

Hiring the Right Marketing Company

By Cathy Taylor

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Hiring a good marketing firm is critical to the success of any business. Here are some things to look for.

First, it's important to understand the distinction between a company that limits itself to advertising and one that operates as a consultant to your business and has developed marketing expertise. The advantage of an advertising firm is they will easily take direction and implement direct mail programs, print ads, and/or radio and television commercials. The downside is your small company may need more diversity and direction.

Hiring a company that partners with you because as well as brings years of marketing experience to the table is ultimately more valuable. The upside is your company will get the exposure it needs to create more sales and profit, and you'll learn more about marketing along the way.

In today's world, you have all the options of print media as well the vehicles that fuel e-commerce. First decide if your firm can benefit from an online marketing plan, then factor that into your budget and allocate enough for print and/or internet-related programs. Which brings us to a critical factor in this process – your budget.

Budget

Successful companies typically spend 22 percent of their marketing budget on direct marketing for their products and services. To determine how you will spend your marketing dollars, you need to determine your short- and long-term goals as well as what results are willing to accept? For example, if you want to secure five new projects before the end of a period, look back historically and estimate how many contacts your sales people make before getting one hot lead. Of those, how many do you estimate you can close?

What we want here is averages, not the exception to the rule. With these numbers you can determine how many direct mail pieces you'll need to deliver based on a conservative return on investment (ROI) using an estimate of .5 to 1 percent. Of course you'll increase that ROI with disciplined follow through such as phone calls. But knowing the amount of money you can afford to spend on reaching your number goal leads you to the next step – finding a company that can deliver on time and on budget.

Industry-Specific Strategy

A good marketing firm understands strategy and differentiation. Strategy is using the right tools to get the desired results. That includes positioning and a smart marketing communications programs. Are you branding and/or generating leads? Does your prospective firm understand the difference?

There is a significant timesaving when you hire a firm that has industry-specific experience because the learning curve is reduced considerably. If they have worked in your industry, they have also discovered some of the promotion pitfalls along the way and are likely to know how to get more results faster.

Most important in any business relationship is their ability to listen. Do they understand your target market? Can they consistently focus on the goal and produce results? Ask them to describe whom they think you are selling to. Have them articulate how you are different from any competition and specifically how they would use marketing vehicles to uniquely position you within the industry. Do you get excited to know more about your own company from what they feedback? If so, good chance you are on the right track.

Print Media

Your marketing firm should be well versed in print media; the more years experience, the better. You need to ask to see samples of past work including: direct mail pieces, datasheets, brochures, print ads, and sales presentations. Do you like how they look? Does it feel like they would do something you are comfortable with? Do they understand the image you are trying to portray? This is a critical factor in making your choice – weigh it in around 50 percent.

Public Relations

For anyone who has tried to outsource public relations, you know how pricey it can be. A good marketing firm should provide, or put you in touch with, PR sources that are affordable. Strategically placed stories within industry publications are worth more to your company than any ad you pay for.

Ask for samples of press releases and kits, case studies, and feature stories. Have they written corporate backgrounders and white papers or produced any stories that have been published and, if so, in what publications? Do news agencies pick up their press releases? This is a good time to ask for references from customers who have benefited from their PR efforts in the past; and don't forget to call them.

Internet

Many companies today can help you build websites and deploy e-mail campaigns and banner ads that generate leads. Ask them for sites they have developed and talk to the people they have run online campaigns for. What were the results? As in any promotion, it is critical to have tracking. Ask how they track campaigns. Marketing is no different on the web; you have to test and retest until you discover what works.

There are other facts that will help you decide which company is best for you. Have they represented any of the trade shows you need to attend? Do you think they would be fun to work with? Are they honest, trustworthy and capable of doing what they claim? And last, but not least, proximity plays an important role in a successful working relationship with a marketing firm. Although many online partnerships can be formed without physical access, it's nearly impossible to have the kind of communications one needs to deploy effective marketing programs. Try to keep your choice local.

Cathy Taylor is a marketing and sales consultant with over 20 years experience. She specializes in strategy and plan development as well as management of communications and public relations programs in both the high-tech and small business sectors. She can be reached at Creative Communications: <mailto:creative--communications@cox.net>.

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