

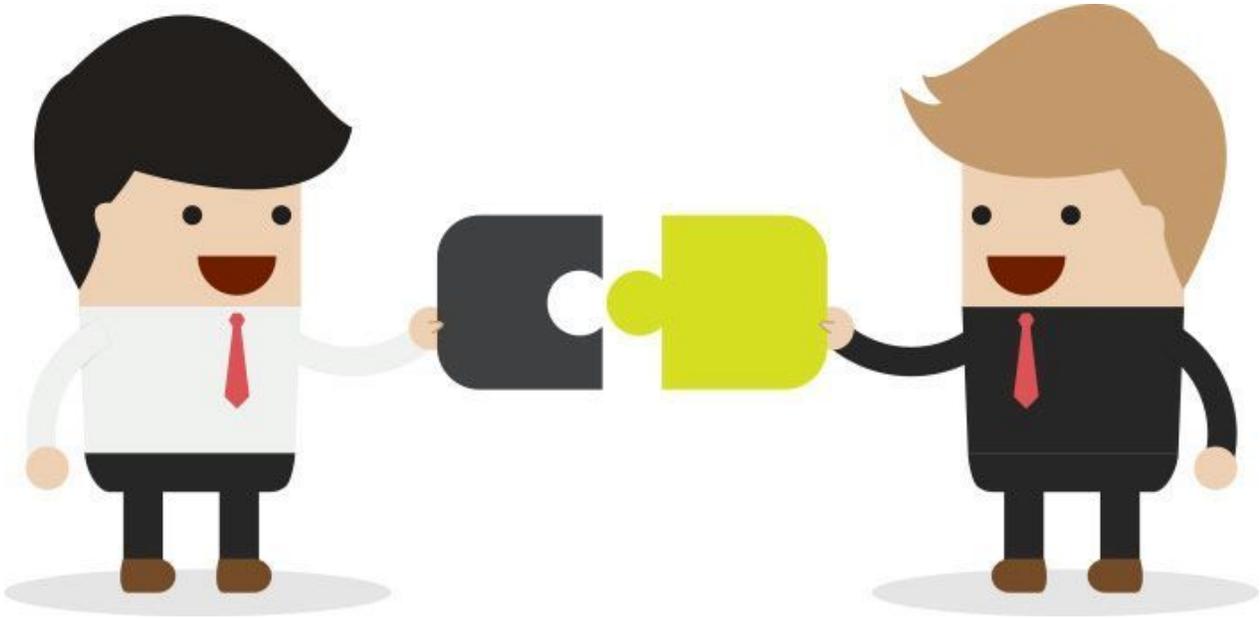


# Scope Creep

What it is & how to beat it.

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## Introduction

Although scope creep can happen in many industries, this white paper focuses specifically on web development from the perspective of the **website development agency** and that of the **client**.

This white paper was written for

1. Businesses who want to learn how to be more successful with their web project and avoid cost overruns.
2. Web Agencies who want to learn how to identify, manage and mitigate scope creep when it occurs.

## Definitions:

- **Client:** *This is the Client or customer or business that is the owner of the project.*
- **Web Agency:** *The website design/development agency that is managing project scope and developing the project.*
- **Project Definition Phase:** *Name for the initial phase of a project that consists of meetings, research and creation of Project Scope and other documents.*
- **Project Scope:** *The defined work that needs to be accomplished to deliver a product, service, or a description of result with the specified features and functions.*
- **SOW (statement of work):** *A more formal document that usually includes detailed requirements and pricing, with standard regulatory and governance terms and conditions. Indeed, SOWs are often legally equivalent to contracts.*

- **Scope Creep:** *Also called requirement creep and feature creep, in project management. Refers to unmanaged additional changes or continuous increase of a project's scope. This can occur when the scope of a project is not properly defined, documented, or controlled from the outset. It is generally considered a negative (at least to the parties responsible for budget and timeline) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scope\\_creep](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scope_creep)*



## In a Perfect World

In a perfect world, the Client hires a Web Agency based on a well thought out SOW and/or project scope document. The extent and detail of the scope depends on the requirements of the project. If the project is a simple web page with text content and some images, the scope definition could be less than one page. If the project is more complex, for example, with complex membership requirements, custom permissions, ecommerce, social media plugins, etc., then the scope document can be many pages and require weeks to prepare.

**Following are some of the documents that may be included in a project scope plan.**

Scope Document	Document / Purpose
Project Overview	Describes the business and states the overall project goals.
Online Style Guide	Defines how the Client's brand will be used online. It can include font specifications, color palettes, image styles and more.
Interface Design Overview	This document relates to the website visual design. It describes the visual look-and-feel as dictated by the Client's brand and industry

	standards.
IA Design Overview	IA or Interface Architecture involves the optimum layout of content areas in the website structure and on the web page.
Site Map	A map of the site structure and how sections link together.
Features and Functionality Matrix	This document is a spreadsheet of all the requested features and functions divided by section and by phase. Many times there is an LOE (level of effort) and notes assigned to each item.
Wireframes	These are diagrams of the site pages, like blueprints of a house, they show the types of content and organization of the content on specific site pages.
Technical Design	This document can have many components starting with hosting and hardware specifications. Next is the technical framework to be used. Integrations with 3rdparty and back office systems.
Marketing Overview	Identifies the target audience(s) and describes their goals on the site. Provides information on the competitive landscape and the business differentiator.
Marketing Strategy	Defines the approach to SEO, social media, email marketing and other online marketing channels.
Testing	Describes the testing process and the target browsers and devices, (also known as UAT, user acceptance testing, QA, and beta testing).
Project Schedule	Estimates the project timeline with milestones for deliverables and approvals.
Project Term	Lists the team members required and their roles. This can include the Web Agency and Client teams.
Change Orders (COs)	If the project scope is adjusted then the change order is the best method to capture the cost and time impact on the project.
Budget	Provides the estimated project budget by phase. Includes costs for hardware and software licenses.

Maintenance Plan	Recommends post launch maintenance tasks and costs.
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Most companies charge for a detailed scope document since it is the blueprint for the website and takes days or weeks of effort to research, discuss, and write up. A Client could then present this document to any Web Agency and obtain a realistic estimate for the project. Accompanying the scope are the all important Project Terms, specific to the agency, which describe contractual terms of agreement relating to delivery and legal responsibilities.

The Client and the Web Agency should review the scope of work together and agree on it in writing in order to proceed with project design and development. It is important that both parties understand the scope and make no unwritten assumptions. Often what happens is this: after the project begins, clients claim that we should be working on a particular feature because “we talked about including that feature in the project...”. Or they say, “I assumed that you would include x,y, or z. Why wouldn’t I want that feature?” But, if it didn’t get in the approved scope, it isn’t included in the project scope or budget.

***BUT what if your project starts without a scope document and the budget is based on a loose proposal?***

Many inexperienced businesses don’t understand the value of a proper scope document and don’t want to pay for one. This puts the Web Agency in a difficult spot because they don’t want to expend effort in scoping out the project on their own dime and they don’t want to undertake a project if there is the danger of scope creep due to unknown requirements.

If the project is truly a simple one, then an agency may decide to take the risk and write a proposal without having to produce a formal scope. If however the project is complex then the Web Agency should either pass on doing the project or put in wide cost ranges and caveats to protect themselves from potential scope creep. The Client should also realize that without a detailed scope, this range is necessary and that their requests for features or functionality may not be delivered in the way they envision.



*Ok, the scope has been agreed upon and the project is a go.*

Once the project begins, even with a scope document, the most important thing is communication between the Web Agency and their team members and with the Client. Lack of clear communication is often the primary failure point in website development. The Web Agency should assign a single point of contact for the project, typically a project manager. On the Client side, one point of contact should also be established to manage the project requests with the Client's stakeholders. "Too many cooks spoil the broth" is a relevant saying when it comes to efficient project communication.

To aid in communication and mitigate scope creep, there are a wide variety of online collaborative tools that can keep everyone in the loop. At Executionists, we currently use ProofHQ.com to enable collaboration on visual design. We use Basecamp.com for overall project tasks, status and communication. Other online tools we can use include box.com, dropbox.com, Invision.com, etc. We are always on the lookout for other online platforms and tools that improve our process and add efficiencies and clarity. When these tools are bypassed, usually by Client opting out due to fear of too much technology to learn, there is the potential for inefficient communication and scope creep. For example, a Client that insists on faxing us printouts of web pages with handwritten notes is opening up potential communication failure points.

**DANGER:** Many Web Agencies are run by sales / business development departments. Their goal is sales. Often they over promise or leave descriptions vague to get the sale. (know anyone like that?!) The better Web Agencies have a process in place that involves creative, technical and project management staff to review the proposed project and ask relevant questions to help define the scope before rushing to the sale.

### 3 Real Life Examples of Scope Creep

This next section provides three examples culled from real life projects. (The names have been changed). Does your project fit into one of these types?

#### **BigIdeaCompany.com**

This startup had a great vision for a service or product. They had a business plan and some branding and financing. After reviewing several Web Agencies they selected one that they thought “got them” and could execute their vision. The Web Agency started with a project Definition phase. The Definition phase would scope the project requirements through a variety of documentation. This documentation included:

- Technical Specification
- Design Specification
- Wireframes
- Features and Functionality Matrix
- Project Schedule and Resource allocation
- Budget

The Definition phase took four weeks and the Client approved the documents that were generated because s/he was anxious to get started without really understanding them. During the next phase, Interface Design, the Client started to see how the site would look and liked the general direction but didn’t want to sign off on any of the design until the site was “perfect”. In the meantime, the development team was slated to get started but could only do some basic programming and prototyping without the approval on the visual design.

The project schedule was being pushed so the Web Agency decided to go ahead and use the latest unapproved designs, figuring they would be minor at this point and they could tweak them later. The technical team developed the site with the design and the beta site was shown to the Client. The Client still didn’t like the design and requested changes. Some of the changes were simple but others affected the page layouts and functionality. These required the design team to produce revised page designs and then the development team to redo website code. The resulting back and forth with the Client, design team and developers was an additional 100 hours just because the Web Agency couldn’t get approval from the Client on the page designs at the correct point in the process.

The website launched. The Web Agency and Client managed to negotiate a discounted rate for the overage but the miscommunication over the cost overruns resulted in a lose/lose for both parties.

### **Important Points for Startup Companies:**

- Although your Web Agency should be managing the process, make sure you are aware of the schedule and your approval milestones. If you have not provided approval and the date has passed, ask your project manager how this affects the project.
- If you have a large, complex project, you will have more success if you parse your project into discrete phases. This will get you up and online faster and you can be growing your business while you are working on phase 2 or 3.
- Remember that websites evolve over time. Choosing your battles and compromising at various points may be the best solution to keep your project on track.
- Don't necessarily go for the lowest bidder. Go with the company that has a track record, solid references, and a process that provides adequate planning.

### **Important Points for Web Agencies:**

- Startup companies are usually headed by an entrepreneurial visionary, A-type personalities. Often these types get excited by big picture plans but hate to get bogged down in detail. Make sure that expectations are appropriately set and provide regular reports to ensure that communication is maintained.
- If a Client can't sign off on design or documents, pause the project until an agreement can be reached. If an agreement can't be reached it may be best to cancel the project rather than continue with a challenging Client and uncertain outcome. In an ideal world, the Client's mindset is collaborative, not demanding and unrealistic.
- "Signoff" or "Approval" means that the Client has agreed in writing, not verbally, to modify the scope or approve the milestone. Digital signatures or approvals are often available with certain tools (such as Proposable.com and ProofHQ.com).
- Companies with innovative ideas are prime candidates for scope creep. The reason is that they are breaking new ground with their mix of customized features. As long as the Agency's project manager can keep up with new requests with appropriate approved change orders, iterate away.

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### **SmithInc.com**

A small eCommerce business wants to improve their online sales and promotions. This Client had an existing website that was four years old. The primary goal was to refresh the design and upgrade the site to be mobile responsive along with a minor content refresh. Definition documents were generated. The SOW broadly stated that the Web Agency would migrate the existing website content, products and customers to the new website.

The design phase went well and the project moved into development. At that point, it was

discovered that the person that wrote the technical spec didn't properly assess the extent of the content. The blog content was much more extensive than previously thought and the eCommerce cart had been customized. The development team had to purchase an additional eCommerce plugin and customize their database in order to migrate the Client's data. This also required additional testing on desktop, mobile and tablet. The Web Agency ended up absorbing the cost of 2 weeks of additional work and lost their profit on the project.

### **Important Points for Small Businesses:**

- If your legacy site has any customization make sure that you communicate that to your Web Agency.
- Upgrading to a new website gives you an opportunity to add newer features and also to trim your old content. Take a look at your web analytics and consider deleting old articles and content that is rarely viewed.
- Don't forget about SEO when upgrading your website. Your old site pages need to refer visitors to the new ones. This can be done through search engine techniques and will allow you to maintain your search engine ranking.

### **Important Points for Web Agencies:**

- Content migration from an old site to a new site can often cause scope creep.
- Content includes, articles, PDF and downloadable files, products, member account information, databases, etc. Web Agencies shouldn't assume a smooth transfer and the SOW should contain language to guard against unforeseen content migration issues.
- When dealing with eCommerce, make sure that any existing ERP (back office) systems like inventory and accounting are able to be integrated into the new system. Also look for any potential customizations that are specific to the Client's business.

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### **XYZCompany.com**

This company wanted a minor upgrade to a newer version of their outdated framework from version 3 to version 4 and the addition of a blog to their website. Since the project was a small one, Scope documentation wasn't created and the Web Agency just provided the Client with a short SOW. The upgrade of the framework went well although there were also several plugins that also had to be upgraded. The addition of the blog went smoothly.

After the upgraded site launched the Client complained that the site was running slower and the pages weren't loading as fast as they used to. The Web Agency did some testing and confirmed that some of the pages were loading slower. The development team made some adjustments to their code but the site was still loading too slowly for the Client. The Web Agency did some server testing and found that the problem was actually with the hosting company's hardware and software. The site would have to be moved to a new server. At this point the Client's faith in the Web Agency was shaken and the Web Agency spent many unbilled hours troubleshooting the "slow" website.

The site was moved to a new server at the Web Agency's cost.

### **Important Points for Small Businesses:**

- Even simple upgrades can cause unforeseen problems. Make sure you have a recent backup of the website and see if your Web Agency can do the upgrades on a cloned version of your site on your server so it can be tested before going live.

### **Important Points for Web Agencies**

- Make sure the Client's legacy hosting is compatible with any software upgrades.
- Have language in your SOW that discusses that hosting services may have to be modified and this modification would be billed additionally.
- Making enhancements to existing code that another Web Agency wrote is potentially dangerous. Developers code differently, even within the same framework. If you put a range of hours for contingencies in your SOW it can help absorb many issues that arise.

**DANGER:** Beware the innocuous Client request! Sometimes even seemingly simple Client requests can completely send a project off track. For example, take the simple request to update a slideshow plugin. The new plugin could be incompatible with other plugins and cause a disastrous ripple effect through the website.



## Red Flags for Web Agencies

For a Web Agency, your whole team should be listening for any red flags that may impact the project scope. The project manager is usually the first point of contact so it is their responsibility to bring any new requests to the team. Here are some common types of Client comments that are red flags.

### **Your Client says:**

***“I wanted it to work like Nordstrom’s (Google’s, eBay’s, etc.) website.”***

This type of comment is fairly typical. It’s easy to use examples from major brand websites to demonstrate the way things “should” work. It’s important to identify what specifically the Client likes and then set expectations ASAP that fit the project budget and scope.

***“You’re the expert, you should have known I wanted this feature”***

When a Client says this, they are accusing you of not knowing your industry which is an

indicator of an adversarial relationship. This comment is probably due to some functionality they saw on another website. This is another reason to spell out the details of each feature and function. For example, if one of your requirements is site search, what kind of search is it? How will the results be returned? What will happen if the search returns “0” results, will it recommend other products or services instead? Your Client may expect that.

***“I’ll know what I like when I see it.”***

This type of statement is a major red flag and means the Client can’t express what they want clearly enough to provide direction to the design team. Make sure you clearly delineate the number of rounds of design and edits. Also your design team should have a solid rationale behind their design choices so when a Client says “I want the search box here” the design team can explain that best practices dictate the recommended position, etc.

***“I had a great new idea on my drive to the office...”***

Ideas are great but they need to be introduced at the appropriate stage in the process. If the scope has already been fixed then any new ideas could require a change order if the idea will impact the schedule or budget.

***“I’ve hired a new marketing director.”***

New people on the Client team, especially in the marketing or biz dev arena can potentially disrupt the process because they bring in their own ideas about the business and have the Client’s ear. In cases like this it’s best to have a meeting to bring the new member up to speed with the project, goals and SOW. The goal is to make them into informed partners in the project scope rather than disruptors.



## Red Flags for Clients

For a Client, once you've accepted the SOW, you are at the mercy of your Web Agencies development process. Your point person or project manager on your side should keep checking in on the progress of the project and providing any information or input that is needed by the Agency. Make sure all business stakeholders are kept in the loop to mitigate them from sabotaging the process with new requests that are out of scope.

### Your Web Agency says:

***“This request is out of scope, we need to have a change order.”***

When you hear this it assumes that a request has been made outside the agreed upon project scope. If you feel that this is included in the project scope, make your case and negotiate to include it.

***“We said we could do “that” but now we can’t do “that”.”***

When your Web Agency finds they can't do some aspect of the project in the manner it was scoped that is usually due to insufficient planning, lack of knowledge or the Agency underestimated the amount of effort required and is backing out of doing it. If this occurs then the Agency should present possible solutions to the Client. If the Agency is unable to offer an acceptable solution then consider removing the feature or function and negotiating

a change order for some discount to continue the project or cancel the project and find another Agency.

***“We are over budget.”***

If your Web Agency tells you this out of the blue, then they should inform you why they are over budget and how will that impact your project. If your project is a fixed bid, make sure they are planning to finish the project as agreed. If your project is on an hourly basis find out how much over budget you are and what will be needed to finish the work as agreed to.



## The Beauty of Change Orders

In project management, a **change order** is a component of the change management process whereby changes in the Scope of Work agreed to by the Owner, Contractor and Architect/Engineer are implemented. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Change\\_order](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Change_order)

Common causes for the creation of change orders are:

- The project's work was incorrectly estimated.
- The Client or Web Agency discovers obstacles or possible efficiencies that require them to deviate from the original plan.
- The Client or Web Agency are inefficient or incapable of completing their required deliverables within budget, and additional money, time, or resources must be added to the project.

- During the course of the project, additional features or options are requested.
- The Web Agency looks for work items to add to the original scope of work at a later time in order to achieve the lowest possible base bid price, but then adds work items and fee back on once the Agency has been hired for the work. This is an exploitative practice.
- The Web Agencies' project manager typically generates a change order that describes the new work to be done (or not done in some rare cases), and the price to be paid for this new work. Once this change order is submitted and approved by the Client it generally serves to alter the original contract such that the change order now becomes an amendment to the original contract.



## A Word About Mediation

In a worst case scenario, consider mediation rather than bringing a lawsuit. There are a growing number of mediators with technology experience. Mediation is a form of alternative dispute resolution, a way of resolving disputes between two or more parties with concrete effects. Typically, a third party, the mediator, assists the parties to negotiate a settlement.

## Conclusion

Remember the adage, “Those who fail to plan, plan to fail”. A well written project scope and clear Client/Agency communication is the best guarantee you can have to avoid scope creep. If scope creep does happen, there are methods to mitigate and ameliorate that should allow for successful project completion as long as both parties are on the same page.

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### About the Author:

Richard Parr is the owner of Executionists, Inc. with several hundred websites to their credit and 30 national awards for design. Richard is no stranger to scope creep having been on both ends as Agency and Client. The author wants to remind you to contact Executionists, Inc. at 424-245-5472 or [info@executionists.com](mailto:info@executionists.com) for any questions regarding website scope, design, or development.

*Illustrations provided by ThinkStock and the artist ojogabonitoo*