

FREE GUIDE

What You Need vs. What Agencies Try to Sell You

A practical guide for early-stage startup founders deciding what to spend on marketing and digital, and what to leave until later.

For founders under €500K raised

12-minute read

No email required

THE PROBLEM

The agency sales machine

If you've sat through a "discovery call" with a digital agency, you know how it goes. A landing page turns into a full brand system. A one-off launch campaign turns into a retainer. By the end of the call, a founder with €20,000 left in the bank is looking at a proposal built for a Series A budget.

This guide is not anti-agency. Good agencies exist, and at some stage you may well need one. This is about walking into those conversations knowing what you actually need right now, what can wait, and what questions separate a fair proposal from an inflated one.

Who this is for: founders at pre-seed to early seed stage, typically under €500K raised, deciding how to spend limited runway on websites, branding, SEO, ads, and everything in between.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Agencies sell what pays their bills, not what you need

Agencies are businesses. Their incentive is to increase the size of the deal, not to recommend the smallest thing that solves your problem. That is not dishonest, it is just how the business model works. Knowing this changes how you read a proposal.

Bundled packages

Bundling raises average deal size. You need a logo, you get quoted a full brand system, a website, and a content retainer.

Retainer by default

Recurring revenue is more predictable for the agency than project fees. Some proposals default to a retainer even when the work is a one-off.

Complexity inflation

Jargon and elaborate deliverables are easier to charge a premium for than a simple, working solution.

Platform lock-in

Bespoke code or proprietary tools mean you need that agency, or their successor, for every future change.

The 5 things you actually need before anything else

Before spending a euro on an agency, these five are the things that need to exist.

Everything else on a typical proposal can wait until one of these is in place and generating signal.

1 A one-page site that states what you do and how to contact you

It does not need to be custom-built. A clean Webflow, Framer, or Carrd page with your offer, your audience, and a working contact form is enough at this stage. A five-page site with a blog nobody writes for is not.

2 Analytics that tell you if anyone is showing up

Google Analytics 4 (free) set up correctly, with three to five goals you actually check, beats a custom dashboard nobody logs into. You cannot make decisions on traffic you cannot see.

3 One channel, run well

Pick the single channel where your first users already spend time (a community, a platform, cold outreach, search) and run it consistently for a quarter before adding a second. Agencies often propose five channels from day one; most early founders cannot resource even two.

4 A way to capture interest that is not just a contact form

An email list, a waitlist, or a simple CRM (even a well-kept spreadsheet) so that early interest does not evaporate. This does not require a marketing automation platform.

5 A clear, honest answer to "why should I care"

One sentence that says what you do, for whom, and why it matters, repeated consistently across your site, your outreach, and your pitch. No amount of paid media fixes a message that does not land.

The test: if a proposed piece of work does not directly strengthen one of these five, it is not a "before anything else" item, whatever the agency calls it.

COMMON UPSELLS TO AVOID AT EARLY STAGE

What agencies pitch vs. what an early-stage startup needs

The table below covers the areas where agency proposals most often diverge from what a founder under €500K in funding genuinely needs right now.

Area	Often pitched early	What's usually enough at your stage
Website	Often oversold Custom-coded site, bespoke CMS, ongoing maintenance retainer	Usually sufficient Well-configured Webflow or Framer site you can edit yourself
Branding	Often oversold Full brand system: brand book, icon library, tone of voice guide	Usually sufficient Logo, two or three colours, one typeface, a one-page style sheet
SEO	Often oversold Monthly SEO retainer from month one, ongoing link building	Usually sufficient One technical audit, fix the critical issues, publish on a regular schedule. SEO compounds slowly; a retainer is rarely worth paying for until you have several months of live content and traffic to optimise against
Paid ads	Often oversold Multi-platform ad management before you have a working funnel	Usually sufficient Prove the funnel converts organically first, then put budget behind what already works
CRM & automation	Often oversold Enterprise CRM implementation, complex automation flows day one	Usually sufficient A free-tier CRM or a structured spreadsheet until you pass a few hundred contacts and have a real process to automate
Content	Often oversold Full content calendar across four channels, personas, editorial guidelines	Usually sufficient Clarity on one audience and one message, published on a fixed weekly or fortnightly schedule on the one channel that matters

Red flag: vague scope

A proposal that lists "services included" instead of specific, dated deliverables.

Red flag: long lock-in

A minimum retainer of six months or more before any work has started.

Red flag: no ownership

You do not get admin access to your own site, ad accounts, or analytics.

Red flag: same-day proposal

A detailed quote sent within a day of the first call rarely reflects real scoping.

Skip, build, or buy

Before agreeing to any piece of work, run it through these three questions in order. Most early-stage spending decisions resolve at the first or second question.

1 Skip: does this solve a problem you actually have right now?

If you cannot point to a specific outcome this unblocks (users you are losing, a signup step that fails, a question every prospect asks that your site does not answer), it is not urgent. Park it and revisit once one of the five essentials on page 3 surfaces the need.

2 Build: can you or your team do a good-enough version yourself?

Most early-stage teams can configure a Webflow site, set up GA4, or run a first outreach campaign without outside help, using free or low-cost tools. This is usually the right call while you are still validating.

3 Buy: is this specialised enough, and urgent enough, to pay for now?

If a DIY version would take weeks you do not have, or the risk of getting it wrong is high (legal pages, payment setup, technical SEO migration), buying a scoped piece of work from a specialist is the sound choice. Buy the specific deliverable, not a retainer, unless the work is genuinely ongoing.

The principle: spend the smallest amount that tests the assumption. Scale spending only once you have evidence it works, not because a proposal made it sound urgent.

Budget benchmarks for startups under €500K

There is no single correct marketing budget for an early-stage startup; it depends on your model and how much of the work you can do yourselves. The ranges below reflect what a lean, pre-Series-A founder typically spends when buying rather than building each piece.

Stage	Typical focus	What it usually costs to buy	Small agency, comparable scope
Pre-seed, idea validated	One-page site, GA4, first outreach channel, mostly DIY	€0 – €1,500, one-time	€3,000 – €6,000
Pre-seed to early seed, first users	Proper site build, foundation audit, one channel run properly	From €1,500, one-time project	€5,000 – €12,000
Seed, repeatable acquisition needed	Ongoing support across site, SEO, or paid, pausable when not needed	From €300/month, retainer	€1,200 – €3,000/month
Any stage, need a second opinion	Working sessions on a specific decision rather than outsourcing it	From €120/session, mentoring	€150 – €300/hour, consulting

A word on these numbers: the "what it usually costs to buy" column is WhatFits' own published pricing, so treat it as one honest reference point, not an industry-wide survey. The small-agency column is an approximate range based on typical EU small-agency and freelance-specialist quotes for comparable scope (bundled account management and retainers are usually the reason for the gap, not necessarily better output). Use both columns as a sanity check on any proposal you receive, not as a hard ceiling.

Four patterns that quietly waste early-stage budget

Not agency upsells this time, just decisions founders make on their own that tend not to pay off before Series A:

Redesigning before there's traction to protect

A visual refresh feels productive, but with no real usage yet, there's nothing for the new design to convert better. Fix clarity and speed first; redesign once traffic makes it worth optimising.

Paid ads before the funnel converts organically

Spend behind a page that already turns visitors into signups. Spend behind a page that doesn't just buys traffic that leaves; you pay to learn what free traffic would have told you anyway.

A CRM or tool nobody actually opens

The tool is rarely the constraint. If the team isn't already tracking leads in a spreadsheet by habit, a paid CRM won't create that habit for them.

Chasing every new channel because it's trending

A new platform or format getting attention online is a reason to watch it, not a reason to abandon the one channel that is already working for your specific audience.

ABOUT WHATFITS

Digital structure for small teams tired of improvising

WhatFits is a one-person consultancy based in Essen, Germany. Founders come to us to get a website, analytics, and a first channel set up properly, without being upsold into a bundle they can't yet use. No lock-in, no retainer for months with nothing to do, and every account stays in your name from day one.

- Website builds on Webflow, from €1,500 one-time
- Ongoing support (SEO, paid, or site changes), from €300/month, pause any month
- One-off strategy or working sessions, from €120/session

Not sure which one you need?

A 30-minute call is enough to work out whether you need to build, buy, or skip.
No deck, no obligation.

[Book a free call at makewhatfits.com](https://makewhatfits.com)