

Outsourcing your Web Marketing

By Philippa Gamse

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The online world is still very new, and constantly evolving. You may be thinking about outsourcing your Web promotion to an expert who is immersed in this world as their fulltime occupation, rather than trying to acquire this knowledge, and cope with the pace of change in-house.

So, what should you look for in a consultant, and what guarantees can you expect?

Choosing the consultant

The consultant should ask a lot of questions about your business and your objectives. They need to be very clear about the strategic and specific goals of your site. Do you want as many visitors as possible (as in: "We get millions of hits on our Web site"), or are you more interested in attracting qualified leads for your association? Are you selling products? Are you looking for new members, sign-ups for your newsletter or events, media coverage, etc.

It's possible that there could be different markets for each of your objectives. The consultant needs to demonstrate that they clearly understand the demographics of the audience you want to attract. This includes whether your markets are currently online, whether they are comfortable using e-mail, etc. It's also important to clarify any restrictions on your marketing - for example, if you are only targeting specific locations.

The key to effective Web marketing is to have a comprehensive, integrated plan that focuses on where your markets "hang out" online. It's absolutely not enough to concentrate your efforts on search engines - that's a passive rather than an active approach. You want to reach out to your potential visitors, not wait for them to come to you. And, you want to ensure that your offline marketing includes your Web site - up to a third of your traffic can now come from real-world sources.

So, the consultant should propose to you a wide-ranging plan (assuming that's appropriate for your goals) that includes:

- Search engine strategies
- Paid (bid for placement) listings
- Review sites and directories
- Linking with other appropriate sites
- Advertising / e-zine sponsorships (depending on your budget)

- Online public relations opportunities
- Integration with your real-world marketing

Effective Web marketing must also include an e-mail strategy. The consultant should include in their proposal some ideas for targeted, personalized (and fully opt-in) e-mail. This requires a contact database that you can use to select out the different audiences that you might have for these messages. The consultant should also be able to help you create this, if required.

And finally, the consultant should explain how they propose to evaluate the success of any marketing campaign against your goals and objectives. Marketing is an ongoing process, during which you'll learn a lot about your site and about your visitors. This knowledge should be analyzed and used to tweak your site and refine your business strategies. A good consultant will be able to work with you to achieve this.

What guarantees can you expect?

Let's be very clear - there is a distinction, which often gets blurred, between sales and marketing. The job of a marketing consultant is to bring qualified traffic to your site (or in other words, into your storefront). Completing the sale is then a separate challenge.

Marketing is also a very gray area, in which it's difficult to provide cast-iron guarantees of results. This is particularly true in the area of search engine optimization, since the search engines are so unpredictable. In my opinion, if a consultant promises you "top ten placement" you should be very wary - it's possible that they are using tactics that could be classified as spam - soon if not now.

But obviously you do want to check that the consultant has a good track record, and that they can provide references from other clients. I believe that good Web knowledge and proven online marketing tactics are as important as an in-depth familiarity with your industry.

In setting your contract with the consultant, it's important to have a mutual comfort level with your goals, expectations and budget. There are many opportunities for free promotion online, but if you're prepared to spend some money, you can potentially build your traffic faster. Since building awareness of a site takes time, perhaps a minimum six-month period would be advisable, but with appropriate get-out clauses for both parties.

Conclusion

Good Web marketing is a team effort! Hire a consultant who you feel very comfortable with, who asks lots of questions to really understand your business and your goals, and who seems genuinely interested in promoting you. But then be prepared to work with them - respect and consider their suggestions, and allow them to be creative in their approach.

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