

DEALING WITH A SHADENCY

How to know if you're working with a shady agency and what to do about it.

By Lindsey Miller



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INTRODUCTION

It breaks my heart every time it happens. I start talking to a potential client, and they tell me about their negative experience with their last agency. I've heard all the horror stories you can imagine. Agencies that stole money, robbed clients of time, refused to give them access to their materials, or just disappeared without a trace. Understandably, these people are reluctant to work with another marketing agency. Their faith in a vendor's ability or willingness to care about them or their company is shattered. It just shouldn't be this way.

I wish every agency fulfilled its promises and treated people right. But the truth is that they just don't. There are some shady agencies out there! And even if you never become a Content Journey client, I want you to understand how to know if you're working with a shady agency and what to do about it because no one deserves to get ripped off! We're all doing our best to grow our businesses and foster a healthy workplace. None of us has time for jerks or nonsense.



So, that's why I'm writing this book. I want to help you understand:

- **What a shadency is**
- **How to tell if you're working with a shadency**
- **How to fire them**
- **What to look for in a new, positive, healthy agency relationship**

I hope the information in this book helps you find the right partners to help you and your business excel.

Now let's get started!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After spending a decade in politics and almost the same amount of time in the WordPress and WooCommerce ecosystem, Lindsey Miller created Content Journey. Her passion for making a difference in the world led her to create a business built around others' success.

She stays knowledgeable about marketing strategies to ensure our clients always follow best practices. One of her favorite things is talking to clients about creative strategies. It is why she always keeps available time for free strategy calls. She says, "They are just fun!"

If you want to talk strategy, feel free to [book a call](#). You also can connect with Lindsey on [LinkedIn](#) or [Twitter](#).

ABOUT CONTENT JOURNEY

Lindsey Miller launched Content Journey in 2020 to help midsize and large businesses use big business tech approaches to grow their brands. Content Journey combines SEO best practices with purposeful content to increase brand awareness and, ultimately, sales.

Content Journey is a people-first company. Our values reflect this focus.



Content Journey's values:

CARE

We care about ourselves, our families, each other, our clients as individuals, and our clients' success.

KINDNESS

We are kind to each other and treat our clients the way we want to be treated.

INTENTIONAL HONESTY

Sometimes we have to deliver bad news. Maybe your website isn't set up for success, or you're just not a good fit for Content Journey's services. Not every client is a perfect fit for us and vice versa. We are intentionally honest with all of our clients and prospective clients, regardless of what we have to communicate. We communicate with kindness and always try to guide their next steps, even if those steps aren't with us. We take this approach because we genuinely care about people and their success.

Content Journey's leadership team has decades of experience in marketing, content, and SEO, among other areas of expertise. Our leadership team oversees a staff of writers who we carefully pair with clients based on fit. Our writing team has decades of writing, journalism, and publishing experience.



CHAPTER 1:

What's a Shadency and Why It Matters

A Shadency is a shady agency. It's an agency that doesn't do what they say and steals your time and money, or worse.

About 80-90% of Content Journey clients come to us because another agency burned them. Those experiences make me sad. I don't want that for anyone.

Shadency is different than an agency making mistakes. No one is immune from making a mistake or forgetting a to-do. Shady agencies don't own the error or take corrective action. There is a difference.

A Shadency can cost you time and money. But it also can damage your business. You could have spent years on marketing efforts with little to no return, only to start from scratch with no access to your data or your website. Can you imagine how much that would set your business back? You would think you were doing all the right things just to discover that your efforts lacked conversions, didn't secure growth, and you will need to repeat the proper steps with a legitimate company.

Talk about major frustration!



CHAPTER 2: Are You Working With a Shadency?

We all think we would know if we were working with a shady agency. We would recognize if someone was being dishonest with us and wasn't doing what was best for our business, wouldn't we? Then why does it happen so frequently?

The truth is that you don't recognize when you're working with a Shadency. They convince you that everything is going according to plan.

They may even present you with data that makes it look like things are operating smoothly. By the time you realize something isn't quite right, you can be in pretty deep, having wasted thousands and thousands of dollars and countless hours for nothing.

But there are things you can look for to determine if you're working with a Shadency.

3 Signs You're Working with a Shady Agency

I'm always surprised by the similarities in people's stories about working with shady agencies. I notice trends in the way these agencies do things. They're indicators that something isn't quite right. Recognizing these three signs can give you a pretty good indication that something is wrong in your agency relationship.

1. NO DATA ACCESS

If you don't have access to your data, that's a huge problem. Your data on your accounts belongs to you and your business, no matter who you bring to manage it for a short time. You need to be the owner or super admin of those accounts. If that's not the case, you should change it immediately. Even if you're happy with your agency, you need to own what's yours.

2. NO ADMIN ACCESS

Just because you've paid someone else to create a website, or you contract with someone else to add to the website, doesn't mean the site doesn't belong to you. You need to have admin access to your website. It's your property.

I understand why some companies may be reluctant to provide clients with admin access. It's not because they don't want them to own their site. The clients don't know how to change or update the site. But just because you have admin access doesn't mean you should be pushing all of the buttons. It's ok to have the access, own the site, and let someone else change and manage it for you.

3. MAKING PROMISES AND GUARANTEES

SEO should always increase your traffic over time, if it's done correctly. But anyone who guarantees a certain amount of increased traffic within a specific timeframe is misleading you. Yes, there are best practices that we perform, but there aren't any guarantees. Guarantees are just not how organic search works.



CHAPTER 3:

Firing a Shadency

So, you suspect your agency may not be on the up and up. Or you determined that you're working with a Shadency. Now what? Here's my advice.

Have a Difficult Conversation

Being an adult and a professional means you will have difficult conversations sometimes. Have a conversation with your agency contact about what's going wrong or which expectations they aren't meeting.

Sometimes you may have a difficult conversation and find that you didn't understand something and your agency is the right fit after all. Sometimes the challenging discussion may result in a mutual parting of ways. Regardless, a discussion is the right and professional thing to do.

Review Your Contract

Yes, I know contracts are an extra headache, but you need to have one with your agency. Having a contract protects both sides of the relationship. It creates clear expectations of deliverables. Also, a contract will tell you how to break up, if necessary. It tells you things like how much notice is required and how to go about severing the relationship.

Review your contract if you're ready to break up with your shady agency. It should tell you what to do.

If you don't have a contract with your agency, now's the time to put things in writing.

Make The Decision

It's up to you whether you want to give your agency a chance to redeem itself or if you think that opportunity has passed. Either way, once you decide to fire your agency, do it. Have the conversation, review the contract, and make the decision. For your sake and theirs, don't drag out a relationship that isn't working well. And don't let them talk you out of a decision you know is right.



CHAPTER 4: What to Look for in a New Agency

It's difficult to even think about choosing another agency after you've been through the drama of dealing with a Shadency. But you still need those services (or the services you thought you were getting) for your company. Putting yourself back out there after getting burned is challenging, but you must. Here's my advice on what to look for in a new agency.

Beware of Promises

Run away if you're meeting with an agency rep and they start making a bunch of promises about how much traffic you'll get or when you'll get it. As I said before, SEO should always increase your traffic over time when done correctly and consistently. But anyone who guarantees a certain amount of increased traffic within a specific timeframe is misleading you. SEO just doesn't work that way. A good marketer will tell you what they hope to accomplish, how they plan to do it, and why they made those decisions. They won't make promises they can't keep.

At Content Journey, we celebrate when our clients hit their milestones. That's the type of agency you want. Find an agency that cares more about your success than its own. Find an agency of people who put your success in front of theirs. If they really care about your business's success, it will be their focus, not signing you and moving on to get another client. Nobody wants someone who just wants to seal the deal.



Focus on Care

Choose an agency with people who know what they're doing. This knowledge means explaining everything to you in terms you understand. If they use a bunch of industry jargon to sound smart but can't explain what they'll do for your company, that's a problem.



Choose Knowledgeable Partners

Marketing seems like magic, but it isn't. If they're unwilling to pull back the curtain to show you what's happening behind the scenes, then they're not being honest.

We show true expertise when we can simplify something so that anyone can understand. A good agency rep can explain their work and processes so that you can understand them. "Just trust us" probably isn't the message of someone you want to do business with.

It's difficult to tell a client that things didn't work out as expected. When looking for a new agency, ask specifically about this experience. If they pretend it's never happened to them, that's a problem. Being transparent when things don't work out is just as important as celebrating wins. Pay attention to their response to a question about a time when things didn't work out. This response will be enlightening on how they do business.

**Seek
Transparency**

**Find Good
Alignment**

When you're interviewing reps from a new agency, they should ask you a ton of questions about your business goals. They should want to know your goals and what reaching them looks like to you. Then they should work to help you accomplish those goals. The last thing you want is to hire an agency that tells you that your business goals aren't correct or you aren't going about them correctly. An agency shouldn't try to talk you out of your goals.

I'm amazed at how often our clients marvel that we do what we say we'll do. All agencies should do what they say they will. Heck, all businesses should do what they say they will. It shouldn't be a surprise when your marketing agency fulfills its promises. Consistency and reliability should be the norm, not a novel concept.

**Look for
Consistency**

**Consider
Pricing**

Whether you can afford an agency or it will push your budget too far matters. Choose an agency with pricing that agrees with your budget. If you're pushing the limits of your budget, it's challenging to let the process work. There are no overnight successes in SEO. There may not even be 30- to 60-day wins. You can't push your budget so much that you need results quickly. Be sure you find an agency with a price point that agrees with your budget.



CHAPTER 5:

Questions to Ask When Interviewing Agencies

After dealing with a Shadagency, you want to hire an agency you feel you can trust. Hiring the first agency you talk to is probably not the best idea. Instead, interview multiple agencies and ask them a list of questions before deciding who to hire.

Questions to ask include:

- What is your expertise?
- Explain, generally, how you would perform the type of work I'm seeking.
- Have you performed this type of work for clients before? If so, tell me about some of the results.
- Do you have case studies from your work in these areas or with other businesses like ours?
- What are your agency's core values? What do you know about ours?
- Is all of the work done in-house? If so, who is on your team? If not, what do you outsource, and how do you find the people to do that work?
- What is your onboarding process like?

- Tell me how you communicate with clients. How often can I expect to hear from you, and at what stages? What if I have questions?
- What do you expect from me as a client?
- How long will the project take? What will I get? What will I be able to review?
- What's your revision process?
- What does the billing process look like?
- What is a "rush" project? Who determines that?
- Are there other add-on costs for services you recommend for our company?
- Can you send me a copy of our contract?
- What will I own after the project is complete?
- What does your reporting look like as we continue our relationship?
- What if I need to change my package or sever the relationship at some point? What does that process look like?

I know this may seem like a lot of questions, but these are the key things you'll want to know when deciding what agency to hire. Think of it as a job interview. You wouldn't hire someone for your team without asking them many questions because you want to ensure they're a good fit. The same is true when hiring a marketing agency.



CHAPTER 6:

Creating a Positive Agency Relationship

Once you decide on a new marketing agency, it's time to lay the groundwork for a positive relationship.

Hammer out the details of your relationship up front and get it all in writing as a contract. I get that contracts aren't sexy. But having a contract protects both sides in the relationship. It creates clear expectations of deliverables, payments, and how to sever the relationship if it's ever necessary to do so.

You've undoubtedly learned a lot from your experience working with a Shadency. You should address anything you want to ensure you never have to deal with again in your contract. If the new agency isn't willing to alter the contract to fit your needs or won't compromise, it may be a sign to move on to another choice.

Once you have the contract details outlined, spend a significant amount of time with your agency rep on the front end. Your new agency needs to understand your business, brand, and voice. They also need to understand your customers and products or services.



Finally, they need a clear understanding of the goals you want for your business and how you think marketing can help you meet those.

Then they should make specific recommendations based on that information, and you should both agree on a plan moving forward.

You'll also want to spend quite a bit of time providing feedback on your first deliverables. Don't feel guilty providing edits or other feedback. You need your new agency to understand you so they can create what you want. Your input on these first deliverables will set the stage for the rest of the marketing materials you receive. They set the tone for the rest of your relationship. If you don't spend the time upfront, you won't be happy as things continue.

Your new marketing agency should set up regular meetings and communication. You should never be left wondering what they're doing for you or when you'll receive materials. And you should always feel empowered to give feedback that best benefits your business.

Open, honest, two-way communication is the hallmark of a successful client-agency relationship.

You won't always have the best news for each other, but you should feel secure that you can work through any issues or concerns in a true partnership.

Recognizing that you're working with a Shadency, firing them, and moving on to a healthy client-agency relationship is a process I wish no one ever experienced. I wish every agency fulfilled its promises and operated with integrity.

Sadly, not all agencies fulfill their promises.

There are some shady agencies out there. But if you've encountered a Shadency, know that all agencies aren't like that. Most of us are out here trying to do excellent work for our clients every day, just like your business is for your clients. You can sever your relationship with the Shadency and move on to a new, positive agency relationship that will truly benefit your business.



Once you drop your shady agency, you'll wonder why you waited so long, and you'll never deal with a Shadency again.

Working with Content Journey

Content Journey helps midsize to large businesses use big business tech approaches to grow their brands. We never practice Shadency. One way we ensure this is by guaranteeing fit. We don't take on every client who tries to hire us. Every client isn't a fit for us and vice versa. We want true partnerships where we know we'll enjoy working together to help grow your business.

We won't make promises we can't keep, and we always put people first. Our values of care, kindness, and intentional honesty drive everything we do.

We are intentionally honest with all of our clients and prospective clients, regardless of what we have to communicate. We communicate with kindness, and we always try to guide the next steps, even if those steps aren't with us. We take this approach because we truly care about people and their success.

If you'd like to learn more about Content Journey or schedule a no-pressure conversation to learn how we may be able to partner to help grow your business, [book a call](#). We'd love to meet you and learn more about your business's needs.



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