

How To Find The Best Ad Agency For You.

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So you need to find an ad agency. The contract is up, and you have to run a review. You haven't looked around in awhile, and you'd like to see what's out there. Or maybe you've just had it with "those guys." You're not alone. At any point in time, hundreds of advertisers are looking for an ad agency. And most of them won't find the right one. That's why people are always looking. The truth of it is, these marriages between clients and agencies last about as long as the average, well, marriage. Hollywood marriage. One expert recently claimed that 50% of all new client/agency unions end in divorce before 12 months are up. Why? Because for the most part, they go about it the wrong way.

There are, no doubt, several *right* ways to find the *right* agency. Just as surely, there are about a gazillion wrong ways to do the same thing. This is an article about *our* way of doing it.

O.K., you need an agency. Let's go find one. Wrong. Let's first figure out *why* you need an ad agency. "All my friends have one" is not a good reason. Neither is "all my competitors have one."

The first task is to sit down with the people responsible for marketing, advertising, public relations, and any other public representation of your company, and find out what they *need*. What do they really require of an agency? What can an agency do that your own people can't? What can a good ad agency bring to the table that would make your company more successful? The answer is, probably a whole lot of things. Because if you could do all the things

that a good ad agency can do, you'd be one. And you're not. So recognize this. Ad agencies are different than your company, and their people are different than your people. Celebrate that difference. Enjoy it. And profit from it. Don't try to turn them into you, because you've already got you. You need something different.

Which is why you've got to go about finding them in a different way.

One very good way to begin the process is to figure out where you want to go in the future. And put yourself there. Think about what that future will be like, and what it will take to get there. Don't keep doing what you've been doing, because that's about the past, and the past won't work in the future. We don't know exactly what the future holds for your company, or how you'd like it to be, but we do know that it will be *different*.

Gather around you the group of people we've already suggested, and add a couple of very smart people to the group. This could include a consultant who understands marketing and the advertising business. Despite all the jokes, there are a lot of very good consultants whose time will be far more valuable to you than what you pay them. If you listen to them.

O.K., you've figured out where you're headed, and you turn the agency search over to your consultant. So let's get going on that RFP. Wrong. We're going to do this differently, remember? Do not do an RFP. Writing a request for proposal will make the folks in procurement happy, but it won't help you find the right agency. It *will* tell you who's good at filling out RFPs, but that's not the object here.

Requests for Proposal are essentially left-brain instruments. The people you're going to send them to are almost all right-brain individuals. They're emotional, intuitive, and cre-

ative. Which is why you need them. They're different, remember? So don't ask them to turn into a bunch of accountants. Yes, they need to know how to run a business, and you want them to be able to understand your business in order to help you, but they are essentially *creative* people. They've got a few left-brainers around to keep track of the money and the art supplies, but that's about it. Let them be who they are. And you'll speed up your process and enrich it at the same time.

So we recommend something different.

Your consultant should understand your business and what you're trying to accomplish, as well as be aware of the many possible agencies that are potential partners for you. He or she shouldn't do an RFP, they should do research to be sure they are up to date on your potential partners. They should get on the phone and contact ad agencies. Together with you, your consultant should develop a "screener" of some kind that qualifies the agencies. Even this shouldn't be too rigid, but if you're in Norfolk, Virginia, you probably shouldn't be talking to agencies in Seattle. Let your consultant include some agencies in this first group that don't appear to be "obvious" fits for your company. They may know something about a particular agency that will turn out to surprise you, and even if they don't, you haven't lost anything.

They don't need to identify your company, (we don't need this all over the trade books) but they should tell the agencies what category you're in, and perhaps a little about what your plans are, including a budget range. Then they ask the agencies to submit their credentials within seven working days. That's it. Let this first group of agencies (probably 10-12) tell you who they are. Their way. This is the first glimpse you'll get of their creative abilities. Their approach to deadlines. Their ability to organize ideas. And how hungry they are. Why tell them how to present themselves, when

presenting companies is precisely what they do for a living? After all, that's what you want them to do for you.

So let them respond their way, not your way. If you're beginning to get the impression that we see this process as a two-way street, go directly to the head of the class. That's the way it should be, because that's the way you'll learn the most.

The submissions you receive from the agencies will tell you far more than any response to an RFP. Your consultant has already screened them based on your criteria. Why do it again? Use this as an opportunity to learn something *meaningful* about the agencies. Look at the entire submission. Carefully. Look at their work. Examine what they've done for people who are in businesses similar to yours. Or dissimilar. They're going to send their best work. So if they have experience in your category, but they don't send any of that work, look out.

Another tip. If their cover letter is full of typos, dump them now. Creative doesn't mean careless.

Feel their attitude. Is it right for you? Does it represent where you want to go in the future? Ask your consultant to prepare a report on each of the submissions. Compare those thoughts with yours. Ask questions of the consultant. Have the consultant ask the agencies any questions you need answered before you feel comfortable with cutting the group in half. Remember, you're not going to do this again for a long time, maybe ever. So be sure. Based on what you've seen so far, are these the kind of people with whom you want to spend the rest of your (professional) life? Are these the kind of people with whom I could develop a strong working relationship?

Key word, there. Relationship. That's what we're after. All the professional competencies have to be in place, that's a given. But the

quality of the relationship is critical.

That's why we go to the next step. Have your consultant schedule visits with each of the remaining agencies. Remember, you've already cut the group in half. Tell them who you are, and send them an information kit about yourself. Also tell them that if they breathe a word about the meeting, they're history. We still don't need the trade books involved, because your switchboard doesn't have the capacity to handle the telephone calls you'll be getting from all the agencies who *aren't* in the search. Unless for some strategic reason you want the search publicized. The remaining contenders want to read their name in the magazines every week because they think it's good for business. If it's good for your business, go ahead and tell the world. If it serves no purpose, and it probably doesn't, keep it a secret. **IMPORTANT NOTE:** We like the advertising trade books. We think they do a difficult job very well, and by and large, they employ very nice, talented people. We just don't think you should have to assign someone full time to answer the unsolicited requests for inclusion in the review that will inevitably result from being mentioned in the trades.

This is yet another benefit of our method. There is going to be an awful lot of things you want and expect your agency to keep confidential. If they can't keep the search quiet, do you want to tell them your company plans?

The final group of contenders now know who you are and what you do.

It's time for them to share the same information with you. Give them two hours to do just that. At their offices. Let them use those two hours anyway they want. This is more than the all-important "real estate check." You're going there to feel the place. To meet the people who will be working on your business. To smell the atmosphere. To soak up the culture. To feel the chemistry.

Second key word. Without chemistry, there can be no relationship. And we're looking for a long term, productive relationship. You know what? So are they.

So let them do it their way. Forcing them into some rigid agenda won't reveal a whole lot about chemistry. Or them. Let them simply *behave*.

If they have any brains at all (and we presume they didn't make it this far without any) they'll spend the two hours introducing their people, exhibiting their capabilities, showing you their work, and generally trying to be your best buddy. All in the context of your company and the information you've given them. So you don't just learn everything they tell you, you learn a lot about them by *how* they tell you. You learn what they've done for other people who may or may not be similar to you. You decide if that's important. You decide if you like their work. And them. *This is critically important*. Because if you don't like them, you're not going to stay married very long. No matter how smart they are.

You also have the opportunity to learn how they think. How they approach their own business. How they are likely to handle yours. And you make them do it in two hours. Because that will also tell you a lot about them. How they organize ideas and concepts. What they think is critical about them that you should know. The regard they have for your time. And much more. Speaking of that, they'll try to get more time with you than the two hours. They'll try to throw in lunch. Tell them that's fine if it's part of the two hours. They'll drop lunch. If you're coming in the night before they'll want to get together with you at the hotel. Don't do it. We're trying to make this fair for everybody involved. No agency gets more than two hours of "face time." Besides, the two hours is part of the test.

Keep in mind the two-way street idea: this is

not an adversarial situation. Don't come off like a Prussian drill instructor. You are working together with these folks to determine if you have a future together. Be yourself. Be a nice guy. Let them see who you are, and what your company is really like.

ALERT! BIG AD AGENCY SECRET!!: Agencies actually do their best work for the clients they *like*. **END OF BIG AD AGENCY SECRET.**

Don't just give them a rosy, annual report, glossed-up version of the truth. Let them see what they'll be getting into. Tell them the truth, and see how they react. This will tell you a lot. It will also help them decide if they're really interested in you. The best agencies, the ones worth hiring, will actually decide if *you're* right for *them*. They won't get themselves into relationships that won't work over time. They'll be honest with themselves, and with you. Because they know that not every account is right for every agency. Your consultant will help you with this. They'll be able to see how the agency people react. They'll be able to assess the situation in a way that's different from you. Listen to them. But decide for yourself.

And decide you do. You cut the list down to the finalists. Probably two maybe three. Now we give them a speculative creative assignment, right? We get them to stay up around the clock for days eating cold pizza and swigging Mountain Dew in a desperate attempt to stay awake. Now we'll really see what they're made of.

Wrong. Spec creative is largely worthless. You should have seen enough of their work by now to understand their capabilities and creative personality. The work they produce will be done in a vacuum without any meaningful input from you, so it probably will be wrong for a wide variety of reasons. In the entire history of advertising, the number of spec campaigns that have actually run, as

presented, can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Don't do it! Besides, the agencies will love you, because they won't have to spend all the time and money to create a campaign (or four) that they know won't ever run. And you want them to love you. And respect you. Remember, we're talking marriage here.

Well, if we're not going to do a creative presentation, let's have them present their solution to a marketing problem, right? Wrong. This won't tell you anything you don't already know. Just like the ever popular "creative shoot-out," it will turn into a "presentation contest." Therefore, it will tell you which agency does the best presentation. But it won't tell you which one is the best agency. More importantly, it won't tell you which one is the best agency for *you*.

Most agencies have one or two really terrific presenters. People that will wow you with their theatrical flair. Or overpower you with the strength of their logic. Or seduce you with carefully turned phrase after phrase. They recognize that the process has turned into theater, and they'll put on a great show. They'll have fun, and so will you. They'll rent more audio visual equipment than you'll find at the local Cineplex. It's what they do. But it's not what you're after.

Well, you ask, if we're not going to have a couple of big presentations, what are we going to do? Aren't we going to have any fun? Sure we are. We're going to have the fun of finding the right agency.

We're going to invite both agencies to come to your place. To visit your offices. And we're going to ask them to prepare for a meeting *as if they have already been hired*. What we want them to do is bring the people with them that will actually work on the business. Not the Chairman, unless she's really going to work on the business. Not the Director of New Business, unless he's really going to work on the busi-

ness. Just the people who will actually work on the business. The creative team, the account people, the media people, the account planner. Everybody. The smart ones will even bring the person who's in charge of billing. They should prepare an agenda for the meeting that will take place on their first day on the account. They have as long as they want. So obviously, we schedule the agencies on different days. This will tell you many things. Who's going to work on the business? Are they smart, and do I like them? Do they understand my business? Do they have any insights that haven't occurred to me? What is their process? Does their strategic planning model make sense? Are they recommending research that indicates they truly understand the assignment? Is their assessment of the competitive environment accurate? How are they going to bill me? (It doesn't sound like a big deal, but it can turn into one.) How badly do they want my business? And maybe most importantly, is that chemistry that felt so good at their place still there? Do I still like these guys?

This last, critical step will tell you more about your prospective partner than any presentation. Combined with what you've learned previously, you will be armed with more pertinent information upon which to make your decision than a week of presentations will reveal.

This four step process will produce the result we set out to achieve: you will have discovered the best agency for you. Along the way, you may find an agency that's particularly strong creatively. Or one with a great account planning department. Or some powerful new ideas about media. You may even discover what you think is the best agency in the country. But that's not important. Because what you're really looking for isn't the best agency. It's the best agency *for you*. ■

- Peter Coughter