

How to Gauge a Marketing Company's Legitimacy

So, it finally happened. You reached the threshold where you can no longer go it alone with your in-house marketing efforts. Don't worry – you're not the only company to feel that way. According to Sagefrog's *B2B Marketing Mix Report*, well over half of B2B marketing teams outsource at least some of their workloads to agencies.¹ If you're like most of these companies, you've arrived at the decision to work with an agency due to one (maybe even a couple) of the following factors:

- » You're dealing with a **resource shortage**
- » You're in need of **specific expertise**
- » You're looking for a **fresh perspective and new ideas**
- » Outsourcing is simply **cheaper than hiring in-house, full-time talent**

Also, like most of these companies, you've probably heard horror stories from colleagues who have hired an outside marketing agency and had a disastrous experience. With hindsight, these colleagues probably realized they hired the wrong partner, and fortunately, that's a costly misstep you don't have to take.

How do you judge a marketing company's legitimacy during the research and qualification stages? How do you ensure you don't have a bad experience and have to fire them after three months? By scoring them on four key areas: resources, skills and knowledge; experience; consultative prowess; and transparency.



Gauge #1: Their Resources, Skills & Knowledge

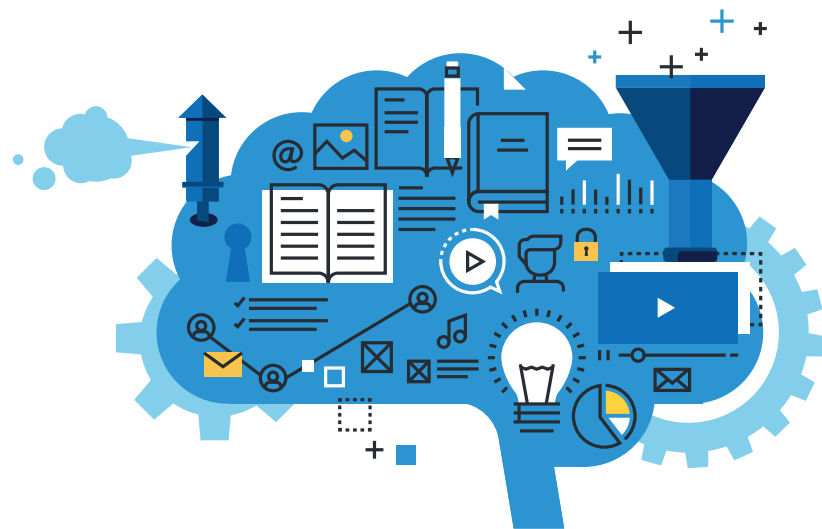
The first step to gauging a marketing company's legitimacy and suitability for your team is by examining the breadth and depth of their resources, skills and knowledge.

To start, how much fire power can they arm you with? Do they have expert strategists, tacticians and management relevant to your marketing needs? It'd be a sad day when you discover the agency you hired to be your outsourced marketing department is more under-staffed than you are. Make sure you confirm that their tactical resources are led by an experienced strategist, and likewise that their strategists have a bench of specialists to execute your marketing plan.

On top of that, gauge whether the agency's skillset is as deep and varied as you need it to be. For instance, is your partner specialized only in one area of marketing, or can they provide benefits to you across a host of different arenas? Depending on your marketing objectives, the level of skill and support you require will vary greatly. Maybe you just need a partner to take over your paid advertising. Or, perhaps you're a one-man band and looking for a full-service team that can handle strategic planning AND tactical output. You should also verify that your partner has access to the right tools and technologies to carry out your marketing plan. Before you invest in a marketing partner, you need to know what level of service and support you're paying for, and the right partner will be up front and honest about what they can and cannot do. If you go down an SEO rabbit hole on your first introductory call and the agency head says — "Whoa, whoa, whoa. I'm sorry, but we're really not set up to provide you with that level of SEO support. We know someone who is, though." — stop and say thank you because you've found a partner you can trust.

Finally, be sure to rate them on how they present information to you. Do they talk in specifics, or in generalities that sound like fluff? When you tell them about your needs and goals, are you getting tailored solutions or "one-size-fits-all" recommendations? A good company will be able to provide specific, concise, data-driven insight — they might even answer your question with a laundry list of other questions! A bad company will throw around jargon like "social media campaign" without demonstrating knowledge of what that means or backing up their reasoning with sound logic or statistics. If they'd rather answer you with something like "well, because everyone is doing it, so should you" — continue your search.

Remember, a marketing company can have all the talent, know-how and high-tech tools from here to kingdom come, but have they proven they know how to drive results? A fool with a tool is still a fool, so make sure your evaluation process extends well beyond an agency's skills and knowledge.



Gauge #2: Their Experience

Experience is another major factor to consider. After all, there's a reason you're looking at a professional marketing firm over the high school intern down the street, right?

Professionalism and credibility should be at the top of your "experience" checklist. Looking for a professional, well-credentialed partner does NOT mean you need a "famous" agency or one that has won a ton of awards. The Kardashians are famous, but do you want them as a marketing partner? Bottom line — just because an agency is well-known doesn't mean they have what it takes to drive results (particularly if you are on a tighter budget).

Similarly, an impressive-looking client list can lend credibility, but it is NOT necessarily an indicator of an agency's skill or quality of service. Maybe they have Amazon, Oracle and Wal-Mart under past clients, but did they do a good job for them? Do you have the same marketing needs as those companies? Did the agency work with them just once or over a period of time? Client lists can be misleading, so make sure you do your due diligence on the scope of the partnership before letting yourself get swept away by big names and flashy brands.

Your marketing partner should also be able to showcase a proven track record of success through both their portfolio of work and client references. Hopefully they have case studies and featured work samples available on their website — check them out. These examples will give you an idea of whether the agency delivers a) quality work/results and b) work that aligns with your needs. But remember, no matter how great the results are, no work is done in a vacuum so it's essential you understand as much as you can about the partnerships BEHIND the results.

There's no better way to get a feel for how a marketing company operates than by talking to their clients. Ask your potential partner for a list of references — if they're hesitant to give it to you, consider that a massive red flag. Hopefully you'll have the opportunity to speak with past and present clients, so you can start painting a picture of what it might be like to work with the agency. Also, always ask the agency how long companies tend to stick with them. Having a revolving door of clients doesn't necessarily mean an agency's bad, but it's definitely something for you to consider.



Gauge #3: Solution Consultant

In addition to weighing their skill and experience, evaluate whether your potential partner can act in a consultant role. That means they'll listen to your challenges, tailor solutions to your needs and explain the "why" behind their recommendations.

First and foremost, consider the agency's staff. Do you see yourself and your team getting along with them? If you don't jive with their team, it's going to be hard to work with them on a daily basis no matter how talented or knowledgeable they are.

If you're jiving with an agency's staff, odds are it's because they listen to your needs and challenges. We mean they really listen. They take the time to understand your goals, business objectives and processes with you at the outset of the engagement before jumping in with tactical execution. Why? Because the right marketing company understands how much time, money and peace of mind gets saved when everyone is on the same page and working toward the same goals.

Always beware of the generic, "one-size-fits-all" solution. If your partner truly understands your needs and goals this shouldn't be a problem, but if you catch them throwing out generalities or you're not following the logic of their recommendations, pump the brakes. The best agencies tailor their solutions to YOU, so don't be afraid to challenge a recommendation or probe for more information. The right partner will be more than happy to have that dialogue. And not only will they be willing to respond with a "why," but they'll also go the extra mile to help you understand the "how." Think about the difference between someone catching a fish for you versus teaching you how to catch one for yourself. You don't want an agency to just build you a website then wipe their hands and walk away — you want them to teach you how to use it. Not only does this ensure you're getting maximum value out of your investment, it also confirms your partner can, in fact, talk the talk AND walk the walk.



Gauge #4: Transparency

A bad marketing company is like the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain – all magic smoke and little substance. A legitimate marketing firm has defined processes, workflows and project scopes that they clearly explain to you ahead of time as well as reinforce throughout the engagement. That way you know what to expect and how they plan to meet your expectations.

Also, ask yourself whether the expectations your partner is setting are realistic. For example, how can one agency miraculously *guarantee* you the #1 spot on Google when every other company is trying to do the same thing? Does it sound feasible to promise one million new customers for \$500 in marketing investment? Before you let yourself get sucked in by their lofty promises, take a step back and think about what the agency is saying. Remember – if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

The right marketing firm also measures what they do and can provide you with key performance indicators as well as activity reports. They should care about how much they're impacting your bottom line as much as you do! In addition, your agency should provide you with consistent communication on project statuses so you're never in the dark about anything in your engagement.

Finally, what your partner communicates to you is equally as important as how they communicate it. In the short time you've been working with a potential partner, what's the collaboration process been like? Are they flaky about returning your calls? Do they talk down to you and limit your input, or do they simply say "yes" to your every request? A good firm will talk to you as their equal and will be willing to challenge your assumptions and guide you with recommendations, even if they differ from your opinions and expertise. This shows they care about your success and are invested in your business for more than just your retainer fee.



The Bottom Line

We know it can be scary, frustrating and somewhat overwhelming to research, qualify and sift through the available marketing companies offering their services to you. However, developing an upfront understanding about the marketing companies you're considering will save you headache and heartache down the road. You'll be surprised how fast the cream of the crop rises when you start gauging them on their performance in the areas we've outlined here.

We definitely have an opinion about how well we measure up to these standards, so when you want to talk to a team of skilled, experienced, solution-oriented, transparent marketing professionals, give us a call — 720-536-8650. We're happy to be put to the test with any questions you throw our way!



ABOUT ACCESS MARKETING COMPANY

Access Marketing Company is a marketing partner for B2B companies. Our team is great at the "hard stuff" other agencies can't or won't do like market technical products and services to nontechnical audiences, develop in-depth yet engaging content pieces and take on top-to-bottom funnel marketing. Essentially, we "engineer your marketing program" with measurable tactics to increase business profit.

Our methodology focuses on clearly identifying and segmenting audiences, developing audience-specific messaging and building marketing systems and campaigns around those elements — using marketing tools *and* expert marketing practices — to increase the flow of prospects through your funnel.

¹Sagefrog Marketing Group, 2018. *2018 B2B Marketing Mix Report*.