



How to Hire a Marketing Company: Marketing Company Selection

With CMOs under more pressure than ever to show results and a positive return on investment (RIO) for budgets, every program scrutinized. In a fragmented media environment facing constantly changing technology, maintaining best practices in-house across all areas of traditional and digital marketing is unrealistic and cost prohibitive. The right agency marketing partner can provide industry experience, insights in a more cost effective manner.

Choosing the right agency requires an investment of time and resources. The agency universe is constantly changing, susceptible to gains and losses of talent and clients. Intense competition pressures many agencies to oversell and claim to “do it all,” and there’s a big difference between capabilities and expertise. Price points vary too, as all agencies have minimums. Always selling, agencies usually don’t venture this information up front.

Hiring a marketing company is one of the most important decisions a company makes. Here’s how to be smart about it:

1. **Timing:** Wait till you're ready to hire. Get management buy-in across department, agree on what type of agency is needed and the general scope of work that will be developed along with a budget range so that expectations are managed and everyone is on board.
2. **Decide on the decision-makers.** Likely lots people will want to be part of the process. In order to facilitate consensus, limit the actual decision maker team to fewer, senior people—preferably no more than 3 people, if possible. Allocate the time and resources needed.
3. **Money Matters.** Establish a budget range upfront—a minimum bottom “floor”, and a maximum “ceiling” of investment. Any program can be scaled to reflect mandatory, “must have” elements as well as desired bells and whistles. Agencies have minimum thresholds and without parameters you could talk to wrong firms, end up with sticker shock and waste everyone’s time prolong the process.
4. **Limit the lineup.** Avoid the long list “cattle calls”. Considering 10 or 20 or more agencies is ridiculous and risks alienating the real agency jewels who are very selective about pitching and avoid such scenarios. Many agencies can be easily eliminated and you should have a very targeted shortlist. Do the needed due diligence or hire an agency search consultant.
5. **Superficiality.** Be careful not to get blinded by over-rated rankings and the easiest to find, “top” or “hottest” agency labels. Notable campaigns done for competitors may not be relevant to your company’s challenges and budget. Agency awards don’t necessarily translate into clients’ business results. Your company’s branding should come first.
6. **Experience.** Do they understand your challenges and have proven successes with clients in similar situations? Look for a proven track record with case studies to back it up. While industry knowledge can be valuable, sometimes a fresh creative perspective can often foster the “Big Idea.” Know what’s handled in-house (what they do best) vs. services outsourced.



7. **Commitment and long term relationships.** What's the agency's client-relationship history? Is the work mostly retainer or project based with repeat business? Do they have lots of quick one-shot projects or many long-term client relationships?
8. **Chemistry** clicks and makes or breaks relationships. Is the agency's top talent that did those campaigns still active or laid-off and long gone? What is the agency's turnover rate? Be sure to meet the team you'll be working with on a daily basis. Find out their backgrounds and how long have they been with the agency. Inner compatibility is key.
9. **Culture Counts.** Do you share attitudes, values, goals and a vision for the future? What's the energy like in their office? Do they act and communicate in a very corporate or laid back manner? Their style should jive with your team's culture.
10. **Manage Expectations.** What's considered a successful relationship? Establish mutual goals and set metrics for success. Develop a clear scope of work, deliverables and tie a fee schedule to a timeline to ensure priorities align and you're on the same page.
11. **Size Matters.** It's easy to get sold on (and then lost in) a big shop. Don't assume "full-service" is a benefit, as larger firms staff services you may not need. Get an idea of the scope and budget of typical engagements over the past year or two. Will you be a priority client to the agency, or just keep folks busy and be another number? The service will suffer if the agency is taking a loss.
12. **Communication.** Pay attention to the details. Is there a good exchange of talking and listening? Do they keep their commitments and deliver the proposal on time? Is it buttoned-up or vague? Look for patterns. First impressions are all you have to go on at this juncture.

Smart planning and careful vetting will maximize your time, resources and help you find an agency you'll love for the long-term. Happy Hunting!

About the Author:

Marketing expert and President of Smarti Solutions, Michele Harris, provides clients with marketing consulting and agency selection, leveraging an unparalleled, intimate knowledge of the agency landscape and proprietary database of over one thousand marketing companies to help businesses find the ideal advertising agency, public relations firm, media and marketing company based on particular needs for experience, size, budgets and specific criteria. Michele utilizes 20 years experience developing revenue-rich marketing programs for Fortune 500 companies and leading advertising agencies. Michele has been covered by The NY Times, NY Post, PR Week, Inc. Magazine, CNN's Money Magazine and Crain's BtoB Magazine. To get sale and marketing advice or assistance finding just the right advertising agency, PR firm or marketing company for your business' needs, visit <http://www.getsmarti.com>

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