

# 10 STRATEGIES

FOR CHOOSING A MARKETING  
AND MEDIA RELATIONS AGENCY



There's a right way and a wrong way to choose an agency. We give you the inside scoop on how to make sure you end up with the right partner.

Choosing the right agency is all about understanding your own needs and objectives and then seeking out a suitable match.



You feel it in your bones. Instant attraction. The chemistry between the two of you is undeniable. You've discovered "the right one." The right agency, that is.

What? You've never experienced pure, unadulterated Agency Bliss? Well, sadly, you're not alone. For lots of organizations, their agency relationships leave something to be desired—and that something is success. But this doesn't have to be the case. Believe it or not, choosing the right agency is all about understanding *your own needs and objectives* and then seeking out a suitable match. Too many companies simply choose their agency based on core competencies, agency brand recognition and/or pricing. While these are important considerations, they should be only part of the information on which you base your final choice.

Here are 10 strategies that will help you find the agency of your dreams:



## 1 UNDERSTAND YOUR MOTIVATION

Why are you hiring an agency in the first place? Be specific in your answers. Are you looking for an agency that can help you create profitable inbound marketing campaigns based on killer content that generates leads and builds your brand? If so, will you need help writing, search-optimizing, and designing this content?

Do you need help developing content for your blog and your social visibility? Or do you want assistance with media relations (which can be an essential component of a comprehensive marketing strategy)? Will your media efforts be devoted simply to product announcements or will they be designed to share your unique "story" and create connections to reporters and influencers? What aspects of media relations do you want assistance with—writing search-optimized press releases, making pitches to journalists, building relationships with key reporters in a particular geographical region?

The more precise you can be in identifying all of your specific goals and expectations, the more effectively you can identify the right agency



Perhaps you want a combination of marketing and media relations support. The more precise you can be in identifying all of your specific goals and expectations (and how these goals and expectations support your company's overall strategy), the more effectively you can identify the right agency.

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR YOUR INTERNAL TEAM



- What are our greatest opportunities for growth?
- What are our marketing goals for the next six to twelve months?
- What marketing activities/tactics do we have planned each week to support these goals?
- How do these goals/tactics support our overall business strategy?
- What marketing activities/tactics did our competition do the previous twelve months?
- How will our marketing activities differentiate us from the competition?
- What technology do we need to have in place in order to execute each marketing activity?
- Do we have the internal resources and expertise to execute each planned marketing activity?

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## 2 KNOW HOW TO MEASURE SUCCESS

Okay, so you know your goals and the specific tactics you want to invest in to achieve those goals. Your next step is to consider how you and your agency will measure success. It's important that you're both on the same page *before* you begin the relationship. Too many organizations wait until after they've signed a contract to start delving into specifics such as: What action items will be completed during the first month of the engagement? During the second month? How will you know the tactics are working? How often will the agency report on its activities and accomplishments? There are many success factors to consider, including:

- Media inquiries
- Social media interactions
- Blog traffic
- Guest blogging and byline opportunities
- Speaking opportunities
- Content downloads
- Webinar registrants
- Inbound links
- Website traffic
- Referrals
- Media placements
- Search engine rankings

If an agency wants to wait until after you've signed an agreement to answer success-related questions, look elsewhere. And when an agency is willing to answer success-related questions up front, be sure to point out instances where

your expectations differ from theirs. Additionally, be skeptical of agencies that promise immediate results—front-page media placements, large quantities of leads and top search engine rankings. These require long-term, organic, high-quality efforts. They don't happen overnight.



### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR MEASURING SUCCESS

- What are the monthly averages for your website traffic, social reach and engagement, visits to leads and leads to customers? (This is your baseline.)
- What is your month-over-month growth in organic website traffic, leads and opportunities?
- What is the month-over-month growth in the size of the audience you are "reaching" on social? (e.g., Twitter followers, Facebook fans, LinkedIn followers, blog subscribers, etc.). More importantly, how engaged is this social audience? Are they re-tweeting, liking, and commenting?
- How are you ranking on search results for keywords important to your business? Is this improving?
- How will you report on activities, milestones and accomplishments? How often will we receive these reports?



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### 3 ASK ABOUT RELEVANT EXPERTISE

Next, you need to determine whether the agency you're considering has the appropriate experience—i.e., does it have a successful track record in the industry and markets you compete in? Is it an expert in the tactics you want executed? If the answer to these kinds of questions is no, that's not necessarily a deal breaker. But understand that a learning curve usually means additional time and costs while the agency comes up to speed. Patience on your part is a must in these cases.

If industry experience is important to you, ask whether the agency can point to successful past or current engagements with organizations similar to yours? Does it have relationships with the media professionals, analysts and other influencers in your industry that you wish to reach? Does the agency have any areas of specialization that you require such as branding, marketplace messaging or social media campaign? Again, be as specific as possible in judging expertise. Just because an agency can write a press release about the rollout of a new product, for example, doesn't mean it actually has the journalist relationships in place to get your press releases noticed.

You might want to ask agencies to see samples of their written materials to make sure that you're happy with their style and approach. Finally, closely evaluate the

individuals the agency will assign to your account. Each person should have a strong track record for delivering meaningful results in the tactical areas they are being assigned.

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR PROSPECTIVE AGENCIES



- Provide a brief overview of your agency including its history, number of years in business, main areas of expertise/focus, etc.
- What are your agency's key differentiators and strengths?
- Can you provide some examples of key relationships your agency has with the media professionals, analysts and other influencers in our industry?
- What company's have you worked with that are similar to our organization?
- What is your expertise in the specific marketing/media relations tactics, channels and strategies that we are going to execute?
- Provide case studies that highlight your success in serving clients with needs similar to ours. Case studies should focus on specific challenges and goals of your client work as well as the outcomes/results.



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## 4 IS THERE SCALABILITY?

You want an agency that can ramp up or scale back its efforts and its team size in accordance with your fluctuating needs. For example, maybe your short-term focus is on building a search-optimized web site or updating your company identity. Then, after you've achieved these goals, you want to ramp up your inbound marketing and media relations. Will you need to find a new agency for these initiatives—and are you prepared to invest time and resources in finding this new agency and bringing it up to speed? Plenty of agencies are happy to offer you scalability—as long as you're interested in signing a lucrative, long-term engagement. Ideally, however, you should be given some level of scalability no matter how much money you're spending or how long your engagement runs.

You don't need a huge agency to get scalability but you do need one with "bench strength"—the resources and talent in reserve to meet your potential future needs. Also bench strength is crucial if you have trouble working with a particular person on your agency team.

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR PROSPECTIVE AGENCIES



- From what you know about your proposed engagement, whom are the individuals that will be assigned to our account and what are their roles and backgrounds (e.g., names and titles, biographical sketches, past experience similar to this account, etc.)?

'Bench strength' is crucial if you have trouble working with a particular person on your agency team



- For each of these individuals, who is the back-up person that will be assigned to our account in the event the primary person is unavailable? What are the backgrounds?
- Provide examples of past client relationships that speak to issues of scalability.




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## 5 IS THERE FLEXIBILITY?

Like individual human beings, some agencies can roll with changes in direction and priorities fairly easily and some can't. If your business, organization or leadership is known for its fast pace or its unpredictability, look for an agency that can cope and respond accordingly. Ask the agencies you're interested in how they cope with change ... and get them to give you specific examples of their flexibility in working with clients.

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR PROSPECTIVE AGENCIES



- Describe two or three situations in which your agency had to make significant adjustments in its efforts based on a client's changing needs or priorities.
- Are you willing to ramp up or scale back the team and/or deliverables if our needs should change? How quickly? How will costs be adjusted?
- What is the process for accessing agency team members with areas of expertise outside of the initial scope?




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## 6 SEARCH FOR SOCIAL EXPERTISE

These days, social media are increasingly integral elements of successful marketing and media relations strategies. Therefore, the agency you choose should be adept at leveraging social sites, setting up and managing social initiatives and helping your company understand the very different rules of engagement in the social world. Does the agency you're considering have a social presence itself? What kind of presence? Does it blog? Is it visible and active on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Pinterest, Slideshare, Google +? If not, how can it help your company build its own social presence? A good general rule of thumb: if an agency doesn't have at the very least a successful blog, look elsewhere for social media support.

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR PROSPECTIVE AGENCIES



- What is your philosophy/orientation regarding the importance/or not of social media?



- Does your agency have expertise in social media? Do you have a social presence of your own? What social properties?
- Can you give some specific examples of how your agency has grown the reach and engagement of a client's social brand?
- Do you perceive any "down sides" to social media activity? If so, how would you proactively address them?

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## 7 SAY "YES" TO TECHNO GEEKINESS

Creativity is often the top quality that companies look for in an agency. But given today's pervasive reliance on technology and Web-based commerce/marketing, a certain amount of techno geek in your agency's character can be a very good thing indeed. Ask the agency which hardware, software and infrastructures it is expert in; an agency that is going to help you with inbound marketing, for example, should have strong experience in search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing software, customer relationship management (CRM) systems, website analytics and, ideally, the programming language your web site is built on. If you already use marketing software, your agency should have expertise in these programs as well. You might also ask whether an agency has ever created any of its own proprietary software or systems and how they would bring this to bear.

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR PROSPECTIVE AGENCIES



- Explain how you use marketing and sales automation software on your clients' behalf to track and measure results.
- Do you have expertise in any particular PR/marketing hardware and software? If so, please identify.
- Do you have expertise in using the marketing and PR related software our company is currently using?
- Have you developed hardware or software of your own?



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## 8 GIVE AS MUCH INFORMATION AS YOU GET

Obviously, you'll be asking a lot of questions of the agencies that interest you. It's the only way to make an informed final selection. But don't overlook the importance of sharing information about your own company. Are you willing to take the time to provide a brief but well thought out overview of your organization's background, competitive challenges, general business plans and what it needs from an agency. The more your agency understands all of this, the better it will be able to deliver on your expectations. By giving as much

information as you get, you and your potential agencies will know for sure whether you actually “fit” together.



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## 9 ASK FOR REFERENCES

It sounds so elemental but a surprising number of companies fail to choose their agencies with the same rigor they use to choose their employees. But if you think about it, that’s exactly what an agency is—one of your employees. Nothing will tell you as much about an agency as a reference—not even the work it has done. An agency’s work can tell you whether it’s capable of producing the end results you’re after but a reference can help you determine whether or not you’ll be happy working together toward those results.



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## 10 REMEMBER, IT’S A TWO-WAY STREET

Partnering with an agency is like beginning a personal relationship. Both parties need to put in a significant amount of effort and care if the partnership is to flourish—and there needs to be mutual respect, clear communication and realistic expectations on both sides.

Take deliverables and turnaround times, for example. A white paper requires planning, research, copywriting, design, review and approval, and distribution—all of which can take three to five weeks. Or longer. Every corporate culture is unique. Some companies have comprehensive internal review processes involving numerous individuals and departments while other companies delegate such decisions to a single person. Neither approach is right or wrong. But be sure to factor these sorts of realities into your agency relationship and expectations.

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## THE BOTTOM LINE

No agency can meet your needs without your continual help and guidance. The idea that you simply hire an agency and then it starts cranking out stellar brochures, articles and press releases is simply not realistic. Are you prepared to give your agency the information, time and attention it needs to meet your goals? Are you also prepared for the sustained effort and patience required to build relationships with the media, to help develop distinctive marketing and media campaigns, and to work with your agency to build your presence and reputation in the marketplace? These things take time. Results won’t come overnight. But if you’re prepared to collaborate with your agency and put in the appropriate effort, the results *will* come.

Are you prepared to give your agency the information, time and attention it needs to meet your goals?



You must also be realistic about budgets and agency fees. Problems arise when your budget doesn't align with what you want. Understand that top agencies with competencies across marketing and PR disciplines are in scarce supply and high demand. Prepare to pay for the level of knowledge and service that you truly want and need. That said, always demand value and results.

Your company is unique. So are the agencies you'll be considering. Finding the agency that fits your company's needs, style and sensibilities might take a little time but your future happiness together depends upon it. Follow the strategies above and you'll be well on your way to experiencing your own Agency Bliss.



## Fisher Vista: The Agency for the HR Marketplace

For more than a decade, fisher VISTA has helped companies improve their visibility and brand recognition in the HR marketplace. Our team of skilled marketing and media relations professionals can assist you with the full range of agency services including strategy, marketing, social media marketing, brand messaging and media relations, Web design and more. And, thanks to our proprietary marketing software, we provide you with unparalleled data and real-time insights into the HR marketplace. The result—intelligence you need to increase leads and sales.

## About HRmarketer

Developed exclusively for the human resource and benefits marketplace, HRmarketer software provides real-time data and rich industry insights to drive your marketing and media relations campaigns. HRmarketer gives you access to:

- Research Databases covering media outlets, press contacts, professional bloggers, social voices, conferences, speaking opportunities and other sources that are vital to the success of your marketing and media initiatives.
- News Distribution Services to make your company news more visible and improve your chance of media placements.
- Marketing Insight and Intelligence to fuel your content creation and keep you informed of trending industry news and social conversations.

HRmarketer improves your vision of the HR marketplace so you can improve your brand's visibility.

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