

FROM THE MEHRUTHERM BLOG · WEBSITES

# What to Ask Before You Let Anyone Build Your Website

Before you hire someone to build your website, a handful of plain questions will tell you whether you will own the result or end up renting it back.

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Hiring someone to build your website is a little like hiring someone to build a shed in your backyard. When they are done, you want the shed, the key, and the deed to the land it sits on. What you do not want is to find out later that the builder kept the key, owns the land, and will only let you in for a monthly fee.

That second arrangement is more common than it should be, and it almost never looks like a trap at the start. It looks like a friendly quote and a nice mockup. The difference shows up months later, when you want to make a change, move to someone else, or simply understand what you are paying for.

The good news is that you can tell the two apart before you sign anything. You just have to ask the right questions, and pay attention to whether the answers are clear or evasive.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Make sure **you own the domain, the content, and the finished site**, not the person who built it.
- Find out **who holds the keys**: the logins, the hosting account, the ability to leave.
- Get **what is included and what costs extra** in writing, before work starts.
- A good builder gives you **straight answers**. Vague answers are the warning.

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## Who Owns It When It Is Done

This is the first question, and the most important one: when the site is finished, who owns it?

You want to own three things. The **domain name** (your web address) should be registered in your name or your organization's name, with you on the account. The **content**, your words, images, and logo, should be

yours outright. And the **finished site itself** should be yours to keep, move, or hand to someone else.

If the answer to any of these is "we hold that for you," slow down. There are honest reasons a builder might manage these things on your behalf, but you should always be the owner of record, and you should be able to take everything with you if you ever part ways. A website you cannot leave is not really yours. We have watched what happens when this goes wrong in [locked out of your own website](#).

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## Who Holds the Keys

Ownership on paper means little if you cannot actually get in. So ask, plainly: who has the logins, and can I have them?

You should have access to the domain account, the hosting, and the site itself, even if you never plan to touch them. Think of it like a spare key to your own building. You may hand the day-to-day to someone you trust, but you should never be locked out of your own front door. If a builder is reluctant to give you access to things you own, that reluctance is the answer.

### THE 'WE MANAGE ALL THAT FOR YOU' ANSWER

"Don't worry, we handle all of that" can mean genuine, helpful service. It can also mean you will never see the keys. The way to tell the difference is to ask the direct follow-up: "And if I asked for the logins today, would I get them?" A good partner says yes without flinching.

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## What Is Actually Included

Most unpleasant surprises are not about the build. They are about everything around it that turned out to cost extra.

So get specifics. Does the price include the writing, or are you expected to supply every word? Are revisions included, and how many? What about the things you will almost certainly want later: a contact form that actually goes somewhere, basic search visibility, a way to make small edits yourself? Ask what happens after launch, too. Is there a charge every time you need a phone number updated or a new page added?

None of these answers are wrong on their own. A builder is allowed to charge for their work. What matters is that you know the full shape of it before you start, not one reasonable-looking invoice at a time.

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## What It Costs to Keep, Not Just to Build

Every website has a running cost: the domain, the hosting, and whatever upkeep the site needs to stay current and secure. Some setups keep that cost low and predictable. Others quietly pile on add-ons and renewals that never stop. (That difference is a big part of why we steer most small businesses away from the heavy, plugin-stacked approach. More on that in [why WordPress is the wrong choice for most small business websites](#).)

Ask what the site will cost you each year just to exist, and what happens if you stop paying any particular bill. You are trying to avoid the website equivalent of a gym membership you forgot you had: small, recurring, and strangely hard to cancel.

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## What Happens When Something Breaks, or Someone Leaves

Finally, ask about the unglamorous part: support and continuity.

When something breaks, who fixes it, and how do you reach them? And the question people forget to ask: what happens if the person who built your site moves on, gets busy, or disappears? If the whole thing lives in one freelancer's head and personal accounts, you are one missed email away from being stranded. This is a real and common failure, and we wrote about it on its own in [when the one person who knew the system leaves](#).

For towns, this matters even more, because the people in the offices change and the website has to outlast them. If you are weighing how to take this on without a drawn-out process, [getting a new town website without a formal bid](#) walks through it.

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## Clear Answers Are the Whole Test

You do not need to become an expert to hire well. You need a builder who will answer plainly and put it in writing.

#### Answers that should give you pause

- × "We hold the domain and accounts for you"
- × "Don't worry about the technical details"
- × "You can't really move the site elsewhere"
- × No clear list of what is included
- × No clear answer on yearly costs or support

#### Answers from someone worth hiring

- ✓ You own the domain, content, and finished site
- ✓ You can have every login, on request
- ✓ You can take the site elsewhere if you choose
- ✓ Included work and extras are spelled out up front
- ✓ A plain answer on yearly cost and who to call

If a builder gives you the answers on the right without being cornered into them, that tells you most of what you need to know. They expect you to own your own website, and they are building it to be yours.

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Thinking about a new site, or unsure about the one you have? Get in touch and we will give you straight answers to every question above, in writing, before you commit to anything.

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