

Choosing a Web-marketing Partner: A Checklist from the Inside

Online marketing can be a highly rewarding and a highly lucrative venture. Or, it can be one of the most frustrating and embarrassing line items on a company's financial report. In the 21st century, web-marketing really is THAT important. But before a company can determine whether they need a web-marketing partner to help make sure their web-marketing efforts succeed, they must first understand the definition of web-marketing, the expectations of both parties and all possible outcomes of their investment. (For more on this, see additional white papers and companion guides at www.beminteractive/resources.htm. These white papers are written for the express purpose of helping to clarify the sometimes confusing world of online marketing.)

The Right Experience

Some companies have a history of bad experiences with web-marketing. Unfortunately, they have experienced a failed strategy or didn't get the necessary return on investment to justify the marketing expenditure. A good marketing partner will seek to understand what a company has done in the past, what has worked and what hasn't.

This begs the question: Why does web-marketing work for some and not for others? A strategy fails primarily because of two things:

- 1) The company has tried to run a web-marketing campaign using a "Do-it-Yourself" model, or
- 2) They have selected the wrong partner to assist in their efforts.

The "Do-It-Yourself" Model

Regarding the "Do-it-Yourself" model, while the idea of saving money is certainly tempting, this is an area in which a company should seek professional advice. Unless your company has a seasoned web-marketing professional on staff, a self-managed campaign is rarely a good idea. It takes a great deal of time, talent and tools to create a successful web-marketing campaign. Experienced web-marketing professionals can share with their clients and potential clients a variety of real-life examples of both time and money wasted by self-managed campaigns.

When looking for a web-marketing partner, consider the following information ... presented from an "insider's viewpoint."

Longevity:

Consider how long your potential web-marketing partner has been in business. The industry is prone to search marketing firms that come and go. Only those that serve clients well and deliver on promises will become long-term players in the industry.

Breadth of services:

Ask what components of web-marketing (SEO, PPC, Google Analytics, Social Media, Blogging and others) a potential partner intends to employ to obtain strong web-marketing results for your company. Make sure the firm you select has expertise in many web-marketing components and can pull out the right tool at the right time. You can't rely on just one piece of strategy.

Appropriately dedicated staff:

Make sure the firm you choose has the staff levels you need. If they have a design staff that "also handles search engine optimization," that should be a red flag that their firm isn't taking this element of your business seriously. Web-marketing can't be done as a part-time function. It takes dedicated resources. In addition, the skill set needed to optimally rank a web site can be a very different set of skills needed for web design and development.

Marketing, design and development:

Implementation of a web-marketing strategy takes not only great marketing, but also design and web programming talent. Make sure the firm you choose has sufficient talent in all these areas to provide seamless integration of web-marketing with your web site.

Understanding your business and your market:

Make sure the partner you choose takes the time to understand your business, your target market and your objectives. Because results from a well-executed web-marketing strategy only get better over time, it's likely you'll be working with the company you select for a long time. Make sure it's a firm with whom you can build a long-term relationship.

Their references:

While it may sound obvious, don't overlook the importance of checking references. You won't likely be able to see specific ROIs they've obtained for their clients, as this would be protected under a confidentiality agreement; however, you should be able to see ranking results and similar benchmarks.

Their visibility:

Check to see if a potential partner is practicing what they preach. Do they keep their own firm visible in the major search engines? If not, can you trust them to keep your company front and center? Since you are looking to buy visibility services from them, check to see how they are doing keeping their own firm visible.

The SEO Process:

Make sure a potential web-marketing partner has a process in place for search engine optimization. Have they been doing it long enough that they have a proven recipe for success? Inquire about the process. If they won't explain the process or if the process is vague, this should be a red flag.

SEO and web design project:

How do they handle a web site design or redesign project when aggressive SEO is part of the strategic plan? Is the SEO "baked in" or just added at the end? If you feel that a firm is throwing SEO into the plan simply to get your business rather than to reach your real marketing objectives, this is another red flag. You will achieve better results if the SEO objective is integrated throughout the process.

Keyword phrase analysis:

Ask how your potential web-marketing partner will determine which keyword phrases to use in your marketing efforts. Savvy marketers know that using the wrong ones will undermine your marketing efforts, and all your money and planning will be in vain.

Meta tags:

Ask how they use meta tags to gain ranking for your firm. Also, be careful of companies that spend too much time talking about meta tags. They are not that important to most search engines anymore.

IP delivery:

Ask specifically about IP delivery techniques. IP delivery is a short cut to getting a site ranked. This practice is considered unacceptable by search engines and may result in getting your site banned. If a potential web-marketing partner is not aware that it is frowned upon, or worse yet, proposes using it, do not get involved with that vendor. You could be putting your web site at risk.

Cloaking:

Ask specifically if a potential web-marketing partner uses cloaking techniques. The comments provided above about IP delivery also apply to cloaking.

Guaranteed SEO ranking:

No one can guarantee top position for a keyword phrase using SEO. If a potential marketing partner offers you guaranteed ranking, use caution. Look closely at the details of the guarantee. Often they will guarantee ranking on obscure phrases or phrases that don't get a lot of traffic. Also be careful of firms claiming to have a "special relationship" with Google or Yahoo. No such "special relationship" exists.

Won't implement SEO changes:

Avoid firms that tell you or your staff what needs to be changed, but will not make the changes themselves; they rely on your organization to make the changes on the site. Look for full service. If the marketing firm isn't providing full service, then it becomes difficult to hold them fully accountable for results. Sometimes there is a legitimate reason for the web marketing firm to not directly make the SEO changes. However, if this is their standard process, you should use caution.

Promotional domain:

Some SEO firms won't do the optimization on your web site/domain. They will purchase a "promotional domain" and perform all the optimization work under that domain. A promotional domain is a different domain than your normal domain and is often purchased and owned by the marketing firm. This has several issues including ownership of the promotional domain and effectiveness of SEO work when done on a promotional domain. Occasionally there is need for a promotional domain, but it's fairly rare. It shouldn't be the first component of a web-marketing strategy. Ask what happens if you cancel your service with them.

Aggressive SEO on the cheap:

There are various levels of SEO, and firms cater to those various levels. Some firms specialize in one-time optimization work; this is not an aggressive strategy, and should be avoided. An aggressive SEO strategy takes an investment of time and money. Therefore, avoid programs that sound too good to be true. A firm offering to do SEO work for a "bargain" price or claiming that submitting your site to search engines once a month is an aggressive SEO strategy doesn't understand SEO. Aggressive SEO requires more energy and investment than these one-time, low-budget programs.

Proprietary programs:

Ask a potential web-marketing partner if they are planning to use proprietary programs. If so, make sure you understand what you will need to do should you end your arrangement with the firm. Using proprietary programs, whether in web-marketing or web programming, can be risky because it you're your relationship to them by the proprietary nature of their solutions and not necessarily the results they deliver.

The PPC Process:

Ask your potential web-marketing partner about the process used to implement a PPC campaign. Make sure they have a process in place, and make sure your input is included in that process.

Search engines targeted:

Ask your web-marketing partner which search engines they target in a PPC campaign. Several PPC engines exist, and some tend to be better for business-to-business campaigns while others are more suited to business-to-consumer. Your budget will also have an impact on which engines should be used.

Mall & comparison shopping search engines:

Make sure the partner you choose knows about mall search engines and comparison shopping engines (CSEs), how they work, the pros and cons, and when to use them. Comparison shopping engines can be very effective if used correctly, and you should make sure your web-marketing partner is prepared to maximize them if they are right for you and your product or service.

Campaign review frequency:

Ask how often your campaign will be reviewed. Complex campaigns should be reviewed frequently. Once a month or once a week isn't sufficient to keep campaigns fresh and vibrant.

Budget management:

PPC campaigns have two budget components: 1) a fee for the web-marketing firm to manage the campaign; 2) the advertising "spend," or the amount you pay the search engines for click charges. Find out how the advertising spend budget is determined and how it is managed on a daily basis. Make sure steps are in place that will maximize your budget.

Bid management fee:

As mentioned above, a portion of the fees associated with a professionally managed PPC campaign include the fee to manage the campaign. Web-marketing firms charge this management fee in different ways. Avoid firms that charge the management fees as a percentage of the PPC advertising spend. This incents them to simply increase the ad budget versus using other metrics for success.

Success metrics:

Ask a potential web-marketing firm what they consider the primary metrics of success. Avoid firms that focus primarily on visits to your website. PPC campaigns are not just about visits. Other metrics of success must be measured and weighed within the context of all factors.

Reporting:

Inquire about the type and frequency of reports that a potential web-marketing partner will provide. Be clear regarding the form in which report will be made. Know what to expect when it's time to hear from your marketing partner.

Summary

If you and a potential web-marketing partner are clear about the expectations involved and willing to invest the time and money to succeed, both parties can look forward to a long and prosperous relationship in the world of web-marketing. As long as the technical pieces are in place, the most important personal factors are to be open, honest, available and forthcoming with information.

About the Author:

Malinda Pengelly believes in success – both for herself *and* for her clients. That’s why she works so hard to build relationships with her team and her clients that have become the gold standard in the Information Technology industry.

As President and CEO of BEM (formerly Beyond Email), Malinda’s primary mission is to put the customer’s needs first. As such, she remains involved on a hands-on level, always available to customers to discuss any question or concern.

With more than 25 years of experience in Information Technology, Malinda has worked in technology management for start-ups and Fortune 500 corporations, managing areas of technology implementation, business process re-engineering and marketing communications.

In May 2008, Malinda received the Small Business Person of the Year award from the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce and been named a “Mover and Shaker” by *Business Leader* magazine. She is a recipient of the *Business Journal’s* Women in Business Award, the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce Small Business Advocate of the Year Award, and her company was nominated for the North Carolina Small Business of the Year Award. She is an outspoken advocate for small business, and remains actively engaged in activities that help other small business owners succeed.

She is a professional speaker, serves on the advisory board of North Carolina A&T University’s Integrated Internet Technologies Program, and is chairperson for the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce’s Technology Thursday program.

Malinda received her Bachelor's Degree in Engineering & Computer Science from Virginia Tech University and her MBA from James Madison University.

She is married to Bob Pengelly, and together they have three teenage children. Her spare time is spent gardening, reading, walking, hiking and spending time with her family.

About BEM Interactive:

BEM Interactive (formally Beyond Email) has helped companies of all sizes remain profitable in their online marketing efforts through web design, development and cutting-edge Internet-based solutions. Client sectors include retail, manufacturing, wholesale, distribution, government, service, non-profit and education sectors. Located in Greensboro, NC, BEM Interactive is a leader in maintaining positive,

measurable results through web-based marketing, search-engine optimization, Pay Per Click marketing and other forms of Internet solutions.

Since 1996, the company's core values include innovative design, fanatical service and positive, measurable results for their clients. These values create the foundation upon which all of their business is based, and the focus from which all their relationships exist. This will never change.

At BEM Interactive, we see the impact an aggressive Web Marketing strategy can have on business. We see it every day. Gone are the days of "if you build it they will come." Your web site can be a significant lead channel into your business, but it takes a well-crafted strategy and a professional team to implement the strategy.

Other Topics::

If this topic has piqued your interest, see other companion guides at www.BEMinteractive.com.

Topics include:

- Search Marketing: A Guide for CEOs, CIOs and Marketing Professionals
- Search Engine Optimization: Best Practices
- Pay Per Click: Best Practices

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