

PRC MARKETING TIPS

5 steps: How to hire a marketing partner for your business

So, you've been thinking about hiring a marketing firm, publicist or social-media manager for your Whatcom County business, but you don't know where to start or how to compare options. This article is just for you.

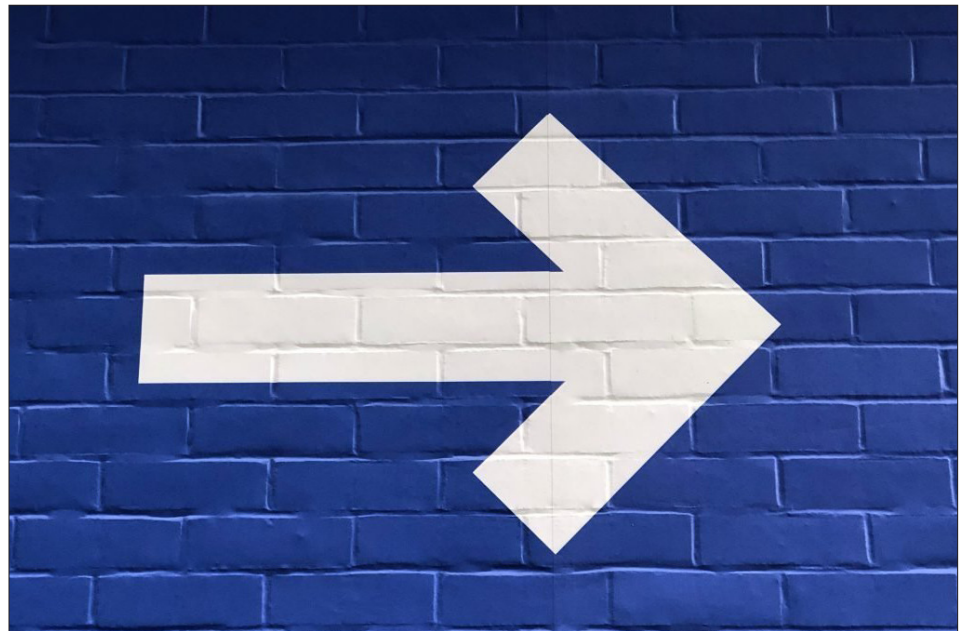
Selecting the right company to which to outsource marketing and PR tasks is an important decision. You'll want to make the best choice possible, so it's worth investing a bit of time upfront to understand the options, identify your needs and consider your budget.

Here are five tips to consider before hiring a marketing consultant:

1. Consider the scope of work

Write down a quick list of marketing tasks your business needs help with. You know the things we're talking about. These are the tasks that you know are not being done consistently or well right now. These are things that may be important but that keep getting shuffled to the bottom of your to-do pile.

The list may include things like developing a marketing strategy, creating fresh brochures or sales sheets, editing text and photos on your website, writing blogs or sending email marketing campaigns, managing social media accounts or consumer reviews online, work-



ing on corporate branding, or even brainstorming business-development ideas.

If you find you need help in only one area (like a press release or new business cards), then consider hiring a press-release writer or a print company for graphic design work. If it looks like you need help in a variety of areas (website, publicity, graphic design, branding and social media management), then it will be best to partner with a local marketing firm that can handle all of those tasks in-house, so your marketing messages are consistent.

2. Be prepared to share a ballpark budget

How much do businesses spend

on marketing each year? Depending on the size of your company, the market you are trying to reach and how aggressively you want to grow, your annual marketing budget may be anywhere between 2 percent to 20 percent of revenue. The U.S. Small Business Administration suggests roughly 7-8 percent for businesses with less than \$5 million per year in revenue.

The marketer you choose to hire will need to know how much you want to invest in marketing in order to make suggestions based on growth goals and budget. The tools available for use will vary depending on your budget — radio, video

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or TV ads might not be within your budget, but social media management and content marketing like eNews and blogging may be a better fit.

3. Understand the marketing firm's size and who will be your point of contact

Depending on the size of the marketing firm you hire, the person you initially meet with may or may not be your point of contact in the future. In some larger marketing firms and PR companies, your projects will be assigned to an account specialist, or you may work with a team of people who will complete tasks. There is potential for frequent turnover in the role of account specialist; over the course of a few years, you may have several different contacts at this type of firm.

With smaller firms, the person you initially meet may also be your main point of contact in the future, and they may be the one completing the tasks you outsource or directing the work within the organization.

There are pluses and minuses to both, so make sure to ask how many people work for the firm, who will be working on your projects, what their experience is and even how you will be communicating with them (in person, via phone or email; what are their business hours?).

4. Check out your marketer-for-hire's circle of influence and experience with social networking

There is no denying that the marketing world has changed. It's far more interactive, so the firm or person you choose should have an understanding of social networking.

If social media management is

going to be part of your outsourcing plan, make sure the firm and its representatives are actively using the online marketing platforms you currently use or are considering. Ask to see samples of pages and profiles they manage.

Remember that a solid network cannot be built overnight. It's developed over time. Already having access to a large audience, and having an understanding of how to use online marketing tools, can make it easier for outsourced marketing professionals to help your Bellingham-area business grow.

5. Know the right questions to ask references

When it comes time to check references (do this!), ask to speak with two or three existing customers that may be similar in size to your business.

Talk with those clients about how long they have worked with the

marketing company you are considering. Ask whether communication is timely, how accessible team members are and how they feel they have benefited from the services provided.

Lastly, it's important to understand that in many cases, marketing success does not happen overnight. However, if you choose the right marketing partner, this could be a long-term relationship that effectively builds over time.

Allow six months to get the ball rolling, build trust with consumers and test new strategies. Your new marketing partner will help you monitor results along the way.

After the first six months, review your marketing plan, goals and budget, and make necessary adjustments.

[NOTE: This article was originally published in the Bellingham Business Journal.]

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Covered in this article:

- 1. Consider the scope of work.*
- 2. Be prepared to share a ballpark budget.*
- 3. Understand the marketing firm's size and who will be your point of contact.*
- 4. Check out your marketer-for-hire's circle of influence and experience with social networking.*
- 5. Know the right questions to ask references.*

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