

Going to Market: A Buyer's Guide for Choosing Marketing Strategists

A buyer's guide for choosing marketing strategists that produce positive results

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A successful marketing strategy increases your company's exposure and generates sales leads. And while few small businesses have experienced marketing talent within their ranks, the companies that excel in marketing end up with a stronger growth trajectory than those that don't. Further, establishing and executing a marketing plan is often a critical but non-urgent task that gets pushed to the bottom of a company's to-do list.

Fortunately, there are many marketing consulting firms that do have the expertise to plan and execute successful marketing initiatives. The smart companies know that the right combination of strategy and well executed tactics should be viewed as an investment, not just an expense.

Whether you're refreshing your logo, investing in a PR campaign, overhauling your Web presence, or launching an e-newsletter, keep in mind that the dollars you spend will result in customer-visible communications. The quality, content and personality of the media you (and your contractors) create affect how your prospects and clients perceive your business.

Make a List

Buying marketing services can be especially difficult. Marketing consultants, Web developers, graphic designers, SEO (search engine optimization) experts, PR pros, copywriters and other related professionals excel at "romancing the truth." Business owners and decision makers are often confused and overwhelmed by the number of specialized marketing options they face (compounded by the range of new media techniques) and by complex "marketing-speak."

Before you engage anyone to help you in your business, be sure to develop a clear sense of what your company really needs. Create a road map of your goals and budget for 2008. You also will want to decide whether you have the time and interest required to manage multiple specialized resources, or if you'd prefer the "one-stop shopping" of a full service marketing company.

Browse the Selection

Once you've developed a clear sense of exactly what you're looking to buy, identify several potential resources. Ask colleagues for references and find out who was responsible for marketing campaigns that you found particularly effective. Attend industry conferences and follow up with the most compelling speakers.

Treat meetings with marketing firms the way you would an interview with a prospective employee:

- Did the marketing company take the time to research your business before the meeting? Do they show a good understanding of what you do?
- Are the materials they send you relevant to your business and error-free? Ask for a variety of media samples.
- Be sure to ask exactly where you'll fit in their client roster. Will your company be their smallest or lowest-billing client? If you are one of their smaller clients, find out how they will make the time to handle your needs. On the other hand, you may not want to be a marketer's largest client. They may become too dependent on you for billings and ongoing work.
- Ask for details about how the firm plans to "right size" their recommendations to fit your company's capabilities and budget. You do not want to wind up with a complex strategy that you cannot execute. Conversely, a solution that is too simple for your company may not help you reach aggressive growth targets.

When hiring a firm, the clients who ask the toughest questions seem to have the best sense of what they need from an outside consultant or a third party. Here are some questions that most marketing firms hate being asked (which is why you should always ask them):

- Tell me about the times that you have been fired by a client. (If they say they haven't, they're probably lying.) What were the circumstances? If you were doing it all over again, what would you have done differently?
- Is all of the work in your portfolio solely a product of your company? Did you use freelancers? What do you engage third parties for? How do you select them?
- How do you price third-party resources? Many firms charge a markup on production or collect finder's fees from third parties. This may result in your working with a "preferred" vendor, rather than the best resource for your particular job.

Check Them Out

Even if you have "good gut" feeling about a particular resource, be sure to speak to at least two people who have worked with the company in the past. Ask for references that have similar challenges and budgets to yours. If, during the process, you receive feedback that gives you pause, you may want to discuss them directly with the potential contractor, so you're getting both sides of the issue. Remember that every new relationship takes time to jell. After you've been through the hiring process, be sure to give the working relationship – and your marketing efforts – time to grow. Foster a spirit of direct and honest communication and feedback, especially when projects hit a bump in the road (which they all do at some point). Make your expectations clear, but make sure they are realistic. The best clients usually wind up with the best marketing resources.

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