



Why is choosing the right agency so important for a B2B brand?

The term 'Agency' is all-inclusive, and is used to describe a vast array of marketing services providers:

- integrated through-the-line
- single discipline – design, digital, direct marketing, public relations,
- an agency network of single discipline providers often used when International support is required
- small, multi-discipline strategic/creative teams, i.e. Clockwork IMC

The first, and I would say crucial, step to choosing the right agency starts not by looking at who is out there and being seduced by slick agency new business teams, but by understanding your needs, or those of your marketing team, and the level of marketing support required.

Ask yourself, what do you need an 'agency' for?

1. **Strategic advice** – many clients will have developed the comms strategy and are only looking for someone to drive it, others need grass-roots assistance.
2. **Creative ideas** – the development of the 'BIG' idea that will work across either single or multi-channel approach.
3. **Design & production support** – to support the client's in-house studio or to undertake all design & print work and help keep the client's involvement to a sensible minimum.
4. **International support.**
5. All, or some of the above.

From here you can start wading through the piles of unsolicited cred presentations that you've kept and review other directory sources to find an agency, or agencies, that on the surface just might meet your requirement.

Narrow your choice

Once you have a shortlist you may want to compare each agency on criteria that you believe is important to your business:

Size of agency – do you want to be a big fish in the agency's comparatively small pond, which may result in a better level of service. Or are you happy, and can afford, to work with a large agency group who are probably more financially secure and may be able to offer a broader range of specialist services from within.



Location – In this now internet-enabled world location should not really be an issue. A good and enthusiastic agency should be prepared to be on-site 10 minutes before a meeting, wherever. However many clients, especially regional ones, use this as an excuse to dramatically reduce the shortlist, quashing the enthusiasm of hungry but perceived expensive agencies within the London area. In reality client visits to the agency are very infrequent - I have a client of 10 years that has still not visited our offices, instead I normally visit them once a week.

Sector Experience – this can be useful and will mean that the agency should come up to speed far quicker than one without the relevant experience. There's always the danger that an agency can lose the creative edge by adopting a formulaic approach...we know this market and what works...this can result in me-too creative work.

Remuneration - many agencies still operate on a fee basis whilst others prefer to work on a cost-per-project – you have to decide what method suits your needs. Are you going to keep them so busy that a fee could be very cost effective, or is project work going to be best? Asking to see an agency's rates for strategy, conceptualising, design and artwork is a useful yard-stick but direct comparison between agencies is always dangerous e.g. 1 MAC artworker may have an hourly rate that is 25% more than another but works twice as fast. Trade associations such as the DMA can offer guidance to clients about hourly rates for marketing services per size of agency.

Get them In

Marketing services, like sales, is a 'people business'. Going back to my first point that this process is driven by meeting individual client needs, then nothing is more important for both client and agency than the feeling that I/we could work with these guys, i.e. Chemistry. Trust is earned over time but in the absence of time, go with gut-feeling.

Pitch or not to pitch – if you have a sizeable piece of business (£100K+) then I can see the merits of asking 2-3 agencies to pitch, based upon a live brief and the promise that someone will be awarded the business. Otherwise, invite the agencies to give you a 30 min presentation on your business and how they believe they could make a contribution to its growth. Many agencies will refuse to pitch but will invite you to participate in a workshop. Indulge them, I can guarantee you will walk away with a few nuggets and food for thought, but make sure the agency puts forward their proposed account team, not the new biz team....people do business with people!



Client Testimonials – ask to speak with a couple of existing clients. No one is going to put you in touch with someone who is not going to sing their praises, but professional integrity is a powerful thing and people will often give a very fair account of their current relationship, perhaps even with a few warts and all.

Affiliations to Trade Associations – a good indicator of the agencies area(s) of expertise: Association of B2B Agencies, Direct Marketing Association, Institute of Practitioners of Advertising, Chartered Institute of Public Relations. Most trade associations also offer a free ‘Agency Selection’ service on their respective websites, which can be a useful aid when creating your shortlist.

Awards – recognition by the industry of an agency’s work must be a good thing. However, as a past judge I have to say that some winners are more worthy than others...it’s your call on this one!

In summary

It’s crucial that the process starts with you having a good understanding of the type of support that you/your in-house team require before approaching any agency. As the process unfolds and the agency choice narrows, ask yourself this question: if you had sufficient work and you could afford their salaries, would you poach the agency’s strategic/creative account team. If you wouldn’t employ them, then don’t appoint them!



steve@clockworkimc.com

www.clockworkimc.com

T: +44 (0)20 8747 2023

About the Author

Has over 20+ years hands-on agency experience of developing integrated marcomm programs for numerous SME and Corporate B2B brands across many vertical markets. Steve sits on the DMA’s B2B Committee; Management Board of the Association of B2B Agencies; past Judge of B2B Marketing Magazine Awards 2006 & 2007; and was the 2008 Chairman of B2B Alliance www.b2balliance.info

Communications Approach: Business Products are Bought, not Sold!

About Clockwork IMC

A lean and very experienced B2B integrated marcomms team based in West London. Best suited to SME and Corporate clients who recognise the importance of ‘brand management’ and the effect that impactful strategic/creative ideas can have on ‘business development’. Acting as an extension to their marketing team, we are:

- Thinkers - Campaign Strategy/Creative Concepts
- Planners - Integrated Media Mix/Media Selection & Buying/Print Management
- Doers - Advertising (Digital/Press), Copywriting, Design, Direct Marketing, Exhibitions, Promotions, SEO/SEM, Support PR, Web.

Client Promise: No frills, just creative thinking, integrated execution and results!