



The 2013 Marketer's Guide to Selecting the Right Email Agency

With email marketing as the top area of marketing investment in 2013, savvy digital leaders are long past the notion that email technology is the primary investment in the email channel. This means leading brands want and need best of breed creative, coding, strategy, production, analysis, multi-channel integration and more to have a truly comprehensive email program. Finding the right email agency is of crucial importance to any business, and this guide will help ensure you are on the right track in finding the perfect email agency partner.

SELECTING THE RIGHT EMAIL AGENCY

With email marketing as the top area of marketing investment in 2013 (according to StrongMail), savvy digital leaders are long past the notion that email technology is the primary investment in the email channel. While a robust, secure and scalable platform is certainly crucial to success, digital marketers have realized that investing in all elements of the email channel is a requirement for success.

This means leading brands want and need best of breed creative, coding, strategy, production, analysis, multi-channel integration and more to have truly a comprehensive email program. The last few years have seen most brands looking to elevate their email program make one of three choices; tapping their Email Service Provider (ESP) for services, hiring a generalist digital agency to manage the email piece or partnering with a specialized email agency.

Email service offerings appear on practically any

“ For every
\$1 spent
on Email Marketing,
marketers can
expect an estimated
\$39.40 ROI.
(DMA 2012)

marketing firm’s website but given the opportunity for significant ROI, one would be wise to their homework to ensure maximum success. There is no one size fits all solution but there are key criteria points to ensure you end up with the right email partner to take your email program to the next level. This guide hopes to shed light on these key considerations.

1. SPECIALIZATION

Email is among the most nuanced of digital marketing weapons and considering the many facets of it (creative, deliverability, content etc.) it is often very challenging for generalist agencies to have a deep understanding of what works in email and be strong in other disciplines.

The reason many email campaigns and programs fall short is because they don't get the time and attention that email requires. Email is not rocket science but at the same time it is not something that can be typically excelled at in passing. In fact, most poorly designed email campaigns fail because they were developed like web pages or seemingly small but crucial things (think subject line and pre-header) were added in without much consideration, at the last minute and with no specific goal or strategy.

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2. SERVICE OFFERINGS

As mentioned, the components of email are deep and wide. Creative is important. So is strategic planning and best practice know how. You also can't forget more back-end areas like deliverability, database management, ESP configurations and HTML coding.

When evaluating email marketing agencies, the depth and breadth of vendors can often reveal true capabilities. Of course what you are seeking will impact your view. If you are looking for an agency to only address strategic issues, then they will need to show their chops in this area and if that is all that is needed, they could be a suitable fit.

If you are engaging in a small project first with a potential email agency and aren't sure of the scope and full nature of the possible future relationship, you would be well suited to ensure their offerings can accommodate your needs as the relationship develops and your needs evolve. Too many agencies are good at the "test" project but can't scale or support the future needs of an ambitious client.

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Truly understanding what services the agency excels in and offers is crucial. It's important to dive deep and ensure the agency can staff your needs today and in the future without having to farm out key components of your email program to outside contractors.

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3. TEAM

Much has been written about how to select any business partner and choosing an email agency is no different. Trusting the agency and its team is key as is actually liking these agency staffers. No one wants to do business with anyone that is disagreeable and hard to work with.

Understanding how the agency operates is important as is how the team works together. Are there multiples offices, do employees work remotely and which employees would be involved with your brand and where do they work? Every brand fears the agency bait and switch – the client has the right to inquire about their potential team's experience and focus.

Size is an important consideration. Every brand wants to ensure they are getting the proper attention and be considered an "important" client. More specifically, how many email experts working on your email program is a key consideration. When hiring your email agency, every brand will want to ensure there is more than one subject matter expert, if not the majority of the staffers that will work on your program.

Finding the right partner that can be nimble but yet also provide a dedicated team (not person) to service your account is of the utmost importance.

Forrester
Research predicts by 2016
that \$1.5 billion of the projected
\$2.5 billion total spend on email
marketing will go to agency focused
disciplines like **CREATIVE,**
INTEGRATION and
ANALYTICS.

4. EXPERIENCE

In the services world, people are the product. Email, as a fairly mature channel (at least for the digital world), has a treasure trove of veterans with a lot of insight. Finding a partner that offers a strong team with real experience is of paramount importance. By real experience, we mean people who have pressed the send buttons on campaigns at 4 AM, have driven consumers to buy from an email and often lived in the trenches.

The experience of operating as a team cannot be underestimated.

How long has the agency been in business and how long have they been focused on email are two must ask questions. Don't be afraid to ask what the founder(s) did before starting this agency, how many email campaigns has the team managed and how many strategic engagements have they completed. This will give you a sense of whether they really are what you want, or just telling you what you want to hear.

5. CROSS CHANNEL INTEGRATION

"How many people specialize in email" is one of the critical questions that should be asked. At the same time, the prospective client should dig into how the agency is equipped and experienced in how email touches other parts of a brands' business. Email isn't in a silo and an agency should never view email this way. Do they have experience with clients' brand agencies?

How about integration of mobile, search and social efforts? Do they understand how email may impact your business' call center? How about experience and understanding of how legal reviews email campaigns?

One clue can often be does this agency eat their own dogfood? Do their own email efforts shine? Do they induce jealousy and inspire innovation? Is it easy to find their email sign up form on their site and do they onboard you into the program in an elegant manner? All questions worth asking to yourself and easy to find the answers to.

A specialized agency with a deep understanding of how the rest of the marketing world works may sound like a contraction but it should be on your wish list for your email agency.

Does the agency's own email program **SHINE**?

6. CLIENT LIST

The best window to view an agency's experience is to get referrals and find out more details on the work the agency performs, not to mention the successes.

Most agencies that have any history or stature in their industry should have some shiny logos to impress you. Client lists should do 2 things: verify the agency has the track record of doing work for similar brands to yours and give you a window into what work the agency really is doing. Marketers should ask more questions than just admire some logos – after all, some clients may not have hired the agency to do work in years or have only engaged the agency for a one off project. Not that this is a negative, but the best window to view an agency's specific experience is to get referrals and find out more details on the work the agency performs, not to mention the successes.

7. REPUTATION

Reputation depends on who you ask but should be in your decision criteria. What an agency does in terms of thought leadership and content creation is a good place to start. A far more revealing area may be doing due diligence with the agency's peers (email centric firms not offering agency services are good starting places) or even competitors.

While rudimentary, search engines often reveal hidden nuggets about the firm or provide clues to their DNA. Do they have a track record of producing success for their clients, have they won awards for the work, are they trailblazers in the oft maligned email marketing industry? Is their leadership respected and cited by peers and the media? All of these questions should be on any marketer's checklist.

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8. FIT & FEEL

The gut check is highly subjective but incredibly important. Does this agency feel like the right partner? Do they seem excited about working with your brand? Are they passionate about their craft? Would you want to have a beer with them after a day of brainstorming?

Any long term successful relationship comes down to many intangibles and with the stressful and never-ending nature of email marketing programs, it is recommended that you are confident and excited about the agency you are working with and that the feeling is mutual.

Does the agency seem likely to answer your calls after 5 PM? Will they be excited for an unplanned discussion of transactional emails or scared of a phone call to discuss CAN-SPAM compliance?

CONCLUSION

Selecting the right email marketing agency can be a difficult process or one that is straightforward. Defining the goals of the partnership upfront can make the selection process far less painful and sometimes help you realize love at first sight.

About BrightWave Marketing

BrightWave Marketing is North America's leading email marketing focused digital agency. The award-winning firm specializes in elevating email marketing and digital messaging programs that drive revenue, cut costs and build relationships.

Headquartered in Atlanta, GA, BrightWave Marketing works with a blue chip client roster, including Affiliated Computer Service (A Xerox Company), Chick-fil-A, Cox Business, Phillips 66 and ServiceMaster. For more information, please visit www.BrightWaveMarketing.com.

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