

Searching for the Right Search Marketing Partner?

Choose Carefully Search Is Forever

By Richard Hagerty

The good news is, now that search engines are taking an increasingly prominent place in the marketing mix, there's no shortage of firms eager to help you with your SEM needs.

The bad news is, well, the same.

And unlike, say, the general agency review process, which has become well understood (if not well loved) over the course of decades, the path to selecting a search marketing partner—or even determining exactly what you need—is anything but clear.

Now, as marketers are becoming increasingly interested in search—and

recognizing it to be a complex, dynamic, data-intensive process that is never “finished”—many are scrambling to put a search solution in place. What's the right approach?

Outsource, in-house, or a little of both

Some marketers outsource the whole search shebang. For some, it's because they recognize the need for a specialized skill set. For others, search just seems too daunting. For still others, it's not important enough to them (yet).

Some marketers—the technical term would be “masochists”—have chosen to go it alone. You'll recognize them

by the sleepless, grumpy faces in the marketing and technology departments. Self-managing a few keyword buys on a couple of search properties is one thing. Managing dozens or even hundreds of brands, each with scores of keywords, is another proposition altogether.

Some marketers have asked their interactive agency to handle the task for them, and then been surprised to find the agency admitting search wasn't one of its core competencies.

And some have opted for a hybrid approach—for example, retaining in-house responsibility for strategy and creative, while outsourcing the cumbersome implementation and analytics.

So what makes sense for your company?

Evaluating your search marketing needs

Before you begin reviewing potential partners, it helps to take a look within.

Ask yourself:

- What kind of company are we (not always such an easy question to answer)? Do we really want to handle something this intricate and changeable ourselves?
- Is search marketing destined to be one of our core competencies?
- Where does responsibility for search lie within our organization—and how might its importance change a year or two down the road?
- Can we afford to dedicate a team to this?
- Can we afford *not* to have this knowledge in-house?

Once you've evaluated your own situation, now it's time to look out into the marketplace. As part of your due

diligence on potential search partners, ask the following:

- What is their methodology for beginning, implementing, maintaining and evaluating a search marketing campaign?
- How do they develop a search marketing strategy? How do they arrive at their customer and market information (e.g., audience insights, category keywords, bid levels)?
- Which of their processes are automated, and which are carried out manually? (You'd be shocked to discover the low-tech truth behind some of the edgiest brands in search.) Do they have a system for managing keywords and bids, or are they doing it by hand?
- How adroit are they at customizing their analytics? Do they provide real knowledge and insight, or just stacks of reports?

Query your search partner candidates thoroughly

You'll find search marketing companies come in a wide range of shapes and sizes, some stronger in marketing strategy, others hailing from the technology side. The difference in experience, capabilities and approach is huge, and what's perfect for one marketer might be a disaster for another. Search marketing may be all the rage, but it's still in its infancy, and many of the companies you talk to will have—how should we put this—moved into this space rather recently. So ask plenty of questions ... and good luck with your search.

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