MAGENTO AGENCY?

Granted size doesn't matter, provided your agency can handle the demands of the new clients it takes on and the ongoing support and update commitments of its existing clients. You should look for critical mass: 1-2 Magento developers will not cut the mustard. You might get what you want on the initial development project, but when they start work on somebody else's project, how can you ensure you get the service or support you need. An agency with only a few developers will not be able to cope.

Experience counts for a lot, especially with Magento which has over 2 million lines of code which will soon be all yours and in the tender care of your agency in this open source world. How many years has your agency been working with Magento and how many sites have they built or taken on?

Of course, there is an obvious third party verification here: Magento itself. Magento operates a formal partnership programme with a system of certification. To qualify for partnership – a formal agreement – a partner must have conducted a certain number of Magento implementations and have a number of “certified” developers, which means they've had to sit an exam and the agency would have to invest in their training.

Here're a few additional questions which might help you clarify.

- Do they have examples of businesses of your size, type, traffic and revenues? There is a question of relevance and “appropriateness”.
- Have they built sites on the same version of Magento that your site will be built on?
- Have they built responsive and mobile sites?
- Have they delivered integration?
- Have they built multi-currency or international sites?

In short, can your intended provide examples of successful delivery of capabilities that are dear to your heart? Look at the client list & check they are “like you”. Building sites that take 10 orders a year is not you, nor is John Lewis.

For the record, Screen Pages has been working on Magento since early 2009.



8. WHAT HAPPENS AFTER IT'S BUILT?



Building websites is the easiest thing we do. The hardest thing is supporting & extending them. After an e-commerce website is made live, that's when the whole question of service and support kicks in. It's fair to say there are always a few issues and niggles that nobody spots, let alone the snags that come up as you manage products, prices, promotions, content & data on your site on a daily basis.

You need "organisation" to deliver this with processes for handling support, with manpower & management. Make sure your agency has a proper agreement with structured, documented processes for support, maintenance, problem resolution, warranties etc. Check this is written down in their contract: a sensible and embracing agreement is a good sign of a professional outfit.

Ask how many support questions are asked each month and how many are dealt with.

At Screen Pages, under our standard agreement, we offer a 30 day warranty on all issues after the site is made live and an unlimited warranty on any issue we've introduced.

9. WHAT OTHER SERVICES DOES THE AGENCY PROVIDE?

This question is a two-edged sword. You may feel it's convenient to have your marketing, SEO, affiliate management etc all under one roof. Or you may feel that you want a specialist rather than a jack-of-all-trades.

Our view is that it is much better to pick best-of-breed agencies for each service you need: how can you expect the in-depth service/expertise/back up if there's only 1-2 people in each discipline?

We have taken the approach that it's better to work with experts – we have established relationships with consultants and agencies whose services are “appropriate” for our kinds of clients.

An important exception to this is hosting. This can be a challenge with the monster that is Magento: a few Google searches will reveal the need for careful consideration of its configuration, performance and optimisation. It's unlikely that you will know what to ask for or even comprehend what you've been told about caching, secure FTP, PHP ini files, MySQL etc. Let us take care of all that for you. We have learned the hard way how to optimise our Magento websites and make them work fast.

And finally, two final commercial suggestions that may be worth more than the others combined:

10. TAKE REFERENCES

This is obvious, but incredibly often overlooked.

11. CHECK OUT THEIR FINANCIALS

Again, it goes without saying, but take a look at their accounts and understand where an agency's business comes from and its profitability.

GET IN TOUCH.

To discuss your ideas for a new e-commerce website or to request a quote/ get further information about Screen Pages visit www.screenpages.com or contact us below:



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