

Working With A Creative Marketing Firm.

By Howard Theriot

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With competitive shopping you simply request a few bids and go with the lowest price. Although the right person for the job might also happen to be the lowest bidder, it's unwise to shop for price alone when your image is at stake. Consider the comparative shopping alternative: search for the firm that can best meet your needs within the limits of your budget. Choosing the right firm for the job is just as important as the decisions you'll make during the course of developing your marketing materials. Take the time compare. Find your perfect match. You'll be glad you did.

Your Strategic Partner. Your marketing firm should not be perceived as an added strain on your budget. Instead, they should play an integral role in allocating resources. They should strive to develop an informed point of view not only of your company and its products, but of your competition as well. This knowledge will serve as a foundation for developing more effective marketing strategies. Their relationship with you should be structured around business success, not the less-tangible realm of design. Design is a problem-solving discipline not an art. When you stop and think about it, you will probably realize that you're not much interested in design at all. You need growth or profits, or both.

Taking Charge. It is very possible that you have only the most superficial knowledge of what a marketing firm really does. You might expect them to tell you how they work, the process, the schedule and when and what will be required of you. You might also expect them to keep you informed of all progress, and provide options and alternatives when appropriate. Any respectable firm will openly welcome this responsibility. It is how they keep things moving efficiently and how they ensure outstanding and consistent results. Every executive wants to relax, believing their business is in capable hands. A good marketing firm should give you this confidence. Through their performance and reliability, you'll come to trust their judgement, their work, and yes, even their fees.

Your Role. As the client, you are the decision maker. You must make solid business decisions and then step back. Tough to swallow? Just consider that micro-managing projects can create a negative and counterproductive work environment and will almost always compromise the integrity of the finished marketing piece.

Partnering With Your Staff. Being efficient and competitive in today's economy requires the utilization of the most sophisticated resources while maintaining a high degree of flexibility. To accomplish this in the most cost-effective way, you must employ a core staff of managers, and supplement them with trusted outside specialists. This way, it is possible to implement the best possible talent at minimal costs. Specifically, when it comes to creative services, it's nearly impossible for any company to employ enough talented individuals to handle its many different

communications needs internally. Using well-meaning but unqualified internal staff can be very expensive in the long run in lost efficiency and in market impact. Because effectiveness is critically important, your marketing firm, when implemented as your strategic partner, is always the least expensive and most productive alternative.

Laying The Foundation. The first thing that should be done by any marketing firm after being assigned a project is to schedule an information-gathering session with you and your key staff. This should cover not only scheduling, budget and job specifications, but also in your competition, target audience, and objectives. You should have all the features and benefits of your product or service prepared for review. This will help sharpen everyone's focus and objectives, and in turn, ensure that what is produced is not only creatively excellent, but strategically targeted. This meeting normally takes place either at your office or theirs. However, in today's wired world it is completely reasonable to expect a conference call and a few emails to do the trick quite nicely.

The Right Ideas. It has been proven best for everyone if you assign only one or two key decision makers at your company to work directly with your marketing firm. This way everyone stays focused on real solutions and are not distracted by too many personal opinions. Good firms normally present no more than three initial concepts showing completely different approaches to the project at hand. Many clients ask for five, six, seven or even more concepts, but offering too many solutions up front only complicates things and almost always results in a poorly developed marketing piece.

Redefining Creativity. When you discuss creativity, you often define it in terms of talent, originality, fashion, trends and praise by creative peers and opinion leaders. For the sake of the bottom-line however, you must think differently. We need to understand that creativity must be redefined as an original way to sell a product or communicate an idea. When the focus is on typefaces and colors, poor marketing projects are produced. When the focus is on defining and conveying a message, great marketing projects are produced.

Your Budget. All companies, all industries, all products have different marketing needs and different methods of determining budgets. Introduction of a new company or product requires heavy spending based on anticipated results, while an established business might implement an annual marketing budget based on previous year's sales. There is no standard formula for determining your ideal budget, but with a little research, your marketing firm should be able to help you establish a solid baseline to start planning.

The Plan. The first step in developing a successful marketing plan is to determine who you are and what makes you special. You must fill a need or people will have no use for your offerings, right? Consider where you want to be and how best to get there. Decide what it is that sets you apart and how this will benefit the consumer. A thorough understanding of yourself, your prospects, and your competition will help you determine and achieve your goals.

The Focus. Although you may offer a variety of benefits that would appeal to many consumers, there is usually one single selling point which will win or lose your best market. Determine that one very special selling point and you will have established a focus which will set the standards for your competition to aspire to. When planning your communications, your message must be clear and specific to your objectives. If the message cannot be distilled down to one or two sentences, you are saying too much.

The Schedule. Despite popular misconceptions, good creative work doesn't always come in a flash of inspiration. It usually comes from much trial and error. This is why you need to take the time to consider several approaches, work them through, and revise them. In addition, you should address budgeting, printing, mail handling, scheduling, and other issues relevant to the success of the project, at the beginning of the project. All this, plus the need to perform in a businesslike fashion, means that your promptness in providing materials and making approvals is crucial if you are to meet deadlines.

Success. How do you measure the effectiveness of your marketing efforts? An immediate increase in sales? Improved image? Breaking into a new market? Ideally each piece would generate more sales, improve your overall image and get you a big chunk of new customers. Yes, on occasion, a single marketing project can produce remarkable success. But, marketing should be viewed as a cumulative effort growing stronger with each project. Set your sights on building long-term success one project at a time.

Keeping It Intact. You've mapped out a solid plan. You've developed a great concept. You've created outstanding visuals. Your brave new approach to marketing is going great. So, why not just throw in a few "support" projects? Because you are always judged by your poorest effort, that's why. When it comes to marketing success, it isn't enough to simply complete each project and then move on. You must look at the big picture every single item that sports your logo must fully support your corporate identity, and every single item related to a particular project must fully support that project and its message. And, ultimately, every aspect of your business will either build your brand or make it crumble.

It's A Crazy Business. A few additional tips on how you can help minimize obstacles, delays, and unnecessary costs.

1. Provide directional comments there is no need to write copy or re-design layouts that is why you hire your marketing firm.
2. Review all copy/layout(s) to ensure work is strategically on-target and that your facts and figures are accurately represented.
3. Provide your materials, comments, and approvals on time.
4. Making all revisions at once will save time and money, and avert errors which occur when information is submitted piecemeal rather than in an organized and controlled manner.
5. Avoid surprises and you will help avoid dilemmas.

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