

How to choose a marketing consultant

Step 1:

Be clear what type of 'marketing consultant' you need

The term 'marketing consultant' is widely used to describe individuals and organisations offering commercial 'marketing' services. Some focus on operational activities lower down the chain, such as website development, online marketing and so on. Others specialise higher up the chain and view marketing in the context of your whole business or organisation. These consultants are known as strategic marketing consultants. They think and act strategically. They believe marketing is about more than creating a website, sending an-email campaign, or writing a piece of PR and know through experience that that many organisations throw good money after bad, playing around with their promotional activities when they should be focusing their efforts higher up the chain.

Using specific tools and techniques, a strategic marketing consultant will help you to understand who you really are and what you could and should be doing to accelerate growth and maximise return on investment. Achieving this focus and direction saves time and money by ensuring that your promotional efforts are aligned with identified market opportunities. Many strategic marketing consultants work hand-in-hand with marketing communications agencies to offer a seamless solution.

Step 2:

Find the right marketing consultant

Once you have decided that you have a need for a strategic marketing consultant, it's important to find the right one. Remember that not all consultants will have the same qualifications or level of expertise. Here are some guidelines to help you:

Size

- A larger consultancy firm is likely to have access to more resources but higher overheads are often reflected in fees charged
- In a larger consultancy, it is less likely that the key people will be doing the work for you as this is often delegated to more junior staff
- A smaller, independent consultancy is likely to provide a more personalised hands-on service and at a more reasonable cost
- However, smaller independent consultancies don't always have the resources to offer a full service in-house, so look for one that partners with other experts who do the things that they don't do

Track Record & Reputation

- Look for a consultancy with experience in your sector and an understanding of the unique challenges it presents
- An established consultancy is likely to be a safer bet than a new kid on the block
- Consider the size and type of organisations the consultancy works with: would you feel comfortable working with them?

- If you operate internationally, look for a consultancy with an international outlook and evidence that they could help you if required
- Check out their website: it should convey a professional yet creative image? If marketing people can't get it right, then who can?!!

Qualifications & Accreditations

- Look for Chartered Marketer status: this is the mark of an up to date, experienced and qualified marketing professional (Chartered Institute of Marketing 2009, www.cim.co.uk)
- Look for a Masters level qualification in Marketing Management from a leading University: individuals with such a qualifications have been trained to the highest level
- Look for academic and commercial links with leading Universities: consultancies that enjoy good links with these establishments are likely to be at the cutting-edge of marketing practices and principles. They are also likely to be able to tap into the University's skill base for the benefit of their clients
- Look for accreditations by Business Link and other support agencies: this proves that consultants have been through a vetting process and match up to certain criteria
- Look for depth and breadth in the consultancy team: sector experience, language skills, cross-cultural experience, voluntary work and so on

Step 3:

Take the time to talk to them and their clients

- Meet them - it's important that you like them and that they like you
- Get a feel for how they work and for the personalities involved
- Take the time to talk to them to discuss your specific issues: remember the more you are both willing to put in up front, the better the outcome
- Ask them to prepare a proposal detailing: what they can do for you, how they will do it, how you will benefit, how long the work will take and what it will cost. Remember that cheapest isn't always best!
- Most importantly, ask to talk to some of their clients and discover how they have benefited
- Once you're happy, sign them up and get cracking!