

Choosing the right agency for your composable commerce project is about more than just flashy demos and promises of “we can do anything.” In my years working between marketing, engineering, and finance, I’ve seen these rebuild efforts stretch from “simple” projects into nine-month marathons — with hidden costs piling up post-launch.

To avoid that trap, you need a practical, no-nonsense **agency selection checklist** that focuses on cost control, long-term ownership, and an architecture built for clear boundaries and evolution. This post dives into exactly that, weaving in insights from agencies like *Netguru*, *DEPT*, and *Codal*, and explains why tools like **headless storefronts** and **API-driven integrations** matter.



Why the Right Agency Matters

Composable commerce isn’t just another site rebuild — it’s a strategic leap requiring modular scope discipline and a delivery model fit that aligns with your team’s capabilities and growth plans. The wrong agency can deliver a one-off product that’s difficult or expensive to evolve, sabotaging total cost of ownership (TCO) and day-two operations.

On the flip side, a strong partner positions you for controlled evolution, transparent costs, and a future-proof architecture. That’s why you need a checklist to evaluate agencies beyond slideware and buzzwords.

Agency Selection Checklist: The Essentials

Here’s a blunt, practical checklist formalized from multiple engagements — meant to catch the usual red flags and highlight what successful composable commerce relationships need.

1. Delivery Model Fit: Are They Built for Your Team and Timeline?

- **Single sprint or multi-phase?** Some agencies like *Codal* are great at quick MVP launches; others like *Netguru* focus on phased delivery with clear milestones. Which approach matches your team, your appetite for risk, and your marketing calendar?

- **Capability handoff:** Who owns the codebase in year two? Agencies that see their job as long-term partnerships versus one-off build teams make a huge difference when you need refinements or bug fixes.
- **Embedded vs remote collaboration:** Does their communication style and tooling mesh well with your product and engineering squads?

2. Modular Scope Discipline: Can They Deliver Scope in Controlled Chunks?

- **Modularity:** Does the agency architect using composable principles or just bolt on headless storefronts as band-aids? *DEPT*, for instance, emphasizes modularity not just in tech but in planning.
- **Scope creep management:** Beware agencies that say “just add this feature” without defining impacts or contracts. Modular scope makes cost and timeline predictable.
- **Hidden costs awareness:** Agencies that proactively list integration, testing, and operational overheads avoid unpleasant surprises post-launch. If they’re not doing this, you should be asking hard questions.

3. Clear System Boundaries and Replaceability

- **API-first architecture:** Check if the agency insists on strict APIs with well-defined boundaries. It’s critical for replacing or upgrading parts without expensive rewrites.
- **Vendor lock-in risk:** Does the agency design systems that can swap middleware or storefronts easily? Beware of monolithic customizations masquerading as composable.
- **Documentation and standards:** Properly documented APIs, interface contracts, and change logs matter far more than a “kitchen sink” solution.

4. TCO Evaluation: What’s the Total Cost Over Ownership?

- **Beyond initial quote:** Include costs for maintenance, version upgrades, new vendor integrations, and in-house staffing.
- **Post-launch operations:** Understand the agency’s role in bug fixes and enhancement pipelines. Agencies like *Netguru* offer transition models that balance cost with support.
- **Scalability and cost-efficiency:** Are API-driven integrations designed to minimize redundancy and manual intervention?

Digging Deeper into Key Themes

Cost Control Through Modular Scope Discipline

Modular scope isn’t just a buzzword. It’s a mechanism for controlling costs, particularly in composable commerce environments where every integration can ripple into extra work. Agencies like *DEPT* excel by treating scope like a series of Lego blocks versus an amorphous blob. Each module has a fence around it, clear deliverables, and defined dependencies.

Long-Term Ownership vs One-Off Delivery

Those “we can do anything” agencies often mean they’ll set you up with a Frankenstein stack that no one really owns over time. I recommend vetting agencies on their willingness and ability to don the long-term owner hat — delivering documentation, support, knowledge transfer, and evolution plans. For example, *Codal* provides transparent transition models that ensure your internal teams or subsequent vendors can pick up the baton.

Clear System Boundaries and Replaceability

Headless commerce platforms are only as flexible as their system boundaries allow. An agency might sell a slick headless storefront, but can you replace that digital front without a costly overhaul underneath? This requires API-first architectures where replaceability isn't an afterthought but a foundational design principle.

API-First Architecture and Controlled Evolution

Composable commerce thrives on stable, well-documented APIs that evolve [composable commerce total cost ownership](#) without breaking integrations. It's about controlled, governed change — not throwing everything over the fence and hoping for the best. Agencies like Netguru emphasize putting versioned, backward-compatible APIs at the heart of every integration, enabling controlled evolution instead of architectural debt.



Comparing Notable Composable Commerce Agencies

Agency	Delivery Model	Modularity	Focus	Long-Term Support	API-First	Emphasis	Cost Transparency
Netguru	Phased delivery with milestones	High	modular scope discipline	Detailed transition and support plans	Strong API-first architecture	Transparent TCO over multiple years	DEPT
Flexible, modular phases	Emphasizes modular integrations	Active partnership model	API-driven integration patterns	Focuses on controlling scope creep	Codal	Rapid MVP launches possible	Scope control but often focused on MVP
Supports clear handoff to internal teams	Solid API integration experience	Transparent quote plus transition costs					

Practical Next Steps for Your Agency Selection

- **Ask vendors to walk you through a recent composable commerce rollout:** Focus on scope discipline, API architectures, and handoff strategies.
- **Request a detailed TCO breakdown:** Don't settle for base quotes; demand explanations of integration, maintenance, support, and future upgrade costs.
- **Challenge vague promises:** If an agency says "we can do anything," ask who owns specific modules post-launch and request evidence of modular design.
- **Check for API-first documentation samples:** Well-documented APIs and clear versioning policies must be in their toolkit.

- **Validate delivery model fit with your internal team:** Does their rhythm, communication, and tooling integrate well with your product and engineering teams?

Final Thoughts

Composable commerce agency selection isn't about finding the flashiest presentation. It's about disciplinely evaluating agency capabilities in scope management, long-term ownership, architectural boundaries, and total cost of ownership. Agencies like Netguru, DEPT, and Codal each bring different strengths, but you'll want to know which fits your organization's delivery rhythm and growth path.

Remember to keep a running list of *hidden costs*, always ask " **who owns this in year two?**," and don't let vague promises slide. With this checklist, you'll minimize surprises, keep costs in check, and set your composable commerce project up for success well beyond launch.