

The 12-hour website audit

How a working SEO audits a small-business site in a day and a half, without analytics access. Tick as you go. The order matters: you decide what "good" means before you open a single tool.

Before anything technical, answer three questions. They decide what "good" means for this site.

1. What is the purpose of the audit, and of any SEO work that would follow it?
2. What can the owner realistically do? (Team size, hours a week, budget.)
3. What is the philosophy behind the product and the business?

1 First impressions, as a potential client

~1 hour · no tools yet

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Browse every page you can reach, on mobile and desktop
Fill the forms. Click the interactive bits. Note what you like and don't. ☐ Check robots.txt, the XML sitemap, llms.txt (if any), and the information architecture ☐ Does the homepage speak to the buyer the owner actually wants?
Or to peers, builders, and fans? ☐ Do broad claims come with specifics: decisions, constraints, outcomes? ☐ Will a buyer wonder about capacity, timelines, or what happens if the owner is unavailable? Does the site answer it? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Portfolio: is the work that matches the ideal client at the top? Do cards link off-site before the visitor can convert? ☐ Pricing or calculators: can a buyer tell what they're committing to? Minimum term, ownership, what the recurring fee covers? ☐ Small inconsistencies a buyer notices before an SEO does
Numbers that don't match across pages, pricing floors vs stated minimums, promises nobody can keep. ☐ Blog: real voice? Written for the buyer or for fellow builders? Byline? Where does the CTA go? ☐ Imagery: does it match the positioning (premium, local, technical)? ☐ Ask ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google (AI Overviews) about the business by name: what do they say, and where do they get it? ☐ Wayback Machine: what was on this domain before, and do old URLs with links need redirects? |
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2 Digging deeper, the SEO side

~4.5 hours · crawl runs in the background from the start

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Run two crawls: a standard JS-on baseline, and a JS-off crawl identifying as an AI bot
Does the page's meaning live in the HTML, or get assembled afterwards? ☐ Status codes, 404s, redirect types (307 vs 308 / 301), www and non-www handling ☐ Sitemap matches the crawl: N pages in, N pages out ☐ Quick site:domain.com query in Google: what is shown, how, and in what order? Compare it against the sitemap and the crawl ☐ Canonicals present, even self-referencing ones ☐ Titles under ~60 chars, descriptions under ~160; is the brand suffix eating the budget? ☐ Heading hierarchy consistent within each page; do the H1s say what the business does and where? ☐ Internal links: do the best pages get contextual links, or only navigation links? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Lighthouse on 5 to 10 page types, including throttled to slow 4G. Note that CrUX has nothing at low traffic. ☐ Network tab: check what the server actually sends and what the browser has to fetch to build the page, which is closer to what Googlebot experiences ☐ Structured data: valid? True? Does anything say who the business and the author are? Organization, Person, Article/BlogPosting, Service, linked by @id ☐ Social previews: og:image on every page type, correct og:url, card type ☐ Visibility: third-party estimates, then say plainly how much you trust them ☐ Branded SERP: who else owns the name? Local pack: are they in it, who are they against? ☐ Backlinks: separate the links that matter from the junk every domain collects. Decide on disavow (usually: don't). |
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3 Decide what to prioritize

~1 hour · stop expanding the checklist

- ☐ Write your working assumption in one sentence
e.g. "The site should help the right client understand the offer, evaluate expertise, and make an informed inquiry."
- ☐ Check the commercial keywords: difficulty, and the gap between search volume and traffic potential
Ads, map packs and directories often take most of it.
- ☐ Ask how the ideal client really finds this business. If they ask a peer and look the name up, the site's job is to survive the look-up.
- ☐ Group recommendations into no more than five numbered priorities, in order
- ☐ Lead with quick wins for trust and conversion; put technical cleanup last
Exception: anything that blocks indexing or rendering jumps to priority one.
- ☐ Separate what's an SEO problem from what's a business decision, and say so
- ☐ List what you'd check next with more access or time (the "next release")

Budget the twelve hours. Writing it up takes longer than you think.



Tag every finding so the owner can scan the verdicts

[shipped]

Already right.
Leave it alone.

[issue]

Needs fixing, with
the why and the
how.

[roadmap]

What to do first,
in order.

[note]

Checked, kept for
context.

[open]

Checked, not
resolved.

+ Three questions to close with

the answers turn findings into a plan

- ☐ What should the site do a year from now?
- ☐ How many inquiries would change the business?
- ☐ How many hours a week are available?

No tools? Does your site survive the look-up?

10 questions for owners

Imagine a good-fit customer heard your name from a friend and is now typing it into Google. Answer honestly.

- ☐ Does your site come up first for your own name, with a sensible title and description?
- ☐ In ten seconds on the homepage, can a stranger tell what you do, for whom, and where?
- ☐ Is the work that matches your best customers the first thing they see?
- ☐ Can they find out what it costs, or what it takes to find out, without guessing?
- ☐ Can they tell who is behind the business, and that you'll still be around next year?
- ☐ Do your Google Business Profile and site say the same name, address, phone, and hours?
- ☐ Do you have real reviews anywhere a buyer would look?
- ☐ Does the site read well on a phone, fast, with no horizontal scrolling?
- ☐ If a blog post is shared on LinkedIn, does it show a picture and a sensible title?
- ☐ Does every page have one obvious next step, and does it go somewhere useful?