SEO payback worksheet

Work out on paper whether SEO can pay back for your business. Use your own numbers and be pessimistic where you are unsure. The example column uses a made up currency called units and is illustrative only.

The worksheet

STEP	QUESTION	YOUR ANSWER	EXAMPLE (ILLUSTRATIVE)
1	What is one new customer worth in profit, not revenue, over their time with you?		300 units
2	Out of 100 enquiries, how many become paying customers?		25
3	So one enquiry is worth (step 1 multiplied by step 2, as a share)		75 units
4	What would SEO cost per month, all in (agency, tools, your time)?		500 units
5	Enquiries per month needed to break even (step 4 divided by step 3)		about 7
6	How many people search for what you sell each month where you work?		You must check this
7	How many months can you pay before you need a return?		6, 9 or 12?
8	Could you survive if it returned nothing for that long?		Yes or no

How to fill in the harder rows

- Steps 1 and 2: use real records. If you do not track your close rate, that is your first job. Count enquiries and sales for three months.
- Step 6: type your main services and your town or region into Google and watch the suggestions. Google Keyword Planner and Search Console give rough estimates. Treat any tool's numbers as rough.
- Competition: search your main phrases yourself. If page one is full of national brands and large directories, you are competing with far bigger budgets. If it is mostly weak or outdated local sites, there is room.
- Steps 7 and 8: write down the cash you can commit without putting payroll or stock at risk.

Your decision path

- [ ] Check demand: are there real searches for what you sell where you work?
- [ ] Check the maths: do the break even enquiries look plausible against those searches?
- [ ] Check your runway: can you pay for 6 to 12 months with no return?
- [ ] Check your site: can it turn a visit into an enquiry today?
- [ ] Then decide: all yes means start. Any no means fix that first or use another channel.

Reading your result

- A few enquiries a month would break even and searches exist: SEO is worth a serious look.
- Break even needs more enquiries than the searches could plausibly produce: SEO alone will not pay. Look at other channels first.
- Customer value and close rate are both low: the maths is hard. Fix the offer or your follow up first.
- You cannot wait the time it takes: do not start. A half finished SEO project that stops after three months has usually paid for work whose return would have come later.

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