

11/1/2019

Avoid Getting “Agencied”

Katie Elzer-Peters

Getting “Agencied” —1. Becoming locked into a contract with an expensive digital marketing agency that doesn’t understand your business and paying tens (or hundreds) of thousands of dollars for deliverables that don’t work for you. (For example, blog posts that don’t relate to your audience, strategies aimed at achieving rapid growth when that’s not your goal or running pay-per-click ads promoting product in the wrong season.)

Because I’ve experienced multiple clients’ frustration after unsuitable-for-green industry agencies have taken a flamethrower to marketing programs and budgets, I had to get this out. “The house is on fire!” is usually the point when I or the people I work with step in and cool things down. You don’t actually have to wait until that happens, though. You can flameproof your marketing program. Here’s how.

The Allure of Flash

We’re all attracted to shiny things. It’s a fact of life. When someone comes to me and says, “I can grow your email list by 1,000 people a day and we can micro-target your social media ads based on ZIP code and heat map email clicks for uber-segmenting” it’s hard not to pay attention. And maybe they can help. It’s worth investigating.

But that’s the key—investigating. You gotta see what’s behind the curtain. A slick and flashy presentation doesn’t necessarily mean they’re good at their job or that they’ll be good for your business. It means they have good graphics and tech people. And lots of bells and whistles are only helpful if you have the staff and support to use them, otherwise you end up paying for things you don’t need or can’t get around to using.

How to Find a Good Fit

First, make a list of your needs. That might seem obvious, but a lot of people skip that step, especially if they’re overwhelmed and need help, any help.

Then ask around. Get referrals. It’s unlikely someone’s going to refer a company they’re unhappy with. Start by asking your industry colleagues in hopes of getting recommendation for a company that’s worked with the industry. If you can’t find one of those, cast your net broader. There are ways to work with marketing firms that don’t have industry experience. (See the next section called “American or Swiss?”)

Once you get referrals, interview and investigate. Here are some questions to ask:

- **What are the average annual sales revenues for most of your clients?** That’s because marketing is different for a \$500,000 business and a \$20 million business.

- **What's the average annual rate of growth for most of your clients?** E-commerce businesses often have huge growth rates of 25% or 40%, but businesses that sell plants can't usually grow that fast because they can't source that much product in a short amount of time. Marketing is different if you're shooting for 2% to 10% growth than 25% to 40% growth.
- **Who writes your content?** Do they have experience writing about plants? May we see some samples? No plant experience is not a deal breaker, but you need to see what they're capable of producing. Are their standards the same as your standards?
- **What are your questions for me?** They should ask you who'll be their liaison to approve content, about your goals and for information about your audience. If they don't, run. You don't want a "one-size-fits-all plan. You want a plan that will work for your business.

Notice I didn't get into a lot about cost or plans yet. Before you get there, screen using these questions and tips, because if they work with budgets and growth levels that are vastly different than yours or their content is crap or they don't ask you any questions, you don't need to move forward with them. If their answers are satisfactory, you probably can come to an agreement.

American or Swiss?

A cheeseburger is not a cheeseburger without cheese. If your business requires outside marketing help, CONGRATULATIONS. You're the big cheese.

Let that sink in: YOU are the cheese. You're what makes your business your business because you understand it. You know plants and the people who buy plants. The agency or contractor you hire knows marketing. It's perfectly fine to hire an agency that knows digital marketing as long as they'll listen to you or your "green industry liaison" during marketing planning and you can synergize your areas of expertise.

It's really easy to tell if someone who knows nothing about plants writes about plants or runs ads about plants. If you have a plant-ignorant agency with good marketing chops that meets your needs, all you have to do is designate or hire a liaison that knows plants to oversee ad campaign lists, review content and respond to concepts. If you and your staff don't have time to do this, look through the GardenComm directory. There are tons of garden communicators who would be thrilled to serve as your extra set of eyes to make sure the ship is smoothly sailing and you're not paying your agency to run a Google ad campaign to sell cannas in December.

Don't Settle

Don't settle for an agency that doesn't know your industry unless you can allocate or hire someone to manage them. Otherwise, you can blow a ton of money. And don't settle for a plant person who doesn't understand marketing. That's another quick way to waste a lot of money. You need both if you want to grow (appropriately). **GP**



Katie Elzer-Peters is owner of The Garden of Words, LLC. She specializes in digital and print marketing for the green industry, putting her horticultural background to work helping clients grow (pun intended!). Contact her at katie@thegardenofwords.com.