A ONE-MINUTE SCREEN FOR ANY TECHNOLOGY VENDOR

The Six Questions

Each one has an acceptable answer and a disqualifying one. You will hear the difference.

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APPLIES TO	Any software vendor, agency, MSP, or platform
LICENSE	CC0, no attribution required
ESCALATES TO	The Conti Digital Ownership Standard
CANONICAL	petertconti.com/six-questions

> If a vendor fails one question, negotiate. If they fail three, leave. If they refuse to answer at all, they have answered.
>
> Run it in the sales meeting. No engineer required.

The Six Questions

Ask these before you sign anything: a build contract, a managed service, a retainer, a platform migration. They are vendor-neutral by design, which is what makes them safe to ask everyone, including the vendor who published them. Each question cites the items of the Conti Digital Ownership Standard that formalize it. This document is the field copy of the canonical page at petertconti.com/six-questions; where the two differ, the page governs.

One scoping note, because the word vendor covers two different purchases. These questions screen vendors who build or operate business-critical systems for you. Commodity tools, Stripe, QuickBooks, the hosted cart that still fits your sales, are a different decision: renting is fine when you know it is rent, the data exports, and the exit is priced. The disqualifying condition is rent disguised as ownership, not rent itself.

01 Who owns the account?

Your system runs somewhere: an AWS account, a hosting panel, a SaaS tenancy. Whose name is on that account, who holds the root credentials, and whose card is on the bill?

AN ACCEPTABLE ANSWER — OS-1 · OS-11

"Yours. The account is registered to your business, you hold the root credentials, and we work through scoped roles you can revoke."

A DISQUALIFYING ANSWER

"It runs in our environment, but you have admin access." Admin access to somebody else's account is a guest pass. The owner can change the locks; the guest finds out afterward.

02 Who holds the keys?

Credentials, API keys, signing certificates, the domain registrar login, the payment processor account. Ask where each one lives and who can rotate it.

AN ACCEPTABLE ANSWER — OS-3 · OS-4

"We administer the credentials through scoped roles in your account. Your business controls the secrets manager, can audit every permission, and can revoke or rotate access without moving the system."

A DISQUALIFYING ANSWER

"We manage all of that in our account, and clients do not receive administrative access." Management is a service. Irrevocable custody is a dependency. The vendor can do the daily work without owning the only keys.

03 What if the operating relationship changes?

A strong operating relationship can last for years. Ask for the continuity procedure before you sign so the relationship stays durable because the work is valuable, not because changing it would break the system.

AN ACCEPTABLE ANSWER OS-12 · OS-13

“Here is the named transition procedure. Your systems keep running, your data exports at will, and changing operators is a documented engineering transition, not a forced replatform.”

A DISQUALIFYING ANSWER

“We have never needed a continuity procedure.” Or a proposal where changing operators requires a separate migration just to keep the same system running.

04 What do the underlying costs run, versus the fee?

Every system has metered inputs: hosting, licenses, API calls, model usage, transaction percentages. Ask what those inputs actually cost, and whether you can see them.

AN ACCEPTABLE ANSWER OS-10

“The inputs are metered in your own billing, at published prices. Our fee is for the work, and you can decompose it from the infrastructure any time.”

A DISQUALIFYING ANSWER

A flat bundled fee that cannot be broken apart. A fee you cannot decompose is a margin you cannot see, and it grows in the dark.

05 What changes after launch, and who owns it?

Production systems need ongoing attention. Dependencies, APIs, models, threats, traffic, and business requirements change. Ask what work the operator performs, what coverage applies, and where the operating record lives.

AN ACCEPTABLE ANSWER — OS-2 · OS-6 · OS-7 · OS-9 · OS-13

"Here is what changes over time, what I monitor, what I maintain, the coverage and response targets, and the work included in the fee. The runbooks, alerts, incident history, and deployment path stay in your account."

A DISQUALIFYING ANSWER

"It needs continuous tuning," with no operating scope, response commitment, runbook, incident record, maintenance history, or clear line between infrastructure cost and engineering labor. Ongoing work is real. An undefined dependency is not an operating model.

06 Can you verify the work at the depth you are buying?

You are buying engineering. Ask whether you can inspect it the way an engineer would.

AN ACCEPTABLE ANSWER — OS-5 · SCORECARD

"The repositories live in your organization with full commit history, and any engineer you choose can audit them whenever you like."

A DISQUALIFYING ANSWER

Demos and dashboards only. A demo is the vendor's account of the work. The repository is the work.

ONE MINUTE TO SCREEN, ONE FOCUSED TECHNICAL REVIEW TO VERIFY

These questions are the one-minute screen. The Exit Test checklist, published at petertconti.com/ownership-standard, is the focused technical review: eleven checks a qualified engineer can run against any vendor, also CC0. The Ownership Standard keeps a long operating relationship voluntary: thirteen numbered commitments preserve client control while Conti Digital can continue operating, maintaining, and extending the system. It is signed, attached to every build agreement Conti Digital signs, and enforced through an ownership audit before final payment.