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**Pointers on Hiring a Marketing Firm**

**for Your Small Business**

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I’m not here to tell you which marketing firm to use. Rather, I’d like to offer you some pointers on what to look for when hiring a marketing firm. I believe the search starts with you. Ask yourself some foundational questions to get a handle on what you are looking for.

Those questions include:

* Who is your target audience?
* Where are they geographically?
* Where and how do they access information?
* What do you hope to achieve?

Now give some thought to what kind of marketing help you need. This can change as your business changes. You may start in one place and then realize you need other things.

For example, starting with branding makes sense. Once you have your brand identity you may be ready for help with advertising or PR. So, what do you need right now? This is a critical question because not all marketing firms are created equal. Some specialize and some are generalists. Some excel in certain areas and others offer a combination of services:

* Branding:  logo design, business cards, literature, and web design.
* Social Marketing:  Facebook Fan Pages, LinkedIn business pages, Twitter accounts, Pinterest, and overall social marketing plans and execution.
* Advertising: print, radio, TV, billboards, or internet ads.
* Public relations: press releases, event coverage, securing interviews on TV, radio, or internet radio, and gaining exposure for product launches, grand openings, anniversaries.

Determine what you need right now. You may also want to think about your marketing needs along a continuum – what you need now, a few months from now, next year. This can help you when you are interviewing potential firms.

One of the most critical parts of finding marketing help is doing your research. There are so many companies in this space. Finding the right one(s) takes a commitment of time and energy on your part.

A good deal of marketing is subjective. They may be considered one of the greatest firms in town, but if you don’t like their design or end product, they aren’t right for you.

Explore the following:

1. Type of firm: do you want a firm that specializes in the type of marketing help you need right now or would you prefer a firm that covers a variety of marketing methods?

2. Do you want a firm that has expertise in your industry or is that not an issue for you?

3. Does their location matter to you? Would you prefer a firm that is local?

4. What is your budget? Is it realistic for what you need? How does that limit the prospective marketing firm pool?

5. Method value: what is their viewpoint on the various marketing methods? For example, if you want to gain national exposure and believe that gaining interviews on internet radio is a good marketing venue for you, does the firm you are looking at share your belief? AND, do they have that expertise?

Now that you know what you are looking for it’s time to interview potential candidates. Find 3-5 companies that look like they fit your needs. Develop a list of questions you can ask to divine whether they really are the right match for you. Those questions include asking for samples of their work, asking for links to sites they’ve created if you are looking for web design, and how they manage their clients.

If you are looking for help with search engine optimization or search engine marketing, ask them how they handle this for their clients. You’ll find some companies that haven’t really gained a grip on how to help companies with today’s page rankings. The more you know, the better off you’ll be.

Interview some of their clients. Ask about timeliness and follow through. How long have they been in business? How long have they been doing the kind of marketing you need? Remember that a lot of firms have had to adapt to the new landscape. Some have done this well and others, not so much. By asking specific, pointed questions you can find out how skilled they are, and therefore, how well they’ll be able to deliver what you need.

Example: I have an associate who needed an e-commerce website. She had very specific needs and was quite clear about what they were. She met a web designer at a networking event who told her they could do the job. She didn’t take the time to ask her questions, or research the sites they’d done for other clients. She just hired them. Not only did they have trouble delivering the end product, but their communication was lacking. They didn’t understand some of the basic things she asked for. By the time she realized they were the wrong firm, she’d invested months with them. Those were months she was without her e-commerce website.

And by all means, trust your gut! If you don’t feel like they are strong with their answers, or there’s something about their work that just doesn’t sit right with you, walk away. You don’t have to be able to quantify the feeling. Just the fact that you have it is reason enough to look elsewhere.

Finding the right marketing help is something that takes time, energy, and research. You have to learn some things about the industry so you can identify the good firms. Anyone can tell a good story and do a good sales job. What you want to know is how well can they deliver on what you need. Marketing is a field that is changing quickly.

Marketing firms need to stay ahead of the curve, adapt to the new environment, and share their level of expertise honestly with their prospects. You, as the prospect, need to be able to discern who is doing that, and who isn’t.