

Nine Ways To Spend Less On Marketing and Communications

Consultants

By Robin C. Johnston

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As markets continue to become more complex, and as media options proliferate, it makes good sense to invest in experienced external consultants to help develop and manage your marketing communications campaigns. Time is money, however, and an unstructured approach to managing consultants can cost you plenty of both. The following nine points will help you keep costs in line, and make sure that both you and your consultants end a project on time, within budget and with deliverables that produce results.

1 - Think about marketing outcomes first and design second. Sure, a pretty ad can attract attention and might even win an advertising award. But will it help grow your business? Not always. Good ads aren't necessarily the prettiest, and don't always have to cost a lot. Make sure that ads are on target for your audience and do no more, but certainly no less, than they are supposed to do.

A poorly planned communication can cause enduring harm by creating an image inconsistent with what customers will actually experience, when they purchase your products or services. So make sure that your outside resources come up with brand promises that square with actual outcomes.

2 - Prepare a strong creative brief for any projects you assign to a consultant. Consultants don't live your business; you do. It's your responsibility to communicate your business and marketing objectives clearly and effectively. Help consultants come into your world and understand what you are trying to achieve. Make sure your brief addresses these points:

- What are key target markets.
- What is it you want to convey?
- What does the target market believe?
- What is it you want them to believe?
- What is the compelling reason to believe?
- Executional considerations ... look and feel.

3 - Hold frequent meetings with all consultants on your team to discuss progress and foster communication. Don't wait until the final presentation to find out what consultants are working on. Business today moves very quickly and, by that time, it may be too late! Rework is expensive. An investment in several short meetings to keep on top of how things are going is money much better

spent, and always leads to better results.

4 - Define scope of work clearly at the outset of the project. What's in, and what's out? Are there some things that you know you will want, and others that you absolutely, positively do not want your consultant to suggest? Make sure they know about this before they are neck-deep in developing their solution. Set the boundaries, and communicate any preferences as early in the project as possible.

5 - Be up front about your budget. You may be skeptical, at first, as conventional wisdom suggests guarding the size of the budget more closely than the gold in Fort Knox. Consider, though, that concealing what you have to spend puts your consultants in the position of having to construct a budget out of thin air, and then turn their energies to convincing you why you must spend what they recommend. What's worse is that, when you nix their proposal and cut their recommendation by half, you force them into thinking about how they can cut corners and still make some money for the agency. Do yourself a favor. The next time you have a project, tell your consultants the total amount you can spend on the entire project, including media buys and material costs, third-party fees, and their services.

Then let them show how you can get the most value for this amount of money.

If you truly have no idea about cost projections, say so and ask your consultant to help you set realistic goals, including paying for this assistance if need be. This turns their Account Manager into your salesperson. When she knows what her financial parameters are, chances are she will relax and stop pressing for more and more. Then, she can focus on convincing her Account Supervisor why your account deserves so much more attention than the last project the agency brought in. Approach the project this way and you will always end up getting more for your money.

6 - Think programs, not projects. Over time, some companies have come to use different consultants for each aspect of their marketing program. As a result, account management fees may consume a much higher proportion of their marketing budget than they otherwise would while overall continuity suffers. When consultants work on multiple projects, they can spread their fixed account management costs over a larger number of engagements. Consultants that are already familiar with your company and its products and target markets do not need to be educated for new projects, and can deliver better results in less time. The result is a higher return on marketing dollars invested, greater consistency, and more money for implementing other projects.

7 - Involve other managers in discussions early on. Unless you're a one-man operation, chances are excellent that your work as a communications professional will affect a number of other managers. Even if final authority for all marketing communications rests with you, it pays to seek input from key players as early as possible. This is not only a simple professional courtesy that rubs organizational politics in the right way, but it also provides you with an opportunity to conduct some low- or no-cost internal research that might help you target your communications more effectively. Up front collaboration also fosters feelings of project "ownership" or buy-in within the organization. Plan to meet with both your peers and your managers. Talk about business goals and how your program helps the company meet them. Ask, listen, and share. After all, you're all on the same team. The clarity and mutual understanding that results will free you to give your consultants more effective guidance, help develop internal allies, and avoid the need for costly redirection at later stages in projects.

8 - Settle on details earlier than you think is necessary. To relieve the pressure in their ears, SCUBA divers are taught to "equalize early and often". You should take the same approach with respect to deciding on project details, when working with consultants. Make decisions early and often. Every marketing manager has had at least one project in which they let consultants explore several ideas, before locking in details. The initial creative work can be fun, and it is easy to get wooed into reviewing storyboard after storyboard, without affirming any particular direction. This can

be costly. Start with a clear idea of what you want to achieve. Once you see what you like, say so! At that point, your consultants can turn their attention to diving deeper into the next phase of idea development or, if the project is done, you can put any money saved back into your budget.

9 - Resist change once you've made your decision. Enough said. After all, you are the boss, and the consultants work for you.

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