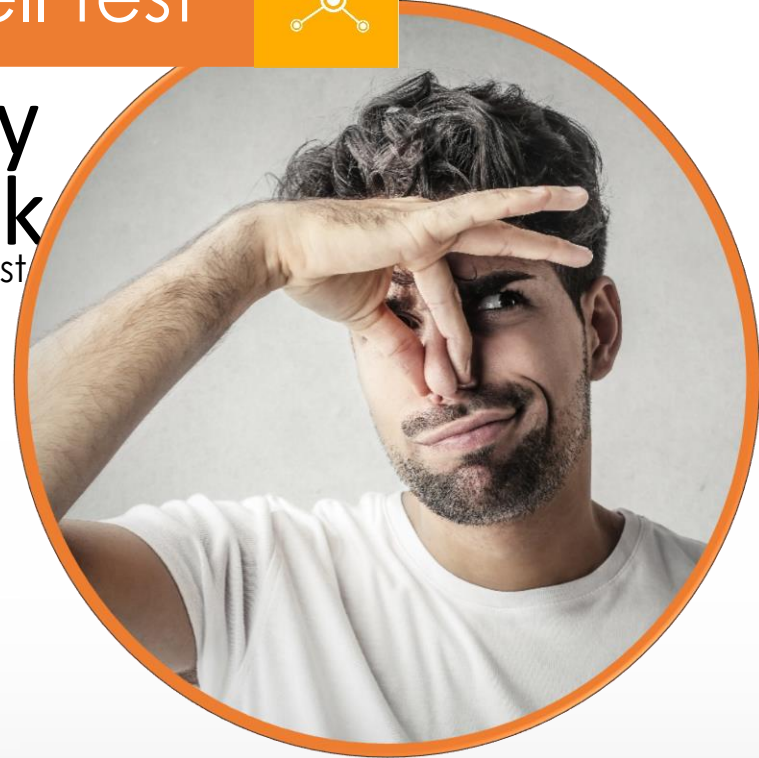


the digital marketing smell test



How to Hire an Agency that doesn't Stink

includes the Questions-to-Ask Checklist



HIRE AN AGENCY THAT DOESN'T STINK

the digital marketing smell test



So how can you separate the charlatans, scammers and incompetents from the professionals? With a little basic homework, and armed with the right questions, you stand a pretty good chance of partnering with the right firm.

If it doesn't smell right, trust your instincts.



by Chuck Bankoff
Digital Marketing Strategist
kreative webworks



HIRE AN AGENCY THAT DOESN'T STINK

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by **Chuck Bankoff**
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HIRE AN AGENCY THAT DOESN'T STINK

The basics



Reputation:

Treat yourself to a free background check by Googling their company name, and the name of any of the principles in the company. It's normal to see a couple of semi-negative reviews, but extreme negative reviews or a lack of consistent positive reviews is a warning. No one produces that much bad will without cause. If you don't see any reviews at all, or if they don't even show up in the search results I wouldn't be impressed.

Google them by Name!





Do they come highly recommended?

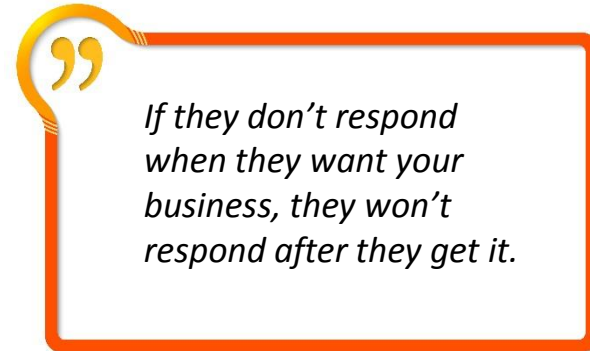
A good Digital Marketing agency should leave a trail of satisfied clients in their wake. Ideally they should offer you direct contact information of some previous clients so you can get the unfiltered scoop on their performance.

Of course not all of their previous clients might want to be bothered, but they should have at least built the type of rapport that some of them would be happy to field referral calls.



Responsiveness:

How fast did they respond to your initial inquiry? Although this is not proof positive of their ongoing attentiveness, it is at least an indicator that they are monitoring communication. Do they consistently return your calls during the initial contact period? Do they have a written statement as to their communication policy?





Do they have Certifications?

Certainly not a requirement, but marketing and software certifications do take quite a bit of effort and are a good indicator of their competence in specific areas.

What is their Company Structure?

Will you be assigned a dedicated project manager during each phase of your project, or will you talk to whomever just happens to pick up the phone? If the agency is too small, you may encounter delays. If it is too big, you may get lost in the bureaucracy.

Are they Full Service or Specialists?

It's by no means a necessity to work with a full-service operation, but the advantages can be numerous. Starting with the planning phase, having a single company who understands how all the pieces fit together will allow them to coordinate your overall strategy, negate duplicate effort, avoid finger pointing, and will just make it easier for you to manage.

HIRE AN AGENCY THAT DOESN'T STINK

The basics



Who will own your assets?

If you pay for it, it's yours...right? It's your website, it's your social media, and it's your created assets. If your digital marketing firm demands ownership, run fast and run far. When you meet your contractual obligations you should own all the work product that is ownable. If it's not "ownable" in the classic sense (like social media and Google Analytics), then you should have sole access to your digital assets should you ever part ways.

Do they push back or tell you what you want to hear?

If they tell you that some of your expectations are unrealistic, accept that they aren't just telling you what you want to hear. Be prepared to face the fact that you just may not be able to accomplish what you want at your given budget, or...at all.

Offering alternate goals and strategies is perfectly legitimate assuming the ROI is commensurate with your investment and expectations.



Do they listen and ask questions?

The virtues of choosing a partner who actually listens is obvious, but the best firms are the ones who ask YOU questions. Do they dig deeper into what you are trying to accomplish, or are they just there to take your order? Interpretation skills are also important. If you are using industry terminology incorrectly, or different from how they use it, you might wind up with a delayed product that doesn't play out like it did in your head.

Do they make Suggestions?

If you aren't a web developer it's unlikely that you have kept up with advances in technology or aesthetic trends in web design. They are the professionals and should be able to talk you out of bad ideas...and substantiate why. On a side note, be leery about proprietary software that may lock you in to them in the future. If another development team can't take over, it could get expensive.

Website Development



Do they have meaningful credentials?

Anyone with a bootleg copy of Dreamweaver can claim to be a web developer. Who specifically will be working on what aspects of your site? Website development requires 3 different disciplines; graphic aptitude, technical expertise and business acumen. Technical and creative skills are mostly mutually exclusive, so if they have a team of specialists, you may get the best of both worlds.

Do they offer post launch maintenance & support?

Do they service what they sell? You may not opt for a maintenance contract, but you want to make sure they are around when you need them to make changes, upgrades and trouble shooting. How many of their current clients are repeat clients or have been with them for a long time? Past performance is usually a good indicator of future behavior.

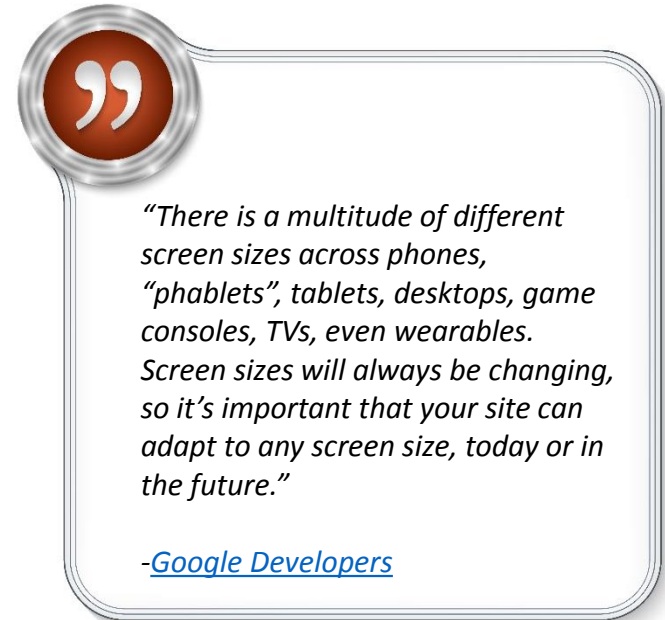




How do they treat mobile development?

It is now imperative that your site be mobile friendly. That could be a separate mobile site, a mobile site builder ap, or Responsive (where the website automatically resizes itself to fit the device it is being viewed on).

Google has made it very clear that they are looking for responsive websites. How are they going to handle your mobile presence? Responsive design takes more upfront planning and is more difficult to pull off, so if they answer with responsive...give them extra points.

A decorative quote box with a rounded top-left corner. It features a large white double quote icon inside a red circle on a silver metallic background. The text is in a serif font, and the attribution is in a blue, underlined font.

“There is a multitude of different screen sizes across phones, “phablets”, tablets, desktops, game consoles, TVs, even wearables. Screen sizes will always be changing, so it’s important that your site can adapt to any screen size, today or in the future.”

[-Google Developers](#)

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Social Media



Which Platforms to Invest in?

Every social media platform has its own unique user base and demographics and it is unlikely that you will benefit equally from being on all social platforms. Whereas Business-to-Business (B2B) brands may fare well on LinkedIn, Business-to-Consumer (B2C) companies are probably wasting their effort. Likewise a consumer products brand might be well served establishing a robust Pinterest presence where consumers browse and buy. If your agency suggests that you just mindlessly cover each platform, they don't have a strategy.

Content Creation

Content is at the epicenter of all social media. How an agency plans and executes content, and to what goal is a strong indicator of their strategic competence. Do they have an actual strategy, procedure and schedule to produce and syndicate content? Do they have copywriters or will you and your staff be producing content under their guidance? Remember, consistent, good quality content comes with a price. The Internet, and by extension Internet marketing is all about content.



Integration with other Initiatives

Posting on social media consistently is a good branding initiative. Posting with purpose is better. Is your media company attempting to funnel visitors to a blog post on your website, or a landing page with a call-to-action? Do they combine social media content with paid social media advertising? There are many different strategies, but if your social media company doesn't have one, they might as well be posting pictures of cats on Facebook.

Technologies

How do they manage and report results? Do they manually post to each platform individually (nothing wrong with that) or do they use software like HootSuite, Buffer, Snip.ly or HubSpot. To manage and/or report results?



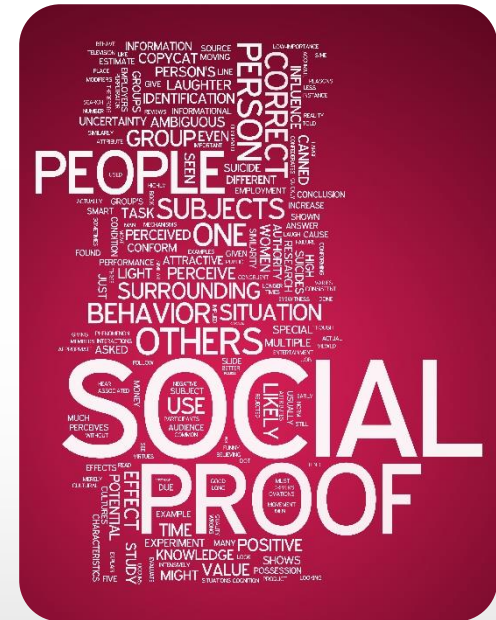
HIRE AN AGENCY THAT DOESN'T STINK

Social Media



Do they eat their own dog food?

Do they have a robust social media presence themselves? They may not be big on Facebook but they may emphasize LinkedIn and GooglePlus and Twitter where THEIR clients frequent.





Be careful of Guarantees

On the surface a guarantee sounds pretty reassuring. But look deeper... what exactly are they guaranteeing? A guaranteed first page ranking for your own company name or a noncompetitive niche keyword that is rarely searched on is no bargain. The reality is, a highly competitive keyword can often take months of dedicated work. Since Google's own guidelines specify that no one can guarantee any specific placement, be wary of anyone who guarantees anything but their own best effort.

Do they submit your site to hundreds of search engines?

This is not a technique that has been relevant for over a decade, yet some SEO companies continue to use it as a selling point. If your potential provider claims to do this, it's either a sales ploy, or they really don't know what they're doing.



Who found who?

“Hi, this is Sharon, your local Google specialist” says the recorded robo-call. If they are so good at plying their own trade, why didn’t you find them instead? Why would you hire an “Inbound Marketing” firm that uses outdated disruptive marketing techniques like cold calls and emails?

Do they boast of Trade secrets?

There is no secret sauce, there is no magic bullet. There are only sound techniques, creative talented and knowledgeable people and hard work. Ask them what the strategy is. How are they going to modify your site, or coordinate the branding of your various social media platforms? If they tell you they have some special access to Google’s secret algorithm, bid them a fond adieu.





Tools and technology

If you hear Google Analytics, HubSpot, Buffer, Hootsuite and some other name brands you're probably familiar with, then they pass the smell test. If they use Spam-O-matic2000 and ContentSpinnerElite, look for the door.

Questions to Ask BEFORE you choose a Marketing Partner:

___ **What kind of research do you do before accepting or starting a project?**

If they do a full website audit to determine what they have to work with and what challenges they will need to overcome, you're off to a good start. If they ask you about your competitors and your target market, and the geographic area you are trying to penetrate, that may indicate a sincere intent to focus on your bottom line.

..... notes

___ **In-House or Outhouse?**

This industry is full of talented people from around the world. If your provider uses off-shore resources for some technical tasks, that's fine. However so much of your web presence is predicated on content so be careful if they use non-native speaking folks for any content related services such as SEO, social media and content marketing.

___ **How much do you charge for your services?**

If they answer before they develop a strategy, beware any answer that isn't a range of fees. Estimating a range of fees in the early stages is perfectly legitimate. If it seems unusually low, ask them what they intend to do. Even if their low fees match their intended strategy you may still be wasting time and money if you don't get the results you need. If it's too high, there still may be room to re-strategize and focus on the "big" things or strategies that get quick results that you can reinvest into a full program later.

___ **Will you manage all of my digital programs?**

It isn't just about Search Engine Optimization any more, it's about Web Presence Optimization. Site, search and social are now inextricably codependent. The interrelationship is such that it is now advantageous for a firm to develop a 360° strategy so they can coordinate the entire effort. That is assuming they have the necessary resources and knowledge (another question to ask).



Questions to Ask BEFORE you choose a Marketing Partner:

___ **Is this a one-time service or an ongoing program?**

Unless you are a local business in a non-competitive industry looking to show up in the local search results, one-time upgrades are essentially useless in the long term. You might enquire about a highbred program where the agency takes care of all the set-up, technical issues and strategy and trains your staff. When combined with an on-going consultation program, that can be effective for smaller businesses. Inbound marketing is a forever process, so if it's in your marketing budget, you might want to leave it to the professionals who have the resources, and can stay on top of the ever-changing digital landscape.

___ **How often do we stay in touch?**

This is a variable based on the types and level of services provided along with the current stage of the project. For example, during a website development project it may require several touch points each week until the creative work has been approved. With search engine optimization work, monthly reporting and follow-up discussions would be the minimum. Look for an "open door" policy where you can quickly schedule clarification meetings as necessary.

___ **How do you handle link building?**

There are many theories and methods of generating backlinks for SEO purposes. Many optimizers advocate the process of "Link Earning" that is predicated on producing quality content that other websites and blogs actually want to link to. Other firms take a more aggressive approach. Make sure your agency doesn't use "spammy" techniques that will get your website penalized. Bad link building practices hurt more than good link building helps.

..... notes



Questions to Ask BEFORE you choose a Marketing Partner:

___ **What do you consider quality content?**

Quality content is original content that has never been previously published on the Internet which actually adds value to your target market. It focusses on a specific topic that you want to get found for. Old regurgitated content (spun content) or duplicate content does not impress the search engines.

___ **How do you measure success?**

A quality analytics system such as Google Analytics, gShift Labs or HubSpot is essential. Discuss what KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) make the most sense for your company. It may simply be an increase in visitors or more granular conversions such as email, phone calls, submitted forms or transactions. Do not fixate on Keyword placement. There is much more to it than that.

___ **Do you claim and optimize my business on directories?**

Citations are mentions of your business by NAP (Name Address Phone number) across local and major directories throughout the Internet and have a great deal of influence on local business search results in particular. Do they claim, optimize and report your citations on a regularly scheduled basis?

___ **How do you report and manage paid advertising?**

In the right hands paid advertising such as Pay-Per-Click, Retargeting and Social Media advertising can have amazing results. It can also be a black hole if not managed properly. Ask them if you can have a live demonstration of how they go about the process.

..... notes



How Lame Is Your Web Presence?

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