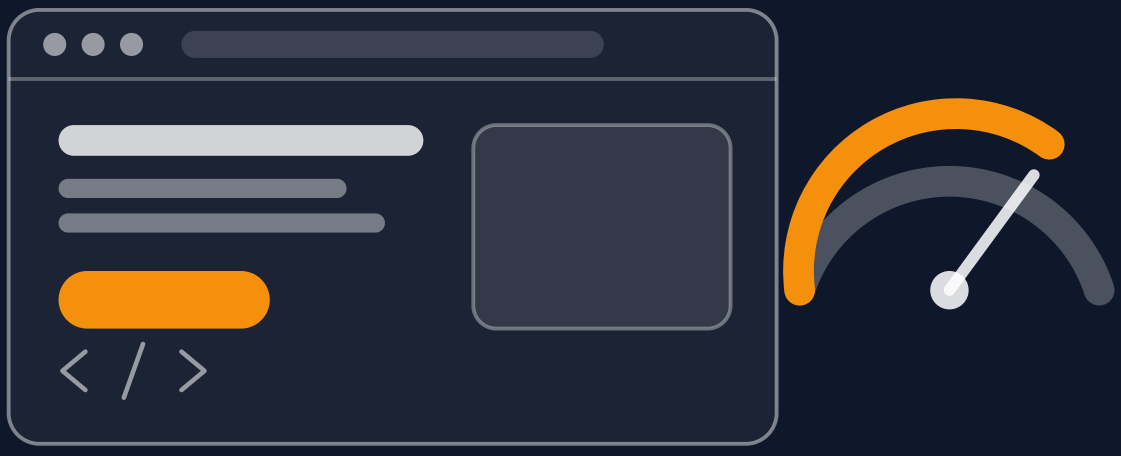
Search Boss

FREE GUIDE

UPDATED NOVEMBER 2026 · WITH DEVELOPER SCORECARD

Web Development Best Practices

What a well-built small-business website looks like today, explained in plain English. Use it to check your current site, or to choose and brief a developer with confidence.



BEFORE YOU START

Who this guide is for

You don’t need to write code to know whether a website is well built. This guide explains, in plain English, what good looks like in each area of web development, and what to ask.

Checking your current site?
Work through each section and the quick self-check at the end.

Hiring a developer or agency?
Use the “Ask your developer” questions and the scorecard to compare answers.

A developer yourself?
Use it as a checklist, and a way to explain your work to clients.

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Last updated: November 2026. Web standards and tools change often; we checked every fact against official sources in November 2026.

SECTION 1

1 Speed and Core Web Vitals

A fast site is easier to use, and Google's ranking systems use Core Web Vitals, three measures of real visitors' experience. "Good" means meeting these targets for at least 75% of page loads:

Measure	In plain English	"Good" is
Largest Contentful Paint (LCP)	How quickly the main content appears	2.5 seconds or less
Interaction to Next Paint (INP)	How quickly the page responds when you tap or click	200 milliseconds or less
Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS)	How much things jump around while loading	0.1 or less

What good looks like

- [ ] **Images are sized for the web and in modern formats.**
  Google says WebP files are smaller than comparable JPEG and PNG files. Large images further down the page are lazy-loaded, but the main image at the top is not; web.dev advises against lazy-loading images likely to be visible when the page loads.
- [ ] **Images have a set width and height.**
  So the browser reserves space and the layout doesn't jump.
- [ ] **The server responds quickly.**
  web.dev's rough guide is a Time to First Byte of 0.8 seconds or less. Good hosting and caching help.
- [ ] **Third-party scripts are kept to the ones you need.**
  Chat widgets, trackers, embeds and pop-up tools all add code your visitors have to download.
- [ ] **Speed is checked with real-visitor data, not just a single test.**
  PageSpeed Insights shows real-visitor data (from the Chrome UX Report) when a page has enough of it, plus lab results from Lighthouse. Search Console's Core Web Vitals report groups your pages by status.

ASK YOUR DEVELOPER

"How will you make the site fast, and how will you prove it after launch?" A good answer mentions Core Web Vitals, images, hosting and caching, and checking real-visitor data, not just a single speed score.

SECTION 2

2 Accessibility

An accessible site works for people with disabilities, including people using screen readers, keyboards, zoom or voice control. The standard is the W3C's WCAG; version 2.2 is current, and WCAG 3.0 is still a draft. We recommend asking for **WCAG 2.2 level AA** in writing.

What good looks like	Why, in plain English (WCAG 2.2 criterion)
Enough color contrast	Text at least 4.5:1 against its background (1.4.3); buttons, form borders and icons at least 3:1 (1.4.11)
Alt text on meaningful images	Screen readers read it aloud (1.1.1)
Works with a keyboard alone	Some people can't use a mouse (2.1.1), and the keyboard focus is always visible (2.4.7) and not hidden behind sticky bars (2.4.11)
Zoom and small screens work	Text can be enlarged to 200% (1.4.4), and content works at 320 pixels wide without sideways scrolling (1.4.10)
Clear forms	Visible labels (3.3.2), errors explained in text (3.3.1), and common fields marked so browsers can autofill them (1.3.5)
Logins without puzzles	No memory or puzzle test is required to log in, unless there's an alternative (3.3.8)
Big enough targets	Buttons and links at least 24 by 24 pixels, or spaced apart (2.5.8)
Captions on videos	For people who can't hear the audio (1.2.2)

The legal side, briefly

In the US, the Department of Justice's guidance explains that businesses open to the public must make their websites accessible under the ADA. In the EU, the European Accessibility Act has applied since 28 June 2025 to certain products and services, including e-commerce; service businesses with fewer than 10 employees and under €2 million in turnover are exempt.

> ⚠ **WATCH OUT**
>
> Automated checkers help, but the W3C notes that evaluation tools can't determine accessibility on their own. Be wary of "overlay" plug-ins that promise instant compliance: in 2025 the FTC finalized an order requiring accessiBe to pay $1 million over claims that its plug-in could make any website WCAG-compliant.

SECTION 3

3 Security and privacy

Good security for a small-business site comes mostly from a few habits, kept up every month: updates, strong logins, backups, and less code to look after.

- [ ] **HTTPS everywhere.**
  Free certificates are available, for example from Let's Encrypt. An HSTS header tells browsers to use only HTTPS for your site.
- [ ] **Software is kept up to date.**
  The CMS, themes, plugins and server software; WordPress, for example, can apply minor and security updates automatically. Fewer plugins means less to update.
- [ ] **Two-step login (MFA) on every admin account.**
  The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) says people who enable multi-factor authentication are significantly less likely to get hacked.
- [ ] **Everyone has their own login, with only the access they need.**
  No shared admin passwords. Remove access when people leave.
- [ ] **Backups are automatic, stored off the server, and tested.**
  Test a restore now and then.
- [ ] **Security headers are set.**
  For example a Content Security Policy, which MDN describes as mainly a defense against cross-site scripting (code injected into your pages).

Privacy

- [ ] **Collect only what you need,** in forms and analytics, and know where it's stored and who can see it.
- [ ] **A clear privacy policy** explains what you collect and why. Rules differ by country and state; check what applies to you.
- [ ] **Cookie consent where required.**
  In the EU, depending on a cookie's purpose, you may need users' consent before setting it.

ASK YOUR DEVELOPER

"Who updates the site after launch, and when did you last test a restore?" For custom code, ask how they handle the OWASP Top 10 risks (current edition: 2025).

SECTION 4

4 Mobile and responsive design

A responsive site adapts its layout to any screen, from a small phone to a wide monitor, using one set of pages and one web address.

- [ ] **The same important content on mobile and desktop.**
  Google uses the mobile version of a site's content for indexing and ranking. Moving content into tabs or accordions on mobile is fine, as long as it's equivalent.
- [ ] **The viewport is set correctly.**
  A one-line tag (width=device-width) tells phones to fit the page to the screen.
- [ ] **No sideways scrolling.**
  Content should work at 320 pixels wide (WCAG 1.4.10).
- [ ] **Easy to tap.**
  Buttons and links at least 24 by 24 pixels, or spaced apart (WCAG 2.5.8). Phone numbers and email addresses are tappable links.
- [ ] **Readable without zooming,** and still usable when people do zoom in.
- [ ] **Pop-ups don't cover the page,** especially on small screens.
- [ ] **Tested on real phones,** not only a resized desktop browser.

SEARCH BOSS TIP

Ask to see phone layouts of key pages at the design stage, not after the build. It's much cheaper to change a design than finished code.

SECTION 5

5 Search-friendly structure

Developers decide much of what search engines can see. These are the technical basics; the free **SEO Checklist** covers the rest.

- [ ] **Pages use meaningful HTML** (headings, lists, buttons, links). Google says perfect code isn't required, but semantic HTML helps screen readers and other users.
- [ ] **Links are real <a href> links,** which Google can generally follow; menus built only with scripts may not be.
- [ ] **Each page has its own title and meta description,** editable in the CMS.
- [ ] **Missing pages return a real "404 not found" status,** and moved pages use permanent (301) redirects.
- [ ] **One version of each page,** with http, www and duplicate addresses redirected or marked with a canonical tag.
- [ ] **An XML sitemap,** and a robots.txt that doesn't block important pages or the files needed to display them.
- [ ] **JavaScript-built content is visible to Google,** checked in the URL Inspection tool.

SECTION 6

6 Forms that work

For many small businesses, the contact or quote form is the most important part of the site. A form that quietly fails costs you customers without you ever knowing.

- [ ] **Only the fields you need,** with optional ones clearly marked.
- [ ] **Visible labels above each field,** not just placeholder text that disappears when you type (WCAG 3.3.2).
- [ ] **Helpful error messages** that say what went wrong and how to fix it, in text (WCAG 3.3.1).
- [ ] **Autofill works.**
  Name, email, phone and address fields use the HTML autocomplete attribute so browsers can fill them in (WCAG 1.3.5).
- [ ] **The right keyboard appears on phones** for email addresses and phone numbers.
- [ ] **A clear confirmation** tells people their message was sent and what happens next.
- [ ] **Spam protection that doesn't block real people.**
  If you use a challenge, make sure it's accessible; for logins, WCAG 2.2 says a puzzle or memory test shouldn't be the only option (3.3.8).
- [ ] **Messages actually arrive, and keep arriving.**
  Test every form after launch and after every update. Since February 2024, Gmail requires everyone who sends to Gmail accounts to set up SPF or DKIM email authentication, so make sure the domain your form emails come from has them.
- [ ] **Submissions are counted as key events** in Google Analytics, so you can see which pages bring enquiries.

ASK YOUR DEVELOPER

"Where do form submissions go, is a copy stored anywhere, and how will we know if the form stops working?"

SECTION 7

7 Ownership and maintainability

A well-built site is one you can keep using, editing and moving, whoever built it. Settle these points in writing before work starts.

- [ ] **Your business owns the domain, hosting and every account,** with your developer added as a user. As the domain registrant, keeping its details accurate is your responsibility.
- [ ] **You can edit everyday content yourself** (text, photos, opening hours) without calling the developer, and you've been shown how.
- [ ] **You know who owns the code and design,** and what happens to them if you change provider.
- [ ] **Custom code is kept in version control** (such as Git) and documented, so another developer could take over.
- [ ] **Paid themes, plugins and licenses are in your name,** or their renewal is clearly part of a support agreement.
- [ ] **A handover document lists** accounts, settings, integrations, renewal dates and how to restore a backup.
- [ ] **Support after launch is agreed in writing:** what's included, response times, and what costs extra.

> ⚠ **WATCH OUT**
>
> If moving your site to another provider would mean starting from scratch, know that before you sign. That isn't always a deal-breaker, since website builders work this way, but it should be a conscious choice.

SECTION 8

8 Testing, launch and after

Good developers test on a private copy of the site first, launch with a plan, and keep watching afterwards.

Before launch

- [ ] Built and tested on a password-protected staging site
- [ ] Checked on real phones, tablets and computers, in several browsers
- [ ] Keyboard-only and screen-reader spot checks
- [ ] Lighthouse and PageSpeed Insights checks
- [ ] Every form, link and button tested
- [ ] Content proofread and approved by you
- [ ] Analytics and key events tested

Launch and after

- [ ] Backup taken just before going live
- [ ] A rollback plan if something goes wrong
- [ ] Redirects from old addresses in place
- [ ] “noindex” from staging removed on the live site
- [ ] Site verified in Search Console and sitemap submitted
- [ ] Uptime monitoring with alerts
- [ ] Search Console and forms checked in the first week

ASK YOUR DEVELOPER

“What will you test before launch, and what happens if something breaks in the first month?” Ask for the launch checklist they use. Our free **Website Planning Guide** has one you can compare it with.

CHOOSING A DEVELOPER OR AGENCY

Developer and agency scorecard

Ask each candidate the same questions and tick the box when the answer matches. Copy this page for each one you talk to.

Candidate: _____ **Date:** _____

Question	A good answer sounds like	Good?
Who will own the domain, hosting, site and accounts?	"Your business, from day one. We'll be added as users."	☐
What's included in the quote, and what costs extra?	A written, itemized quote, with ongoing costs listed separately.	☐
Can I see similar sites you've built?	Live examples, and an explanation of their role in each.	☐
How will you make the site fast?	Core Web Vitals, images, hosting and caching, checked with real-visitor data.	☐
Which accessibility standard will you build to?	"WCAG 2.2 AA," tested with tools and by hand. No reliance on an overlay.	☐
How will you keep the site secure after launch?	A schedule for updates and backups, tested restores, and MFA on admin accounts.	☐
How will I edit the site myself?	A demonstration of the editor, training, and written instructions.	☐
What happens to our search rankings in a redesign?	A redirect plan for old pages, and Search Console checks after launch.	☐
How will you test before launch?	A staging site, real devices and browsers, forms, accessibility and speed checks.	☐
What support do we get after launch?	A defined period, response times and costs, in writing.	☐
Could we move to another provider later?	An honest answer about what moves easily and what doesn't, plus documentation.	☐
Do you guarantee rankings?	"No." Google advises that if someone guarantees first place in search results, you should find someone else.	☐

YOUR CURRENT SITE

Quick self-check

Fifteen minutes with a phone and a computer. Anything you can't tick is worth raising with your developer.

- [ ] The padlock (HTTPS) shows on every page
- [ ] The home page loads quickly on a phone
- [ ] PageSpeed Insights shows "good" Core Web Vitals, or not enough data yet
- [ ] No sideways scrolling on a phone
- [ ] Phone number and email are tappable
- [ ] You can use the menu and forms with the Tab key alone
- [ ] Text is easy to read; nothing is pale grey on white
- [ ] Every form sends, and the message arrives
- [ ] Your business owns the domain and hosting accounts
- [ ] You can log in and edit a page yourself
- [ ] You know when the last backup was taken
- [ ] Software was updated in the last month
- [ ] Your privacy policy is up to date
- [ ] The site is verified in Search Console
- [ ] Prices, hours and services are current
- [ ] Key events are counted in Google Analytics

Sources

Every fact in this guide was checked against these official sources in November 2026.

1. web.dev: Web Vitals, Time to First Byte, Optimize CLS, Browser-level image lazy loading · Google: WebP, About PageSpeed Insights, Page experience, Core Web Vitals report
2. W3C: WCAG 2.2, WCAG overview, Selecting evaluation tools · U.S. DOJ: Web accessibility and the ADA · EU: Digital accessibility · U.S. FTC: accessiBe final order
3. Let's Encrypt: Free certificates · MDN: Strict-Transport-Security, Content Security Policy · CISA: Multifactor authentication · WordPress: Updating WordPress · OWASP: Top 10:2025
4. EU, Your Europe: Online privacy and cookies · Gmail Help: Email sender guidelines · MDN: autocomplete, viewport
5. Google Search Central: Mobile-first indexing, Links, HTTP status codes, Redirects, Canonical URLs, JavaScript SEO, Optimizing for generative AI (semantic HTML), Do you need an SEO?
6. Google Analytics Help: Key events · Chrome for Developers: Lighthouse · ICANN: Registrants' benefits and responsibilities

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WANT A HAND?

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About this guide

Last updated: November 2026. This guide is general information, not legal, security or technical advice for your situation. Web standards, tools and laws change often; we checked the facts in this guide against official sources in November 2026. No one can guarantee search rankings, traffic or sales, and this guide doesn't either.

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