



Choosing Your Advertising Agency

When to Start looking

Tom is a hotelier who has just renovated his boutique property; he wants to spread the word about the new amenities for business travelers. Susan's development company is launching a new residential community; she needs to narrow her target market to reach potential buyers.

When companies decide to work with an advertising agency, their motivations may differ but the core reason is universal: to become more profitable. If your organization is considering hiring an agency, read this article for some useful tips – they just might improve your bottom line!

Choose Wisely – Invest the Time

Most client-agency relationships last for years, so it makes sense to invest some time and research up front into choosing the best agency for your company's business needs. A poor fit will cost you in lost sales and staff time expenditures. For a perfect fit, take:

Six Steps to the Agency That Is Right for You

1. Establish Your Goals

Before you start searching for agencies, spend some time reviewing your business goals. Set short- and long-term objectives to progress toward with your agency. For example, you may wish to increase room nights by 25% in the next 12 months, plus start building buzz among the young families who will be your long-term patrons.

This step is important for two reasons. First, if you come to the agency with clear business goals in mind, the work they do for you will achieve greater success because they'll have a more focused target. Second, you won't be able to accurately evaluate the quality of agency work unless you can link its outcomes to your business objectives.

2. Create a List of Potential Agencies

For resources, consider:

- Word-of-mouth referrals, especially from respected colleagues in your business sector
- Professional organizations, such as the American Advertising Federation and the American Institute of Graphic Arts
- An industry-specific Google search, for example, "marketing real estate developments"
- Directories from business journals, chambers of commerce, and Better Business Bureaus

3. Narrow Your Prospects

Write down some key questions for your potential agencies. Call each one and ask:

Do you specialize in any industries?

Many agencies will accept clients from any industry, but increasingly marketing and advertising firms are developing areas of expertise that set them apart from their more generalist competitors. This strategy allows agencies to develop a solid knowledge base so they can "hit the ground running" as soon as you sign on – months or years won't be wasted while your copywriter struggles to understand the language, trends, players and client preferences in your sector.

After all, if you owned a Lexus hybrid, wouldn't you rather take it to the dealer for service than to Joe's "We Wrench Anything" Garage? If an agency specializes in the unique marketing needs of your industry, it is probably a good idea to meet with the staff from that one.

What is your work process?

Operating a business without a plan doesn't often lead to success. Likewise, agencies lacking a formal work process will not consistently deliver the results your company needs. Ask potential agencies to describe their work process. An effective process includes the following stages: diagnosis (what's the problem?), prescription (what's the solution?), application (implement the solution), and evaluation-adjustment (can we improve performance?).

How big is your agency?

Small and large agencies both have their benefits. Small agencies tend to be more nimble and less bureaucratic. With smaller agencies, you are also more apt to have senior-level staff with years of experience assigned to your account. In contrast, larger firms often offer in-house services that smaller agencies must outsource, such as research or promotions. They also provide the status of a big agency name.

Use the feedback from your phone calls to determine the top one to three agency prospects.

4. Meet with Your Top Agency / Agencies

By this point, you will have self-selected one or more agencies that would probably do a fine job for you. To ensure long-term match potential, assess the following during each meeting:

Compatibility

It may seem farfetched, but just as Dr. Neil Clark Warren espouses 29 dimensions for relationship success on eHarmony.com, compatibility is vital to a successful client-agency relationship. Request to meet with the staff members who would work on your account – you need to ensure that you like these people and they like you. Strong creative work requires a close and mutually respectful long-term working relationship. Chemistry matters.

Industry Knowledge & Service Quality

Ask to see samples of integrated marketing communications or media campaigns that were done for a company in your industry. Hopefully you'll see ads, brochures, press releases, and more – enough to gauge the breadth of the agency's services. Assess the tone, language and design aesthetic. Do they reflect your industry? Would you be proud to have similar communications pieces representing your organization?

Focus on Success Metrics

While examining previous work the agency has done in your industry, inquire about the results. Did a new development sell out in 10 months? Did a regional poll show high levels of brand awareness? Ask if case studies are available for former campaigns or projects. Communications should help drive business success.

5. If Necessary, Pay for a Trial Assignment

You've found what you think is the agency. But before you can get started, a colleague advises you to ask for spec work to see how they perform. Spec work involves an agency completing a trial project free of charge in hopes of winning your company's account. As you can imagine, a spec assignment is not the best way to judge an agency. Agency staff can only donate limited time and effort to uncompensated work, resulting in products that are not of top quality. Potential clients then underestimate the agency's full capabilities. For this reason, spec work is becoming less prevalent. The trend is now toward paying an agency for a trial job, just as you would pay any other vendor to try out its services.

6. Start Building Your Marketing Success Story

Congratulations! You've done the groundwork that will ensure the success of your company's marketing efforts. As you begin to work with your agency, keep these last tips in mind:

Immerse the Agency in Your Brand and Product

It is worth your time to explain all the aspects of your business to your agency partners. Share what you are comfortable with: existing marketing materials, your mission statement, your strategic plan, SWOT and competitor analyses, branding and positioning, product features and benefits, and more. If you don't yet have all or some of these items, no problem – engage your new agency in helping you to develop them.

Maintain Good Communication

As with any relationship, the one you maintain with your agency should be tended with honesty and respect for it to flourish. Don't hesitate to bring up any concerns or questions you might have. Share your enthusiasm for the merit of the work that is done for your company, and celebrate success milestones along the way. Although advertising, marketing and public relations practices are increasingly grounded in sophisticated metrics and analytics, they remain creative endeavors. Your shared excitement will be a catalyst for continued marketing success.

Fresh Creative is a communications and design firm that specializes in real estate development and hospitality properties. We use strategic process and experience to develop comprehensive solutions that create distinctive impressions.

Contact Fresh

For more information about Fresh Creative and how we can help you, please contact Sam Berens: sam@visitfreshcreative.com or call 850.244.5549

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