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Selecting a Digital and/or Search Optimization Agency

1. The Lowdown

The Agency of Record (AOR) relationship should be continuously assessed, regardless of brand spend or media allocation. Distribution channels for brand messaging are vastly improved and numerous; vigilance is required to be an effective steward of a marketing budget. More often than not, digital and search optimization agencies are in the mix, vying for—and often winning—AOR status, a reflection of where marketing communications is migrating.

2. Why do I need to know about it?

Branding and sales opportunities through Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM) are so great that sites need enough rich content and value to justify a robust Search initiative for competitive advantage. To enrich user experiences and transaction capabilities, Web sites should constantly refresh content and marketers must continually assess and redeploy their spend. That means evaluating which kind of agency is appropriate and whether one digital partner can do it all.

Digital Agency Relationship Options

Digital Agency Full Service	Digital Agency & Media Planning/Buying Agency	Digital Agency with Search Optimization & Media Planning/Buying Agency	Digital Agency & Search Optimization Agency & Media Planning/Buying Agency	Full Service Traditional Agency that Sub-contracts other Services to other Agencies or Individuals
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3. What Do I Need to Do?

Make your IT director your new best friend. If you haven't already, then assess your operational and branding goals. Be sure you are tagging a site for search and analytics with these goals in mind. Such tasks are challenging for companies that are late adopters to technology, which encompasses a considerable segment of brand marketers.

If an IT department has limited technology and human capital, then working with a digital AOR and a separate search optimization agency might be optimal. On the other hand, if a talented and dedicated interactive marketing director is on staff, one primary agency relationship and a strong project director could be adequate. Regardless, make a list and check it twice.



4. What Steps To Take?

I. Look at Current Internal Departments and Agency Relationships

List current agency relationships and inventory and their functional and technical deliverables. Keep a separate column for “Creative” and “Brand Strategy,” then examine the marketing department and IT department organizational charts for synergy and cross-functional holes. List outsourced relationships such as interactive content copywriting, creative development, and technology/applications support for the marketing department.

ACTION: Reflect on the following first:

1. State of the Web Site. A new or dramatically improved Web site might be best built by a technology company in concert with a separate, outsourced creative agency or a current agency. Often the best wire frames for a Web site and creative come from two very different sources. Consider the internal IT Department and ask, “Can they really do the build from inside?” If the answer is “no,” then identify a strong technology firm immediately, and address the reporting structure so that IT and marketing are equally involved, but with one leader residing in the Marketing department.
2. Marketing Staff: Set expectations for rapid levels of turnaround and speed to reflect the distribution chain of the business. If marketing performs considerable production, collateral, and promotion work in-house, then a digital agency’s print production or studio department might not be utilized to a great degree.
3. Branding. If the brand strategy is clear and is strong in the marketplace, an AOR might be less necessary that management thinks. Make sure the AOR knows Web design. Research and strategic planning, if in house, should not be part of overhead you won’t utilize. Beware, digital agencies often want and expect revenue growth within these practice groups, six months into a contract.
4. Media Spending. If the traditional media spend won’t buy media “media clout,” you might need a separate media-buying agency. A traditional AOR agency might be less important than having a media buying agency.

II. Define Your Agency Requirements

Think about interactive needs, starting with a visceral response: full service digital agency or a la carte programs? After a review of the marketing staff, create a list in two columns (AOR and other agencies) that includes all these needs. List them by priority:

Account service, creative, research, media, strategic planning, broadcast and print production, public relations (traditional agency disciplines)



Creative development and execution only

Media planning or buying or both

Sales promotion

Direct marketing, interactive, and programming

Search and analytics

Content developing, editing, and management

Customer relationship management (CRM)

Business Category expertise

Many of the best search experts tend to be at a specialty search agency or on staff with a client. Avoid two possible scenarios: paying overhead for unnecessary services or for lesser-quality services that are superior at a “specialty boutique.”

5. The thing to remember is...

Performance criteria for search optimization should integrate with data and analytics state of the Web site. A new or dramatically improved Web site might be best built by a technology company in concert with a separate, outsourced creative agency or a current agency. Often the best wire frames for a Web site build and creative come from two very different sources. Consider the internal IT Department and ask, “Can they really do the build from inside?” If the answer is “no,” identify a strong technology firm immediately, and address the reporting structure so IT and Marketing are equally involved.

Making the Decision Easy

Work with the agency team to craft action plans against each area, including timetables, responsibilities, and measurement. Scrutinize the search team and seek references for the search leader, specifically. Also, visit ANA.net and review the two-way, metric-based evaluation for agency relationship management. It’s a solid tool for assessing all agencies in advance of initiating a new contract. Focus on the project or assignment, add the core areas below to the ANA evaluation list, and the selection process will be solid.

Creative prowess

Channel delivery efficacy

Process efficiency

Interactive media competency

Technical proficiency

Technical production quality

Financial conformance

Technical support

Adherence to timetables, responsibilities, and measurement

Competitive site analysis

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