

The Ultimate Guide to Choosing a Digital Agency

How to Find an Agency Partner That Sets You Up for Sustainable Digital Marketing Success

Spin  tech



Introduction

The scales have tipped. In 2019, digital ad spending is expected to surpass TV ad spending for the first time ever. And that doesn't even account for investments in websites, content, email, and social media.

With that shift, all the traditional advertising agencies have been shuffling to the digital side in an effort to retain their share of that spend. Around here, we call it "The Digital Gold Rush." Every agency is rushing to adapt to the marketing landscape. So more and more companies are competing for your attention and your digital marketing budget.

More options mean tougher decisions. Do you stick with your traditional agency and hope their learning curve is quick? Do you entrust your digital marketing to a company solely dedicated to the space?

This guide provides more questions than answers — 73 of them, to be exact. But whether you're hiring your first agency or you're moving your budget elsewhere, you'll be better prepared to navigate that process and find a trusted partner that can take your digital marketing to new heights.

Learn more about:

- [Questions you should ask any agency before signing a contract](#)
- [How Google helps narrow down the list of qualified agencies](#)
- [Characteristics to look for to develop a successful, long-term agency partnership](#)



Top 20 Questions to Evaluate a Digital Agency — Directly From Digital Marketing Experts

As the marketing leader at your company, you hold a lot of responsibilities, managing everything from the team to the budget.

You also have to set the course for success with a marketing strategy that drives revenue. And that often means partnering with an agency that has the knowledge, the talent, and, most importantly, *the time*, to deliver on your marketing goals.

With the steady rise of digital marketing, it's more important than ever to have a strategy that meets your audience wherever they are online. As the consumers shifted online, so have the marketing agencies. There are many more marketing companies competing for these increasingly important digital marketing dollars. But not all of them have the same level of experience and expertise.

EXPERT TAKE

“There is and will continue to be a ton of noise around digital marketing. It is easy to get caught up in miseducation on what is all possible. The marketplace will eventually weed out this noise, but it is important that you check references to ensure you get what you believe you are buying.”

— Marc Reifenrath, President

So how do you weed out the good from the bad and get the help you need?

Ask questions — a lot of them.

You don't have to be an expert in all things digital. But you should know enough about digital marketing to understand when an agency is selling you false promises and when one actually knows their stuff.

Whether it's an agency trying to sell you on their superior services or you're just putting together an RFP, ask these critical questions to find a partner that will actually deliver a return on your investment in digital.

1. What clients have you worked with in the past?
2. On average, how long do your client relationships last?
3. When you say you work with a big-name brand, do you work with the national brand and all locations or just a single location or regional network?
4. What experience do you have in *my industry* and do you work with any competitors?
5. Do you have any references I can contact?
6. What do you do really well?
7. How do you define client success?
8. How do you leverage or work to improve successful campaigns and strategies?
9. How do you handle it when a strategy you developed fails?
10. How do you measure performance?
11. How do you report performance back to clients? How transparent are you? How much detail do you provide? What tools do you use? How often do you report performance?
12. How do you track the impact of your digital initiatives offline?
13. What are the terms of your service agreements?

14. How many clients did you lose last year and why?
15. How do your various agency departments interact and do they collaborate on strategies?
16. How would you structure a team for our digital marketing initiatives?
17. Who will be executing the work and where are they located?
18. Do you contract out any of your management services to third parties? If so, can I actually sit down face-to-face with this team?
19. What certifications do your team members hold?
20. What is your process for learning and understanding a new client's business?

EXPERT TAKE

“Ask an agency what their discovery process is for learning your business. Too many companies jump into tactics without fully understanding the business, customer base, or overall industry. If an agency says they can jump in and start for you tomorrow, be wary of the quality and strategy behind these efforts.”

— Brian Allen, Digital Marketing Director

Get into the weeds if you have specific needs.

Not every company can hand over their entire digital marketing portfolio to an agency. And many have employees with the ability to manage certain aspects, like social media, paid media, or content creation.

So you may be less concerned with the overall digital marketing expertise of an agency and laser-focused on how they can meet your specific needs.

Search Engine Optimization

1. Do your services cover execution, strategy, or a combination?
2. What SEO capabilities do you have?
3. How do you choose which strategy or services to recommend for a client?
4. What type of audits do you start with to benchmark current performance?
5. What is the most critical step in migrating our website to you to ensure that we keep our existing rankings?
6. How does an SEO strategy fit within the larger scope of our digital strategy and our overall business?
7. Is this strategy sustainable?
8. How many years of experience does your SEO team have?
9. Do you have any examples or results from successful SEO strategies for businesses like mine?
10. How often do you perform additional research and or run audits for your clients?



EXPERT TAKE

“There’s a misconception about SEO that the strategy simply revolves around updating some title tags and content to get pages to rank better. A true strategy is more than a simple checklist of things to be done month-to-month. Ask the right questions but understand that not every individual tactic you hear about is appropriate for your site.”

— Tyler Peekenschneider, SEO Strategist

Paid Media Advertising

1. How are your fees structured (commission-based, retainer-based, etc.)?
2. What percentage of media fees do you charge?
3. What bid management tools do you use and how do you use them?
4. What is your approach to creative and landing page testing?
5. What are the most important KPIs that you tell your clients to focus on?
6. What is your general approach to optimizing a healthy SEM strategy?
7. What does your reporting look like for your media strategies?
8. What is your process for implementing conversion tracking and campaign goals?
9. What does your build process for search and display campaigns look like?



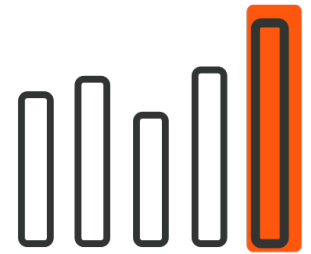
EXPERT TAKE

“Setting expectations and marketing goals for each objective, channel, and strategy will build the foundation for a successful relationship and campaign. It gives the agency goals and benchmarks to work towards. If those are challenging to establish upfront, just discuss that and lay it on the table so there are no surprises down the road.”

— Tyler Rayome, Sr. Paid Media Strategist

Data & Analytics

1. How do you measure digital marketing KPIs?
2. Do you measure both macro and micro conversions?
3. What is your process when testing conversion tracking?
4. What type of attribution model do you use?
5. Why did you choose your attribution model, and is it used universally across all digital marketing efforts?
6. How are General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) / Intelligent Tracking Prevention (ITP) regulations impacting our metrics?
7. How have you audited Google Analytics channel attributions?
8. What type of custom filters, alerts, dashboards, and reports do you set up to help clients understand performance?



EXPERT TAKE

“Data and analytics should be at the core of every digital strategy. This allows you to track and define success throughout the duration of your campaigns. A tool such as Google Analytics offers many great features out of the box but it also leaves room for misattribution, which can impact business decisions. With the right metrics strategy in place, you will easily be able to make sense of clean, accurate, real-time data to understand what’s working and what’s not.”

— Jeremy Schmidt, Digital & Data Strategist

Social Media

1. What social media strategies would you recommend to achieve my business goals?
2. Do you have any case studies to showcase results for clients in my industry?
3. Have you produced social media work on a similar scale or for businesses similar to mine?
4. How do you measure a social media campaign's success and an overall social strategy's success?
5. Which social media tools do you use and how do they help drive results?
6. What's the methodology behind your social media audit or analysis?
7. How many certified social media strategists are on your team and what are their certifications?
8. Do you offer community management as a service?
9. What community management methods do you use that stand out from other agencies?
10. What are your strengths and limitations for creating content on behalf of my company?



EXPERT TAKE

“For many brands, social media is the number one place they can generate affordable brand awareness and drive new quality traffic and leads to their websites. But you have to know what you want to achieve. When you have clarity on what business results you want your agency to drive, the better they can provide you with the right strategies to achieve your desired results.”

— Kip Russell, Sr. Social Media Strategist

Email Marketing & Marketing Automation



1. What marketing automation platform do you use or recommend?
2. What type of reporting do you provide to clients?
3. How do you ensure optimal campaign performance from month-to-month?
4. What steps do you take to ensure emails are CAN-SPAM compliant and follow all data and privacy regulations?
5. Can you provide examples of how you have utilized personalization in your customer's campaigns?
6. Do you develop email creative in-house? If so, can you provide examples?
7. How will you ensure our company builds and maintains a strong sender status and reputation?
8. What does the onboarding process for marketing automation look like?
9. What will you need from our company to get started?

EXPERT TAKE

“Because marketing automation is usually integrated into the broader customer journey, it requires more planning and strategy to ensure customers receive the ideal message at exactly the right time in their journey. In addition to questions and conversations with potential partners, make time to have internal discussions around marketing automation so stakeholders understand how it could integrate and influence their specific business objectives.”

— Dustin O’Leary, Digital & Data Strategist

Content

1. What's your process for determining which content is worth creating?
2. Do you have your own team of writers or do you rely on a network of freelancers?
3. What controls and processes do you have in place to ensure quality and alignment to my brand and strategy?
4. How do you create content that resonates with the target audience?
5. What metrics do you use to measure the success of content?
6. What channels would you recommend as part of a distribution plan?
7. Do you have samples of your work with other brands?



EXPERT TAKE

“Many agencies place too much emphasis on the creative side. But content creation does not equal strategy. You can easily end up with a lot of new content with little to show for it. You need a strategy to create the right content that achieves your marketing goals, meets a need, and reaches the audience where they prefer to engage.”

— Jordan Bahnsen, Content Strategist

PREMIER

Google
Partner

Why Your Digital Agency Needs to Be a Google Premier Partner

Google makes it easy for anyone to pick up its products and start using them to grow their business. Anyone with a credit card can set up a Google Ads account and run a campaign. Doing so successfully takes much more than a piece of plastic.

Set it and forget it, and you're setting yourself up for failure. Choose an ill-fitting audience, ad type, or budget and you could burn through cash quickly. And have nothing to show for it but a whole in your digital marketing budget.

Without the in-house knowledge to effectively manage a Google Ads program, most companies turn to agencies. Because it takes an experienced professional to run campaigns that drive revenue without blowing your budget. That's why Google created its Google Partners program — to recognize the individuals and agencies with the expertise to get you the most bang for your buck.

With the sight of a simple badge, you can trust that your digital marketing partner has the knowledge and experience to manage your ad budget and give you an excellent return on investment.

The Google Premier Partner badge is reserved for the best of the best.

All Google Partner badges are not created equal. And if you're investing heavily in paid media advertising, you want proof that your ad dollars are in good hands.

For the basic Google Partner badge, an agency only needs one certified expert managing \$10,000 quarterly with solid performance. To earn the coveted Google Premier Partner badge, a digital marketing agency must have the expertise to handle the biggest ad budgets and outperform the competition — a feat achieved only by an **elite group of agencies worldwide**.



Google's seal of approval has real benefits for your business.

It's not just a badge of honor or a way for agencies to tout their expertise. There are perks of working with a Google Premier Partner.

To maintain that status, Premier Partners have to meet higher standards. After all, Google's putting its name behind the agencies and experts charged with managing digital advertising programs. Those expectations create a few distinct advantages for you.

1. Digital Marketing Experts Trained by Google

The top tier of agencies have dedicated digital strategists that know all things Google. They've passed Google training programs in a variety of specializations to earn their own individual badges — certifications showcasing their skills and expertise.

These aren't just one-time certifications, either. Google requires certified professionals to take continuing education every year or so to renew their certifications. That means the ad experts are always up-to-date on the best practices in digital media and the latest products and features developed by Google.

2. Proven Performance and Revenue Growth

In Google's eyes, it's all about performance. The better the ads on the platform perform, the better the experience is for Google users. So Premier Partners are under a microscope.

Google reviews and approves quarterly ad spends of its Premier Partners to make sure campaigns are converting at a higher rate and are consistently leading to revenue growth. Agencies at this level could never afford to set it and forget it and actually get away with it. They must constantly monitor the quality and performance of all their campaigns.

3. Exclusive Access to Google Products & Insights

Google trusts its Premier Partners to get the most out of your advertising dollars, so they provide additional tools to ensure that success.

To help its Premier Partners stay at the top, Google offers exclusive access to workshops, training sessions, special events, industry research, beta programs, product updates, and Google support — for both agencies and their clients.

Not only do you get the latest and greatest insights directly from the source, you also get to connect with your very own Google representative to help improve your results.

Working with a Google Premier Partner maximizes your ROI.

As a marketing leader, you have to show that your budget is spent on tactics that make a tangible impact on your business. When you're looking to generate more leads or revenue online, a paid media strategy is a critical piece of the digital marketing puzzle. Google Premier Partners are experts at all the little things that make an advertising program successful — choosing the right keywords, optimizing ads, A/B testing, analyzing results, and refining your strategy.

A Google Premier Partner has separated itself from the vast competition online by continually generating conversions and increasing revenue.

They can help you do the same.



7 Agency Characteristics That Signal a Successful Partnership

You know the process. Maybe you've even been a part of it. An agency delivers a beautifully-designed, thought-out proposal. They wow you with creative and strategic ideas. And they show up in full force for a face-to-face meeting to impress you with their collective expertise and experience.

Many agencies have mastered the pitch. But based on how many clients change partnerships ever year, a lot of agencies don't follow up with performance. Make the wrong choice and it can end up costing you precious marketing budget. Or worse — your job.

Finding the right agency is just like hiring a new team member — except with higher stakes. Just as you have certain traits in mind for a new employee, you need to look for defining traits in your digital agency of record.

1. They ask a lot of questions.

An agency that's committed to your success wants to learn as much as they can about your business so they can come up with the best solution to meet your unique challenges and defined goals.

If you feel like you're answering more questions than they are, that's a good thing. The sales process should start with your goals and challenges in mind. They're probing and exploring to make sure your company is a good fit for theirs. And they're working hard in the early discovery phase to learn how you operate so they can hit the ground running and you can see improvements right away.

Beware of any solutions that appear "out-of-the-box" or agencies that jump right to tactics. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to digital marketing. Only agencies that truly understand your company and your audience can develop data-driven, sustainable digital marketing strategies.

2. They're honest and transparent.

Some agencies proudly showcase their core values. Others let them shine through in their relationships and work. Either way, make sure integrity is one of them.

A long-term agency partnership is built on respect and trust. An honest agency is just as quick to tell you what they *can't* do for you as what they can. There should be no surprises in pricing or throughout the sales process. You should know exactly what team will be in place to support you. And most importantly, measures for success should be in place before you get started.

All of that should be clear in your conversations as well as the proposal. That way, you know exactly what you're getting out of your investment, who will be helping you get there, and how you'll know if your strategy and partnership are working.

3. They're a team of specialists and subject matter experts.

“Digital” can mean a lot of things — anything online, really. The biggest difference between dedicated digital marketing agencies and traditional agencies with a digital arm or digital team is the level of expertise.

In the race to adapt to the marketing trends, many agencies are slapping a “digital” label on employees or dedicated teams. Much like public relations, print, and traditional advertising are different, digital marketing is an overarching name for a variety of specific, intricate services.

Teams and individuals that dabble in SEO, paid media advertising, social media, content, email, and analytics under a digital umbrella lack the depth of knowledge as ones that solely focus their attention in one area.

Be wary of an agency, traditional or specialized, that talks about digital in broad strokes and can't get into the details of the specific functions your business needs.

4. They back up what they say with concrete examples and data.

In digital marketing, there's more data than ever before within reach. When someone's pitching you their services, they should have hard facts to back up their plans. You should not only know what to expect from an execution standpoint, but also what performance boost you can expect from a given strategy.

Agencies with real experience and expertise have all that ready. They can point out growth opportunities in your current digital marketing efforts and share case studies to show how a certain strategy benefited a company like yours.

You should have the utmost confidence that they have the ability to deliver on everything they say in the sales process.

5. They practice what they preach.

An appealing presentation can be put together in a day. An agency can educate you on what they do and what they've done for clients like you. But a company that is truly set up for success has the team, processes, and structure in place to take the strategies they sell and apply it to themselves.

It starts with the website. Nearly every agency has the talent to create an attractive design. But is there any depth to it? Is it clear who they are and what they do? They need to be able to sell you not just by what they say but by what they do.

Don't stop there. You're looking for digital marketing services, so see how they perform at their own game.

■ **SEO**

Did they appear in top search results to your most pressing marketing questions?

■ **Paid Media Advertising**

Do you see relevant ads for your search-related queries? Does it feel like you now see their ads *everywhere*?

■ **Content**

Are they writing about topics relevant to your core marketing challenges? Is it readily available on their site and *elsewhere*?

■ **Social Media**

How well do they promote their own business and company culture?

■ **Email Marketing**

Do they offer an opportunity to sign up for additional content? Is it actually relevant or follow a cadence designed to meet your needs?

6. They provide helpful solutions — before a commitment is made.

A digital marketing agency that's freely giving away services or insights is probably not putting in the effort to provide the best solutions for your business. On the other hand, any company that refuses to help until after you've put your name on the dotted line should give you pause.

An agency that's focused on your success is ready to serve right away. They are helpful throughout the RFP process and provide the information you need to make a decision. If you have immediate needs, they're happy to jump in and assist you on a project basis until a long-term strategy is developed.

When an agency shows its value right away, you get a glimpse at what you can expect out of a partnership.

7. They're fun to work with.

Expertise, performance, industry experience, integrity — there are a lot more important factors to consider when choosing an agency.

But you can't overlook the fun factor. Not the quirky buildings, ping pong tables, or beer selection. But the fun that actually matters — the people are enjoyable to be around and easy to work with.

When you're selecting an agency, you're hiring an extension of your own team. You're going to be meeting, talking, and emailing with them a lot. You want those team members to fit in seamlessly and be genuinely invested in your relationship as well as your business.

Tight deadlines, unexpected requests, and dips in performance happen. Good agency partners will help you through it all with empathy and a smile. They make your job easier and make you feel confident, even in tough times.

All these characteristics are a reflection of the team, culture, and processes in place at an agency. If you can spot them in the sales process, you're likely to see them throughout your partnership.

Take Action

Now that you know what to look for, what to ask, and what makes a successful agency partnership, you can apply it to your own RFP process. Outline your business goals and objectives and prepare a list of questions for all those prospective agencies. You'll see pretty quickly which ones are ready to drive your digital marketing to business growth.

Our team of specialists is ready to design a digital strategy customized to your company.

Give us a call.

855-412-1144

Tell us about your project.

[Start a Partnership >](#)