

## Selecting a Marketing Agency

The right marketing agency will amplify your team's capabilities, offer experience, fresh ideas and expertise to help you grow your business. With the exploding media landscape, it's both challenging and unrealistic to have all marketing expertise in house.

However, it takes time and resources to effectively hire a marketing company. Most businesses don't realize it's not just about capabilities and industry experience; there's a host of other factors that come into play. Here are some best practices to consider when selecting a marketing agency:

### Do's and Musts:

**-Money Matters.** Establish a budget range and timing upfront, or you'll prolong your search, spin wheels and waste time. You can spend weeks or months interviewing marketing companies, and after rounds of meetings and proposals, experience sticker shock and find it's not a good fit after all.

**-Right-size.** Get an idea of the size and scope of the marketing agency's average clients over the past 12-18 months. If you have an accurate picture of their typical engagements, there's a greater chance the relationship has the potential to grow over time.

**-Manage Expectations.** Develop a clear scope of work, concrete deliverables and a timeline. What happens in the first 30 days? What are the deliverables after 3 months? What are the key points for approvals? Tie a fee schedule to key milestones.

**-Recent Results.** Most marketing companies have downsized staff to some degree. Be sure to check to see if the top talent that did all those great campaigns still active or laid-off and long-gone? Look for recent successes, and meet the team.

**-Expertise.** Is their work good or great? Amateur or expert? Is the work adequate, or do you admire it? Look for seasoned professionals, proven track records with successes against similar objectives, and lots of examples and case studies to prove it.

**-Culture counts.** Are they communicative and responsive? Are they too schlocky? Or, too corporate? Would they fit in your office environment? How they act, think, what they value, their style and how they communicate should be ideally aligned with your team's culture.



### **Don't and Pitfalls:**

- **Assume “full-service.”** Larger firms have the in-house staff—although you may pay for overhead you don't need. Smaller marketing companies claim to be “full-service,” but outsource to accommodate solutions. Specialty firms offer value. Identify your needs, understand what's handled in-house and meet the team.
  
- **Focus on “the hottest.”** A fabulous campaign done for somebody else—or notably, your competitor—doesn't necessarily mean they'll do the same for your business. Is your company's situation, challenges, timing, and budget, exactly the same? (Of course not.)
  
- **Avoid ‘signature’ looks.** Lots of creative agencies have a signature look, and canned cookie-cutter style. Does their work all have a similar style? Your branding should come first—not theirs. Look for a varied portfolio, across industries. Range is power.
  
- **Fall in love for all the wrong reasons.** Yes, chemistry is very important. However, it should not be the primary decision driver. You need to remain objective. Think rationally, and value big ideas that can drive your brand and your business.
  
- **Small fish in a big pond;** It's easy to get sold on—and then lost in—a big shop. Beware of the recession rat-trap: hungry marketing companies take smaller clients. Yet, they are still better suited for bigger ones. A good deal can turn into a disaster, and service will suffer if the marketing agency is taking a loss.
  
- **Issue a blanket RFP to a long list.** RFPs are usually calls for a disaster. Because it's time consuming to provide an intelligent response, RFPs often alienate the super stars that may be just the ones you need. Do your due diligence or hire a consultant to help you develop the right marketing agency short-list in advance.

These tips will help you maximize your resources and get the best return on your time and investment.

### **About the Author:**

Michele Harris is Founder and President of Smarti Solutions, the leading marketing agency search firm for the mid-size marketplace. Michele has 18 years experience developing revenue-rich marketing and business development programs for a client portfolio that reads like a veritable "Who's Who" among Fortune 500 companies and the nation's premier advertising agencies. As Smarti's Chief Marketing Matchmaker, Michele has helped hundreds of businesses find the right PR firm, advertising agency, creative development firm or marketing company. Michele received a Small Business Award by New York City Mayor's Office, and has been covered by CNN Money Magazine, The New York Post, The NY Times, NY Post, PR Week, Crain's BtoB Magazine and industry blogs.