

# So Many Agencies, So Little Time.



Choosing a Digital Marketing Agency:  
A Practical Guide to Getting It Right

# Digital Marketing Runs On Data.

That means everything is measurable and success can't be faked. But it also means that you can be tens of thousands of dollars and far into a campaign before you have enough data to fairly gauge your agency's performance.

How can you increase your chances of making an investment in the right agency partnership? Careful planning and clear-eyed evaluations of your company and potential service providers are the keys. We've created this guide to help you prepare for your next agency relationship.

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## SECTION ONE:

# Define Problems and Goals

Before you begin your agency search journey, create a picture of your destination by identifying the problems you need to solve and goals you want to reach.

**State the problems.** If you can't easily define what needs to be corrected or improved, you'll be leaving that work to your future agency partner. This is an option, of course, and capable agencies can perform their own examination of your company's resources and processes to unearth gaps that may be preventing you from seizing your best opportunities. You and your team, however, will always be in the best position to identify where your digital marketing efforts are falling short.

List each issue separately, even where one is the direct cause of another and may appear to be inextricably linked. This makes the next step easier.

**Prioritize the problems.** Rank your list according to what's most important rather than what's most urgent. Put the items that offer the best combination of long-term value and return on investment at the top. A prioritized list gets you organized, and ready to develop a strategy with your new agency for tackling your challenges in the right order.

**Define measurable success.** To create measurable goals, specificity matters. A goal such as *increase brand awareness* will be difficult to quantify; *increase newsletter subscribers by 20 percent by the end of this year* can be easily measured. Note that a deadline should be part of the goal as well.

**Defining success is one of the most important tasks in the planning phase:**



Success can have different meanings to different team members based upon their individual roles, responsibilities, and personal stakes in the outcome.



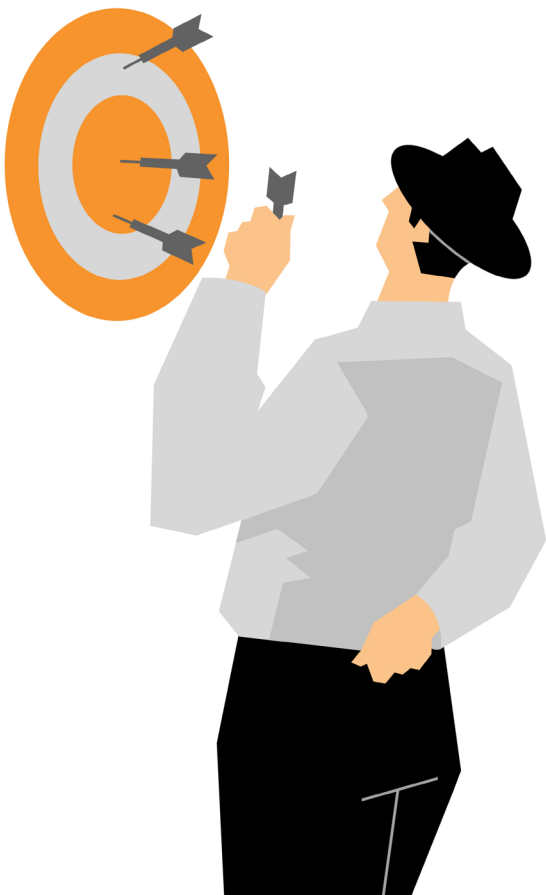
You may not get consensus on all of your stated goals, but everyone should understand them and why they're important.



In the absence of this definition, the accountability of both your agency and your team can quickly become a moving target. You and your new agency must agree on clearly stated definitions of success in order to reach them.

## Traffic Is Nice, But...

Increasing visits to your website is important, but what do you want people to do once they get there — complete a form, sign up for your email list, or something else? Each of these actions is a **conversion**: a way to move window shoppers closer to buying. Ask prospective agencies about their approaches to conversion rate optimization and how they will help you convert visitors into customers.



## Everything Must Lead to Leads.

The tools and tactics could change every day but marketers and advertisers would still have the same job to do they've always had: **Get more leads**. Your success definition has to include lead goals: How many leads you've been getting and how many you now want to get, what a qualified lead looks like, the monetary value of a lead, and the timeframe for acquiring new leads. All other goals must support this one.

## SECTION TWO:

# Get Up to Speed on Digital Agency Services

The lines between traditional and digital advertising and marketing constantly shift as new technologies spark new communication channels. If you're currently using just a few digital marketing services, having an understanding of the broader spectrum of services will help you assess your needs and be prepared to speak the language of your prospective partners during your agency search.

## Most Commonly Used Digital Agency Services



### Local SEO

Strategy, keyword research, online data source management, content writing



### Website

Site architecture planning, design, development, content writing management



### Email marketing

Content writing, strategy, campaign execution, list management



### Conversion rate optimization

Goal definition, data collection and analysis, design, testing



### PPC

Strategy, ad creation, campaign optimization, campaign management, landing page creation and optimization, bid management



### SEO

Strategy, keyword research, link development, on-site optimization, analytics, campaign management, content writing



### Content

Strategy, multi-channel content creation, content marketing, personas, content audits



### Social media

Strategy, account creation, account management, campaign management, channel monitoring, influencer identification

## Main Digital Channels



### Company website

Main content pages, landing pages, microsites, forms, downloads, blog



### E-mail

Promotional, customer service, lead nurturing



### Apps

Mobile and desktop



### Social media

Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, Google+, YouTube, Tumblr, Vine



### Online events

Webinars, podcasts



### Mobile

All previous channels, plus mobile-specific advertising

# Inbound Marketing: The next wave that's already here

Inbound marketing has been around for about a decade. It was fueled by the rise of digital itself, as the way we work, communicate, get our news and entertainment, and generally get things done has made consumers the gatekeepers of information and commerce instead of companies.

Traditional marketing and advertising was outbound: sending direct mail, buying broadcast, and running ads, then hoping they got attention. Inbound marketing flips that: Companies must attract interest and new customers by earning their time and attention and offering something of value in exchange.

Contrary to some reports, traditional offline channels for reaching consumers are not dead. We still watch TV, sort through the postcards in our mailboxes, and glance at the billboards on the road. But now we can make those channels work harder by tying them to our online presence and using them to strengthen inbound marketing efforts.





## SECTION THREE:

# Assess Your Resources

Should all of your digital marketing work be outsourced? If not, which of your in-house resources can manage which services? You may not have the final answers right away, but you'll want to map out your needs and resources before interviewing potential agency partners.

**Take a clear snapshot of today.** There are a lot of moving parts in marketing, from staffing to technology, but each part must be rigorously evaluated. Consider the strengths and challenges of your people, processes, and organization as a whole.

Arriving at an unbiased assessment of your team members' skills may be your toughest task, particularly if you have a large team or work with people who aren't in the marketing department but who are key to its success.

Be objective about your staff's capabilities and capacity for taking on additional tasks that your new digital marketing plan may require. Also think before moving team members into entirely new roles simply to fill an immediate need. Good people in the wrong places can be set up for failure when their skills don't match their new job descriptions.

**Account for non-marketing resources.** Your digital marketing agency will probably be bringing new ideas and technological tools to the table that will require the involvement of other areas of your organization. Take into consideration the skills, needs, and capacities of those in sales, IT, or other peripheral roles as you plan.

## IT and Marketing: Can't We All Just Get Along?

The things that keep your IT team up at night are not the same concerns that cause your marketing team to lose sleep. IT managers are focused on keeping their systems secure, stable, and reliable; marketing managers want to change things up with the latest tech for acquiring customers. IT often moves at a deliberate pace while digital marketing must move quickly to be effective. In between these groups can be a minefield of opposing priorities, perspectives, and even cultures.

With the proliferation of apps, analytics tools, customer databases and more, digital marketing technologies now go far beyond websites and into the domain of IT systems and networks. The explosion of marketing tech shows no signs of abating, so companies will need to find solutions to balance change (marketing) and risk (IT) and keep everyone aligned behind the goals of serving customers and staying competitive.

At the very least, don't ask your IT people to be web developers/designers or your marketing people to be enterprise technology experts. It's a rare person who can cross that kind of divide.



## SECTION FOUR:

# Find Good Candidates

There are tens of thousands of companies and consultants who fly the *digital marketing* flag, but you don't need to cast your net too wide to find qualified prospects. Be prepared to ask the right questions, ignore the wrong signals, and rely on trusted sources.

**Prioritize attributes.** List and prioritize the attributes your desired agency should have, such as:

- Knowledge of your industry or product/service category
- Offering a particular set of services
- Offering highly customized services
- Experience in marketing to your target audiences
- Location
- A focus on local, regional, national, or international markets, or a combination
- Size and/or billings
- Experience integrating with in-house marketing teams
- Traditional advertising or non-digital marketing capabilities

**Start your research.** As with any kind of search, the easiest place to start is Google. Logic dictates that if the potential agency ranks highly in search results, they at least know how to get good rankings. One rather large caveat: Google is constantly improving the quality of its search results, but there are still plenty of ways for bad players to get on the first page, so don't let rankings be your sole criteria for an agency to make the list.

**Activate your network.** The real legwork, and the best way to build your short list, is through referrals:

- Check with members of professional marketing or advertising organizations to which you belong.
- Has a particular digital marketing campaign caught your eye? Find out who created it and get in touch.
- Ask for recommendations from current vendors or contractors who are likely to have contacts in the marketing space. These may include web developers, graphic designers, videographers, printers, writers, public relations practitioners, or anyone in a creative field.

**Spend time on the agencies' websites.** This seems like a no-brainer, but this is about doing more than glancing at the home page or leadership bios. Dig for the real stories of what they can do and how they work with their clients. Look for case studies or results that are relevant to your goals or type of business.

Design love/hate is highly subjective, so try not to let your initial reaction to the site's colors or style get in your way. Focus instead on the words and the site's usability. Clear, natural copy and a straightforward site structure go in the plus column, while too many buzzwords, hard-to-find menus or any other barriers to usability or a quick understanding of the agency's offering aren't signs of good work to come.

## SECTION FIVE:

### Check the Fit

You're about to launch a relationship in which your company and your new agency will be investing significant resources. Allow plenty of time to get to know several agencies through in-depth interviews.

#### What to ask.

**Use the following questions to create your own list of interview topics.**

- ? Will the people working to get our business be the same people who will work on our account?
- ? How involved will agency leaders be as time goes on? How available will they be to us?
- ? Who will craft our marketing strategies and who will execute them?
- ? Who will be our day-to-day project or account manager?
- ? How will you collaborate with our internal team?
- ? How will the people working on our account gain knowledge about our business, industry and competitive environment?
- ? What will you do to achieve early results?
- ? How will you measure success? How often?
- ? How often will you provide reporting? Can you share samples of the reports we'll receive?
- ? Will we own the data you gather and work with? What about creative assets?
- ? Are there any parts of your process that won't be transparent to us?
- ? How often will we meet?
- ? How will you bill us for your services?
- ? What project management and/or communication tools do you use?
- ? What marketing tools and software do you use? Are they proprietary?
- ? Will you provide references for past and current clients?
- ? Will any of your services be outsourced to third-party providers?
- ? If our company contracts with more than one marketing firm to achieve the right mix of services, how will you work with these other firms?

## What the agencies may need from you.

Evaluating a good fit is a two-way street, and agency leaders with integrity will bow out if it looks like they won't be able to do great work for you. The agency that doesn't care about fit is not the one you want to sign.

### Expect agencies that do want to ensure mutual success to have questions for you:



**Customer information:** Be ready to share what you know about your customers, both existing and prospective. This information is the foundation of digital marketing. Note that if an agency hasn't asked a fair number of questions about your customer data by at least the second meeting, you probably shouldn't schedule a third one.



**Company/competitive information:** Agency candidates need to know how your company is doing. How does your company stack up against its competitors? Are there problems in areas such as sales or customer service? If your new agency succeeds in helping you attract qualified leads, is your company ready to meet new levels of demand for your service or product? Realistic marketers know that no matter how much they may increase audience engagement, much of the last mile of the journey to convert browsers to buyers is up to their clients.



**Budget:** You may be asked about your budget. This can be an uncomfortable conversation for companies accustomed to keeping financial information close to the vest, but an agency needs to have a good idea of what you plan to spend. Comprehensive digital marketing campaigns aren't inexpensive, and a responsible agency will tell you up front if your budget is insufficient to create an effective SEO or PPC campaign or a great website built for conversions.

Digital marketing is not a commodity. If the lowest price weighs heavily in your agency selection, you may be looking for a vendor rather than a true partner. You may also be concerned that an agency will inflate its prices if you reveal your budget is higher than the agency anticipated, but such a lack of trust is not the best footing on which to start your new relationship.



**Technical requirements:** What platform is your website on? Are you PC or Mac? Provide agencies with the details of your company's technology that may be relevant to digital marketing techniques.



**Timeline:** Share any immovable deadlines or general timelines you have in mind. You can expect several aspects of digital marketing to take time to yield results — SEO, for example, can take three to six months to get off the ground. If a new website is needed, six months or more is not at all unreasonable. Tell the agencies about any relevant events that may already be scheduled or if your business is in any way seasonal or at the mercy of uncontrollable market forces that may affect timelines.



**Access:** In addition to having decision-makers available, your agency will likely need access to your website, blog, and site analytics in order to do its work and meet deadlines.

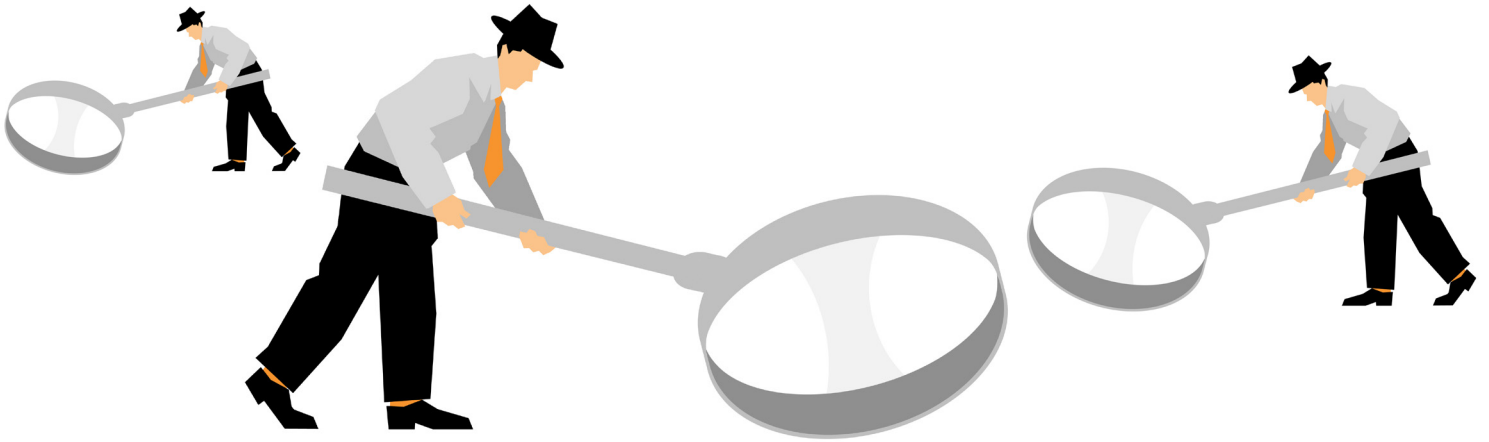


**Anything that can't be changed:** Are there any sacred cows? If there are processes or assets that simply can't be changed, such as the company website, agencies must know that going in.

## RED FLAGS.

Dig deeper if you spot any of these warning signs.

- Extravagant promises, such as a guaranteed first-place slot in search results. When you realize what a steep, uphill climb great rankings are, you'll know how unrealistic this can be.
- A hard sell on proprietary tools, platforms, or processes that aren't explained to your satisfaction or that you're absolutely required to use.
- A greater emphasis on automated, set-it-and-forget-it marketing tools than on the day-to-day hard work of marketing strategy and execution.
- Telling you all of the services you need before they've learned something about your business and its goals.
- Trying to sell you every service on a long list of offerings when chances are good you won't need all of them.
- Offering fundamental digital marketing services, such as SEO, as a sideline rather than as part of its core business.



## A word (or several) about RFPs.

Even if your corporate rulebook requires a request for proposal (RFP) process to procure most of your vendors, look into whether an exception can be made for a marketing agency search. Why?

- An agency's response to an RFP will offer little more than a standard résumé and the answers it thinks you want to hear. RFPs can't give you any idea of the agency's vision or creativity, the type of people it has and attracts, what its people are passionate about, or how innovative the agency may be. In other words, it won't elicit the things that should matter in the final analysis.
- RFPs can't account for the broad spectrum of categories and capabilities that digital marketing involves. Arriving at a meaningful apples-to-apples comparison of the responding agencies based on the questions asked in an RFP isn't easy.
- RFPs are good for gauging an agency's skill at filling out questionnaires, but aren't a useful test of much beyond that. Multiple meetings, checking references, and in-depth conversations are the best use of your time.
- More and more, some of the most successful and respected agencies in the business simply refuse to participate in RFP processes (for all of the reasons listed here and more).
- Let's be honest: In the end, when all other things are equal in RFP responses, good chemistry weighs heavily. Many companies sign with the people they like most and are most excited about working with, regardless of an RFP response.

## SECTION SIX:

### Keys to Success

There are many ways you can support your company's and your agency's mutual digital marketing success as you work together.

1

**Name a  
point person**

Agencies of all types have seen progress bogged down and great work neutralized because a committee is involved on the client side. Digital marketing moves very quickly and delayed decisions can mean a waste of money and missed opportunities in the marketplace. A single point of contact, particularly one with decision-making powers, is key to the responsiveness your agency needs to keep everything moving at an optimal pace.

2

**Reach decisions  
internally**

For the same reasons you should have one point person, work on getting to consensus internally instead of asking your agency to sort out conflicting points of view. Also make sure anyone who holds the veto pen isn't brought in for approvals until the last minute.

3

**Stick to the  
defined scope**

Unanticipated changes happen, and agencies should have some room for that in their operating margins. Frequently requesting changes or adding special projects to an agency's workload, however, are signs that something's not quite right. Perhaps original estimates didn't account for everything they should have, or the approved terms are simply overlooked because you're focused on an urgent need in front of you.

Whether it's an unplanned round of website design or some special reports for that big meeting tomorrow, making a habit of asking for extras puts your agency in a tough spot — they want you to be happy but don't want to essentially work for free with any regularity. Keep an eye out for scope creep, which can be a killer of time, money, and general good vibes. *We'll be glad to estimate that for you* is a reasonable response to your requests for additional work.



**4**

**Make adequate  
resources  
available**

If you're bringing on a digital marketing agency's help for the first time, be ready to have members of your team take on additional responsibilities. Agencies can't do their jobs without contributions of resources from the client side. Even if a lack of internal capacity was one of the main reasons you outsourced digital marketing, you'll still need to be prepared to regularly give time and attention to your agency.

**5**

**Keep your  
agency informed**

Help your agency help you by keeping them up to speed on marketing efforts they may not be a part of, such as a print campaign or trade show participation. They may bring some new ideas to the table for using online marketing to support offline promotions, such as tracking URLs or other tie-ins.

**6**

**Provide a  
great customer  
experience**

No matter which agency you choose, the digital marketing results ultimately achieved will only be as good as your services, products, people, and website. How you continue your prospective customers' journey once they've engaged with you matters as well. Ensure that processes are in place to manage and track incoming leads — this is good for customers and for gathering data that can make your marketing even better.

**There's no silver bullet for successful digital marketing or single formula for choosing an agency. Realistic assessments of your company, people, and needs, and a thorough evaluation of each potential agency are the keys to finding your best marketing partner.**

## About DAGMAR Marketing

Marketing has to work harder than ever before, and so must your marketing dollar. At DAGMAR Marketing, we're focused not only on bringing visitors to your website, but the right visitors. Our inbound marketing approach directs your budget to your best prospects, earning their attention and trust, and transforming leads into customers.

### Our core services include:

**Strategy:** We always work with a plan that's built on your company's goals and strengths, and an understanding of your ideal customer.

**Campaign development and execution:** Creating campaigns is never once-and-done. The great advantage of digital marketing is its responsiveness to changing conditions, and we put that edge to work for you again and again.

**Traffic-building and conversions:** We customize your campaigns to drive your most valuable prospects to your website and lead them through a frictionless journey to becoming customers. Every campaign is created from scratch, and our work for you may include SEO, PPC, conversion optimization, content development, social media marketing, email marketing, and/or website design and development.

**Analysis and insights:** Data is gold in digital marketing, and its decision-making value is too high to leave on the table. We'll help you collect the most meaningful data and use the insights it yields to improve your business. Frequent, thorough, and transparent data analysis and reporting is part of every campaign we execute.

**You:** No matter which box you check for *type of business*, you're in the people business and so are we. Even as technology has allowed us all to make the whole world our marketplace, business is more personal than it's ever been. Relationships — yours with your customers, ours with our clients — are the reasons we do what we do. We'd love to hear your thoughts about what you need from your agency relationship and how we can help.

# We Have an Hour with Your Name on It.

There's an agency out there that's  
right for you. Even if we aren't a fit for  
your needs, we'd be happy to talk with  
you about where to go from here.

Please feel free to get in touch.



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