

C-suite guide to selecting an agency

One of the most important decisions a CEO or chief communications officer can make is to select an integrated communications agency partner to help achieve business objectives. This guide is intended to provide a framework to the agency search process by outlining key considerations.

Gain alignment within your team

Agencies are successful when their expertise is valued and understood by the CEO and other professionals with whom they will be working. Recognize upfront that some internal teams may feel threatened. Before moving forward to select an agency, be transparent with your colleagues. Be certain your organization is aligned on the decision to partner with outside experts.

Gain consensus on agency deliverables

Have very specific deliverables, whether qualitative, quantitative or both, in mind before hiring an agency partner. Seeking more media hits, more “likes” or “friends” or more “buzz” are highly tactical goals that may easily be measured but do little to demonstrate a return on investment. Goals such as strengthening important relationships, improving brand awareness among target audiences, generating leads or prospects or positioning yourself as an industry thought leader may be harder to quantify but may mean more to growing market share.

Have a budget in mind

Have a realistic budget, or at least a budget range, in mind before seeking an agency partner. “Mercedes” expectations on a “Chevy” budget is unsustainable and will cost more over time as you grind through agency after agency. If you’re not so certain about the budget, seek agency input on what budget it may take to achieve the agreed-upon deliverables.

Understand how agencies charge for work

There are a few common billing practices for agencies. Some charge a flat hourly rate while others charge different rates based on the experience of team members. Some charge by the hour while others charge by a set monthly retainer. Some agencies mark up vendor services they secure on your behalf, while others do not. Know upfront precisely how your budget will be utilized.

Related experience isn’t everything

An agency partner must demonstrate strategic thinking, broad and deep communications capabilities, strong relationships and proven results. Related industry experience may be helpful, but it’s not everything. Remember, your agency will never know as much about your business as you do and you will never know as much about integrated communications as your agency partner. If you don’t agree with that statement, you should hire staff, not consultants.

Chemistry is everything

If you start a relationship with an agency as a strategic partner, they’ve joined your work family. Time together will be more productive if the chemistry is right. If you work for a conservative and process-oriented company, that cool group of unshaven twenty-somethings may not be for you. You know your culture and your colleagues. Hire an agency that challenges your thinking but with whom you personally connect.

Note client service-oriented signs

In addition to expertise and chemistry, look for clues about an agency’s commitment to client service. Did they return your call or email promptly? Did they send follow-up materials as promised? Did they arrive to your meeting on time? Did they thank you afterwards? Did they learn all they could about you and your business? Hiring an agency is like dating ... if they aren’t nice and respectful on the first date, don’t expect much more down the road.

Get off to a good start

Remember, it’s a relationship ... you must commit the time to help your new agency understand your culture, your business, your industry and your expectations. Give them a tour of your facility. Invite them to training sessions. Introduce them to staff. Offer them a required industry reading list. Engage with them on communications plan development. Agree to those weekly status calls. By investing in your agency upfront, you increase chances that you’ll both succeed.