

# A Practical Guide to Website Procurement

The requirements document that actually gets you accurate quotes.

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Not sure where to start? We can help 



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## Introduction: The £75 Million Wake-Up Call

Here's a sobering statistic to kick things off: **66% of technology projects end in partial or total failure**, with only 31% delivered on time and within budget. The Australian Bureau of Meteorology famously turned a website redesign into a \$75 million debacle — proof that even the most straightforward-sounding digital projects can spiral into chaos when the groundwork isn't right.

But here's the uncomfortable truth most procurement guides won't tell you: **the seeds of project failure are usually planted long before a single line of code is written.** They're planted in the requirements document.

If you've ever sent out an RFP for a website redesign and received quotes ranging from £15,000 to £150,000, you're not alone. This isn't because agencies are pulling numbers from thin air (well, most aren't). It's because your requirements document left too much room for interpretation — or worse, it told agencies what to build without explaining why.

As digital strategist Paul Boag puts it: *"Most procurement processes focus on commodities. They are inappropriate for commissioning digital services."*

This guide is for the digital marketing manager, project manager, or marketing lead who has been handed the task of finding a new web development partner. It will help you put together a brief that generates meaningful, comparable proposals — without requiring you to become a systems analyst overnight or accidentally publishing your business's operational playbook on the internet.

## A Word on Detail: How Much Is Too Much?

Before we get into the pitfalls, let's address the most common misconception about requirements documents: **more detail is not always better.**

There's a tempting logic that says, "if I document everything perfectly, agencies will quote perfectly."

In practice, attempting to specify every feature, every field, every data flow, and every integration touchpoint before you've even chosen a partner is:

- **Enormously time-consuming** — weeks of work before a project has even started
- **Often inaccurate** — you'll make assumptions that turn out to be wrong
- **Inherently inflexible** — it locks you into decisions before you've heard expert input

- **Counter to modern delivery** — good digital projects are built iteratively, with learning built into the process, not waterfall-specified upfront
- **Potentially risky** — particularly for public RFPs, over-sharing operational detail puts sensitive business information in the open

A Functional Design Requirements document — the kind that maps every user story, data flow, field-level input, and system interaction — is genuinely specialist work. It's what experienced Business Analysts and Systems Architects spend careers getting right. Expecting a marketing manager to produce one from scratch isn't realistic, and the gaps in the output will cause problems downstream.

What you can do — and what agencies actually need at this stage — is provide **the shape and complexity of what you need, not a blueprint to build from**. Think of it as a conversation starter, not a specification. The detailed discovery happens *after* you've appointed the right partner, collaboratively, with their expertise in the room.

The goal of your requirements document is simple: **give agencies enough context to understand the problem, estimate the effort, and show you how they'd approach it**.

## Part One: The Common Pitfalls

### Pitfall #1: Defining the Solution Instead of the Problem

This is the cardinal sin of requirements documents, and it's remarkably common.

**What clients write:** "We need a mega-menu with expandable subcategories and a sticky header."

**What agencies actually need:** "Users struggle to find our products — we see high drop-off on category pages and our customer service team fields a lot of calls from people who can't find what they're looking for."

See the difference? The first example prescribes a solution. The second describes a problem that a skilled agency can solve — possibly with a mega-menu, but perhaps with something far more effective.

*"Write briefs that identify a problem and request submissions for possible solutions. Move away from specifying solutions and instead ask agencies to solve your problems for you." — Paul Boag*

Agencies are brilliant at designing solutions. That's literally what they do every day. They've seen hundreds of websites, thousands of user journeys, and they understand what works and what doesn't across industries. When you dictate the solution, you're bypassing the most valuable thing you're paying for.

The fix: For every requirement you write, ask yourself: "Am I describing a problem or prescribing a solution?". If it's the latter, step back and describe the challenge instead.

## Pitfall #2: Top-Level Technical Information Without Any Sense of Scale

There's a meaningful difference between too much technical detail and not enough context. You don't need to specify how things work — but you do need to convey how big they are.

"We need an ecommerce function on our website" tells an agency almost nothing. One will assume 50 products and a simple checkout. Another will imagine a multi-currency enterprise catalogue with complex fulfilment logic. Both quotes will be very different, and neither will necessarily be right.

You don't need to hand over your operational data. But a broad sense of scale — the kind you'd share comfortably in a first conversation — makes an enormous difference.

### For ecommerce, useful context looks like:

- Roughly how many products? (e.g. under 100, up to 1,000, or 5,000+, and whether products have multiple variants or attributes)
- Approximate transaction volumes (low, medium, high — or monthly order of magnitude)
- Do you need multi-currency or multi-language support?
- What payment providers do you currently use?
- Do you need subscription or recurring billing?
- Are there B2B requirements such as trade pricing or account-specific catalogues?

Notice what's not on that list: exact order values, precise SKU counts, how your warehouse sync works technically. That level of detail is for discovery — once you're working with a chosen partner in a trusted environment, not broadcasting in a public tender.

The principle holds across all functional areas. You don't need to describe how an integration works. You need to say it needs to exist, and which systems are involved. *"Our new website needs to integrate with Salesforce for lead capture and Sage for order management"* is sufficient at this stage.

## Pitfall #3: Overlooking Automation and Integration Opportunities

Here's something that gets missed in almost every requirements document: clients describe manual processes they want replicated online, without realising those processes could be eliminated entirely.

A new website is an opportunity to **consolidate data, improve accuracy, and free up your team** from tasks that technology should be handling. But agencies can only spot these opportunities if they understand your current landscape.

You don't need to map every workflow. A broad picture is enough:

- What business systems do you currently use? (CRM, ERP, email marketing, accounting, support platforms)
- Are there manual hand-offs today that feel like they shouldn't be manual?
- Is there data that currently lives in multiple places that should be in one?

Even a sentence like *"our sales team manually copies web enquiries into Salesforce and this is a pain point"* gives an experienced agency a signal worth exploring. That's the level of detail that's useful here — not a process map, just an honest description of friction.

#### **Pitfall #4: Going to a Marketing Agency for Web Development**

Let's address the elephant in the room.

Many companies instinctively approach their existing marketing or brand agency for website work. The logic is sound — they know the brand, they've done great campaigns, surely they can handle a website redesign?

Often, they can't. Not directly. Many marketing agencies don't have in-house development capabilities. They'll take your brief, add a margin (typically 40–60%), and pass the work to a development partner. You end up paying a premium for a middleman who may not have the technical depth to ask the right questions — or pass the right brief.

Worse, because many marketing agencies don't specialise in UX, user journeys, or conversion optimisation, critical details can get lost between you, them, and whoever is actually doing the build. You end up with a website that looks beautiful and performs disappointingly.

#### **Signs you might be dealing with a reseller rather than a builder:**

- Technical questions get deferred to "the team" rather than answered directly
- The portfolio is heavy on brand work and light on complex digital functionality
- There's vagueness about who will actually be doing the development
- Conversations about hosting, security, or CMS governance don't go very deep

This isn't a criticism of marketing agencies — brand strategy, messaging, and campaign thinking are genuinely valuable. But if a website is what you need built, work directly with people who build websites for a living.

#### **Pitfall #5: No Analytics, No Baseline, No Goals**

"We want a website that performs better."

Better than what? By how much? Measured how?

Without a performance baseline and clear targets, agencies can't determine what level of investment is actually warranted — or whether the ambition matches the budget.

### **Share what you have on current performance:**

- Monthly traffic volumes (ballpark is fine)
- Known conversion rates or lead volumes
- Any obvious drop-off points or UX problems you're aware of
- Mobile vs desktop split if you know it

### **And be clear about what success looks like:**

- More leads? More transactions? Lower support burden?
- Are there specific growth targets the website needs to support?
- Is there a campaign or product launch the new site needs to be ready for?

Targets also help agencies calibrate the right approach. A site that needs to double its conversion rate within 12 months is a different project to one that needs a modernised design and improved CMS. One probably needs A/B testing and iterative optimisation built into the brief. The other might not. Analytics and goals tell an agency which one you're dealing with.

### **Pitfall #6: The Internal Perspective Problem**

Here's an uncomfortable truth: **your internal view of your business is not the same as your customers' view of it.**

You're too close to see what outsiders see. Assumptions that feel obvious internally are invisible to the people you're actually trying to reach. This isn't anyone's fault - it's just what happens when you're inside the building.

It's also why the requirements process can become a political battleground. Marketing wants brand showcasing. Sales wants lead generation. IT wants security and maintainability. Customer service wants to reduce inbound calls. Without an external voice in the room, requirements documents become a negotiated compromise - and compromised requirements produce compromised websites.

An external consultant working across your departments - without the politics, without the history, and with the freedom to ask questions nobody internally dares ask - will surface requirements that never would have made it into an internally-produced document.

*"The people who are going to build the product are not involved in the decision-making process."*

*Rarely is the agency involved in shaping the brief." - Paul Boag*

This is where bringing in an experienced digital consultancy early - even before you go to market - pays for itself.

## **Pitfall #7: Specifying the Tech Stack Before You Understand the Problem**

Ask a room full of marketing managers what platform they want their new website built on, and a significant number will say WordPress. Not because they've evaluated the options. Not because it's the right fit for their requirements. But because they've used it before, their current site runs on it, or their last agency built everything on it.

WordPress is the world's most widely used CMS. It is also, rather less proudly, the world's most hacked. According to Sucuri's annual threat report, WordPress consistently accounts for over 90% of all infected CMS platforms they investigate - not surprising when a typical site relies on dozens of independently maintained third-party plugins, each a potential entry point.

Specifying any CMS or tech stack upfront - before you understand your full requirements - closes doors you didn't even know were open.

### **Where this causes real problems:**

- **Security and governance.** Plugin dependencies, update cycles, and third-party code volume can create serious issues in compliance-heavy environments. What passes muster for a marketing site may not survive an IT security review for a platform with greater responsibilities - Cyber Essentials and ISO 27001 have specific implications here.
- **Future integrations and complexity.** Your brief today might describe a straightforward website. But if your roadmap includes deep CRM integration, bespoke application logic, or complex API connectivity, a .NET stack or a platform like Sitefinity or Umbraco may serve you considerably better long-term. The agency can't tell you that if you've already made the decision for them.
- **Eliminating the right expertise.** Specifying a platform can inadvertently exclude the agency that would have been your best fit — one that specialises in a technology precisely because they know what it can and can't do.

There are legitimate platform preferences worth including in your brief - open source vs proprietary, developer availability, community longevity, your internal team's ability to manage it post-launch. Just frame them as context for agencies to respond to, not hard requirements that shut down the conversation before it's started.

## Part Two: What Your Brief Actually Needs to Cover

Here's the practical bit. This isn't an exhaustive specification — it's the context an agency needs to understand your situation, propose a sensible approach, and give you a meaningful estimate.

### 1. Who You Are and What You're Trying to Achieve

Start with your organisation. Not a marketing paragraph — a genuine description of what you do, who your customers are, what markets you operate in, and what role your website plays in the business today versus what you need it to do.

Include your current website URL. Agencies will look at it anyway, but you'll want to contextualise what you think is working and what isn't.

### 2. Your Brand and Identity

Agencies need to understand your brand before they can design anything.

- Do you have brand guidelines? Include them, or say you don't (that's additional scope)
- Visual identity assets - logo, colour palette, typography
- Tone of voice - how do you talk to your customers?
- Examples of work you admire, and work you definitely don't want to look like

### 3. Measurable Goals - Not Vague Ones

Vague goals produce vague proposals.

**Weak:** "Improve our online presence" / "Make it more modern" / "Better user experience"

**Useful:** "Increase inbound leads by X%" / "Reduce bounce rate on key landing pages" / "Support a product launch in Q3" / "Improve mobile conversion" / "Cut support queries driven by poor website navigation"

These don't need to be perfectly formed KPIs at this stage. But they should reflect a real business outcome, not a design preference.

### 4. Functional Overview - Shape and Complexity, Not Specification

This is the section most briefs either skip entirely or overload with detail. Neither extreme is helpful.

What you're communicating here is: **what does the website need to do, at a high level, and roughly how complex is each part?**

A useful way to think about it: if you were describing a feature to a colleague over coffee, what would you say? That's the right level of detail for this section.

### **For example:**

*"We need an enquiry form that routes to different departments based on enquiry type, saves into our CRM, and triggers an email notification to the relevant team. Rough estimate, 10–15 fields."*

That's it. No field names. No validation rules. No CRM mapping logic. The agency now knows it's not a simple contact form - it has routing, integration, and automation involved - and they can factor that into their estimate. The detail gets worked out in discovery, collaboratively, once you're working together.

The same principle applies to integrations. You don't need to explain how they work technically. You need to name the systems and describe the outcome:

*"The website needs to integrate with HubSpot for marketing automation and Microsoft Dynamics for order management."*

That's enough. The "how" is a conversation for later.

**Work through your main functional areas and give a sentence or two on each.** Think about: content management, search, user accounts or portals, ecommerce, forms, integrations, personalisation, multilingual requirements, and anything else that makes your site more than a brochure.

## **5. Business IT and Governance Context**

Often overlooked. Often the thing that causes the most expensive surprises.

You don't need to share your security policy documents. But agencies need to know if there are constraints that will affect the project:

- Are there compliance requirements? (GDPR specifics, ISO 27001, Cyber Essentials, industry regulation)
- Hosting preferences or restrictions? (region, platform, on-premise requirements)
- Preferred technology stack, or technologies that are off the table?
- Any integrations that involve sensitive data or restricted APIs?

A brief paragraph on your IT governance context is usually sufficient. The detail gets worked through with your IT team once a partner is appointed.

## **6. Your Budget Range**

Yes, include it. Not a precise figure — a range is absolutely fine. Here's why it matters far more than most people realise.

**Budget doesn't just affect price. It fundamentally affects approach.**

Take design as an example. There are meaningfully different ways to design a website, and they exist at very different investment levels:

A **lean design process** draws on established UX principles, competitor analysis, and agency experience. It's efficient, professional, and entirely appropriate for many projects.

A comprehensive design process involves end-user research and interviews, multi-persona journey mapping, prototype testing with real users, behavioural data analysis, A/B testing frameworks baked into the architecture, and multiple rounds of validated iteration. It's powerful - and it costs considerably more.

Without a budget range, an agency has no idea which is appropriate for your situation. They'll guess. And they'll all guess differently.

The same dynamic plays out in technical delivery. Security and performance aren't binary - they exist on a spectrum. A project with a £50,000 budget and a project with a £200,000 budget can both deliver a functional website. But the larger investment allows the agency to include:

- Comprehensive unit and integration testing
- Penetration testing and security hardening
- Load and stress testing for peak traffic scenarios
- Automated regression testing to protect future changes
- Performance optimisation sprints targeting Core Web Vitals

If security and performance are genuine requirements - as they should be for any platform handling customer data or significant transaction volumes - the budget needs to reflect that. Without knowing the envelope, an agency can't tell you what's achievable within it.

**Here's the real value of sharing a budget range:** it allows agencies to show their thinking. Rather than just pricing to a number, they can explain how they'd deploy your investment - what they'd prioritise, what they'd phase, and why. That's where good agencies differentiate themselves. A well-matched budget and brief turns a proposal from a price document into a genuine strategic recommendation.

## 7. Long-Term Thinking

The best digital partnerships extend well beyond launch day. Starting this conversation in your brief signals maturity and helps agencies propose the right kind of relationship.

Consider mentioning:

- What does post-launch support look like? What's your expectation on response times?

- Do you have budget for ongoing optimisation and iterative improvements?
- Are there features or phases you'd like to tackle after initial launch?
- Are you open to a retainer or ongoing partnership model?

A phased approach - launching with a solid core and iterating from there - is often better value and lower risk than trying to build everything at once. Good agencies will propose this anyway but mentioning it in your brief opens the door to more honest, strategic conversations.

## Part Three: Running a Good Procurement Process

### Don't Rush Vendor Selection

Rushing the vendor selection process is one of the most consistently cited mistakes in digital procurement. Take the time to:

- Review portfolios and case studies properly - not just the pretty pictures
- Check references (and actually call them, don't just email)
- Have multiple conversations with shortlisted agencies before deciding
- Assess how they think, not just what they've built

A few extra weeks of due diligence can save months of project pain.

### Consider a Discovery Phase First

Rather than going straight to a full project brief, consider whether a paid discovery engagement makes sense. Many agencies offer this as a standalone service - a structured workshop or audit that helps define the right approach before any build commitment is made.

The benefits are significant:

- You get expert input into your requirements before they're finalised
- You see how the agency thinks and works before you're committed
- The discovery output becomes a much better brief for the build phase
- Risk is significantly reduced for both sides

This is particularly valuable if your requirements are complex, your stakeholders have competing priorities, or you're not entirely sure what you need yet. Which, frankly, is most organisations.

## Evaluate Thinking, Not Just Price

The cheapest quote is rarely the best value. When assessing proposals, look for:

- **Evidence they've understood your problem** - not just repeated it back to you
- **A coherent approach** - does their methodology make sense for your situation?
- **Relevant experience** - have they solved similar problems before?
- **Clarity on who does the work** - who specifically will be on your project?
- **Honest risk management** - how do they handle scope changes, delays, or unexpected complexity?
- **Communication style** - do they explain things clearly? Are they people you'd want to work with for 6–12 months?

An agency that asks great questions in response to your brief is almost always a better sign than one that simply sends a polished deck.

## Get It in Writing

Once you've chosen a partner, make sure the engagement is properly documented before work begins:

- Scope of work with clear deliverables
- Acceptance criteria for each phase
- Timeline with milestones
- Payment schedule
- Change request process (this one matters a lot)
- Intellectual property ownership
- Termination clauses
- Support and maintenance terms post-launch

This protects both parties and removes the ambiguity that causes most project disputes.

# A Quick Checklist Before You Send Your Brief

*Run through this before you issue your RFP:*

## **Context**

- Organisation overview - what you do, who your customers are, what markets you serve
- Current website URL and an honest assessment of what's working and what isn't
- Competitive context - who do you compete with, how do you differentiate?

## **Goals**

- Clear, outcome-based objectives (not design preferences)
- Current performance baseline - even approximate figures are useful
- What success looks like in 6–12 months

## **Functional Overview**

- High-level description of key features and functionality
- Integration landscape - which systems need to connect?
- Rough sense of scale and complexity for key areas

## **Constraints**

- Governance and compliance context
- Hosting preferences or restrictions
- Technology preferences or exclusions

## **Brand**

- Brand guidelines or equivalent
- Tone of voice
- Design references - what you like and what you don't

## **Commercial**

- Budget range
- Target timeline and any fixed dates

- Evaluation criteria - how will you make the decision?

## Partnership

- Post-launch support expectations
- Appetite for phased delivery
- Interest in ongoing retainer or optimisation

## Conclusion: The Brief That Saves the Project

A good requirements brief doesn't need to be a 50-page specification document. It needs to be honest, clear, and contextually rich enough for an experienced agency to understand your situation and respond meaningfully.

The irony is that the briefs most likely to generate accurate, comparable quotes are often shorter than the ones that don't - because they focus on problems and outcomes rather than attempting to pre-solve every technical question.

Your brief sets the tone for the entire project. A vague brief attracts vague proposals. A thoughtful brief attracts thoughtful agencies.

Give agencies the shape of the problem. Let them show you how they'd solve it. That's when the interesting conversations start.

## How Spinbox Can Help

If you've read this and thought "*I'm not sure we have the internal resource to put a brief like this together properly*" - that's a completely reasonable position. Most organisations don't. It's not a gap in your team; it's just not something most people do regularly.

**Spinbox provides consultancy services specifically designed to help organisations define the right approach for digital projects** - whether that's a website redesign, a web application, or a complex integration project.

Our discovery and consultancy work includes:

- **Stakeholder workshops** - drawing out requirements from across your organisation without the internal politics getting in the way
- **Technical landscape review** - understanding your current systems, integrations, and constraints
- **Brief and requirements support** - helping you produce a document that generates genuinely useful proposals
- **Vendor evaluation** - independent assessment of proposals and pricing

- **Project governance** - keeping things on track once a partner is appointed

We act as the experienced BA or digital consultant that most client-side teams don't have on tap. We've been through this process many times, from both sides of the table, and we know what makes the difference between a project that delivers and one that doesn't.

**Ready to get your next digital project right from the start?** [Get in touch with the Spinbox team](#) to talk through how we can help - from shaping the brief to finding the right partner and beyond.

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## About the Author



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