

Congratulations on your steps toward an important investment that can help your business evolve and establish a digital, future-reaching presence. Hiring a digital marketing company is a major decision that should be thoroughly researched and weighed with your leadership team. Maybe you tread lightly in this territory because you've worked with a few firms that haven't taken your business goals to heart.

Asking many questions about a digital marketing company's web process, content strategy, lead generation, account management system and more will help you land an agency that can propel your brand into the future. In this post, we offer ways in which you can evaluate an agency's legitimacy and whether they will be a strategic partner going forward.

1) Who is managing my account?

In the digital marketing world, a dedicated account manager is someone who goes beyond customer service. They serve as your brand's confidant, tell you what strategies work best, know your marketing goals by heart and are actively working to make sure all your initiatives are on task and completed to the highest standards. Whether you're interested in increasing your website traffic or improving your blog strategy, they make it a priority to help you determine the best possible ways to spend your marketing dollars.

Entrusting your brand to someone outside your inner circle is a big deal, which is why your account manager should be a strategic partner you can count on and trust.

2) Who is executing work, and what roles do they fill?

This is one of the most essential questions you can ask your potential marketing company. Really, who are these people that will be digging around in your company's personal affairs? Go through their website, research them and set aside some time to meet them face-to-face. Get a good look at the team in front of you, from sales team to graphic designer to content manager. Listen to what they do and how they describe their work. Do you see them as an extension to your team?

Pay special attention to who is responsible for the most technical aspects of a website. If the designer and developer can explain a complex process in a cohesive, confident manner, this is usually a good sign. Having a knowledgeable in-house team on your side will help your catering company succeed.

3) Is any work outsourced?

Outsourced work isn't necessarily better or worse. Some companies have a strong in-house team with contract employees to help pick up work during peak seasons. Keep in mind this may aid in more affordable pricing. Generally, having more than one expert on standby or a network of freelancers is a smart business practice that will make your business feel more covered and accounted for. Ask the agency if outsourcing costs you more.

4) Do you have client references?

Again, this is an important first question to ask. References are essential to any business' credibility. Think about how important reviews are to your clients.

Take a long look at the agency's work, who their clients are and what they were able to accomplish with them. Ask them about the duration of some of their client relationships and what kind of marketing projects they worked on together. What were some strengths? Did the agency meet the clients' timelines? Reading their case studies and blog posts featuring clients is another good way to scope out their work.

5) What industry knowledge can you provide?

Is there anyone on the marketing team who can offer a from-the-field perspective? Meaning, they know the ins-and-outs of your specific line of work because they've done it themselves for an extended period of time before trying to help others establish a presence in the same markets. Having this insider knowledge of your business will set a marketing company apart from the rest. Ask yourself: do they know enough to hit the ground running? Or will there be a learning curve to understand the industry?

6) Do you demonstrate knowledge specific to my business strategy?

Determine how well the senior team can articulate your goals and how the agency can distinguish you from your competition. Heck, find out if they work for your competition. Are they exclusive? Genuinely ask yourself and your team if you believe the agency cares about your investment and is looking to increase your ROI.

7) What are your company's values or beliefs?

You will want to work with a company that aligns to your values and beliefs. What is the team's culture, and will it jive well with yours? Asking questions about what gets them up in the morning and what is important to them is not just conversation filler, it's establishing that chemistry that is necessary in any work going forward.

8) How do you measure success?

It's helpful to determine your goals around leads and revenue. Agencies truly interested in helping you generate solid leads can report on these numbers, analyze them and adjust their marketing tactics accordingly.

There's also the numbers around web traffic, social media and ad impressions that are important. These reports—whether they are delivered in spreadsheet format or via an analytics dashboard—should be thorough, easy to understand, consistent and show results in the amount of time you've determined based on your needs.

9) What services do you offer, and what are you the best at?

The marketing company you choose should be well-rounded and versatile in all major proficiencies. Web development and design, hosting, social media strategy, SEO, copywriting and branding are some of the top services of a well-rounded team. All of their major services should be able to easily flow together in order to give your brand the position it deserves.

Try to stick with one company, as working with multiple opens up a lot of inconsistencies. Think about when a client approaches you and you are able to offer corporate catering, wedding catering and sometimes even the equipment. Think about

how much more they feel at ease.

10) What is the turnaround time on projects?

It's important to partner with a company that puts your time first. You're a busy professional concerned about your business, and your marketing company should be able to make the burden of time feel lighter, not heavier. A company that keeps its word in regards to project time is highly valuable. At the same time, you should take into account any last-minute changes you may need and be prepared to compensate accordingly.

11) Do they design with copy in mind?

Too many marketing companies put content on the backburner, and as a result, the quality of their websites suffer. You can have a beautiful, fast-paced website, but if the copy is weak and the brand voice isn't properly conveyed within it, how will your audience recognize you? Because so much copy is out there on the frontlines of your customers, it shouldn't be treated as an afterthought.

12) What factors do they consider important in content creation?

An agency's content creators should be able to align to your brand's voice and tone, and they should know the difference between the two. Content should be engaging, informative and enticing. And it should cater to the industry it's discussing. Read what the company has produced. If they're creating content for the sake of creating content, then you should walk away now.

13) How often will we discuss our work? Which method of communication?

What you use to communicate project updates, goals and metrics is important.

Remember that a dedicated account manager will be able to work around your schedule and use the modes of communication—video conference, phone or in-person—that work best with you. Set realistic goals for yourself, keeping in mind your workloads. Some clients prefer once a week, others like a more in-depth meeting once a month.

14) Where do you host your websites and why?

A web host is necessary in order to publish a website online, and not all of them are created equal. When looking into an agency's host, be sure to ask about data storage, connection speed, up-time, technical support and if you can add on multiple domains and websites. Another good thing to look into is the SSL (Secure Socket Layer) Certification, which ensures that your personal information remains protected.

15) What platforms do you use to build your website?

The platform a marketing agency uses to build your website should be capable of handling your business needs as your business grows. It's important to determine what you need your website to do. Do you need a blog, gallery section, online store or contact form? Reputable platforms like WordPress can easily accommodate these features, provide you with maximum control over your website and allow for pain-free updates and maintenance.

16) Will you own our web domain, web server and all other web-related entities?

It's important to determine if you will own your domain or not. Some companies connect your site to their web servers, which will allow them to easily manage all server responsibilities. However, if a client wants access, they can be given SFTP credentials. Companies that use open source software and custom code do so because they don't want to add extra licensing concern and costs in regards to the software.

Determine if the company uses any premium WordPress plugins. Certain plugins make it easy for a website to continue receiving updates. A responsible agency will pay for these plugins and manage them. If a client ever wants a full backup of their website, they can have it. Everything you pay for, you should have access to.

17) Will website work be responsive and optimized?

Roughly half of smartphone users search for products and services on their phone, which means your customers will be viewing your website from their mobile devices. Having a site that easily reacts to screen size is essential. So is one that will be optimized for high-resolution images, making images appear crisp on high-resolution displays.

18) Will my website be backed up in case of emergency?

A website is a huge investment, so having a backup plan in case it's the target of a hack or data is corrupted or accidentally deleted should be non-negotiable. Ask the digital marketing agency how they combat data loss. Many developers create backups through the web host or use plugins to help secure data.

19) Are web codes easily organized?

Organized HTML code is the foundation to a smooth, high-functioning website. So many websites suffer from poorly organized codes. Good code has a proper character set and indentation and follows consistent naming conventions, tagging, logical ordering and other necessary functions to allow for a clean backend of your website. If the code is good, any developer should be able to read it.

20) Do they teach you how to use the website, and is it built in a way that's user-friendly?

If the company hands your website off to you without walking you through the mechanics of it and how to use it whenever you want, then it's generally not a good sign. The web team should be able to show you how the backend of your website works and discuss user features with you.

They can show you how to post materials and update content in a way that is straightforward and comprehensive. We can't stress enough how important this website education is and how proper training will help you and your team get back to what you do best.