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How to choose an advertising agency

Online marketing opportunities call for Web-savvy agency

St. Louis Business Journal - by [Julia M. Johnson](#)

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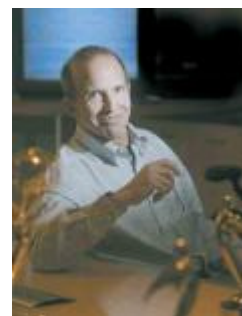
If you're in the market for a new advertising agency, narrow your list to the ones that are the most Web- and tech-savvy, ad professionals advise.

While the Internet has expanded businesses' options for promoting themselves, it also has made it more difficult for a company to appear unique.

That's where a good agency can become your strongest marketing partner, according to Larry Weintraub, chairman of Clayton-based **Weintraub Advertising**.

"The Web education and training of an ad agency's staff is one of the most important questions you can ask today," Weintraub said. "There's so much happening online, from e-commerce to marketing. Ask whether an agency trains its people in online marketing techniques, or do they tend to hire people who already have experience in that, or do they farm it out to another company?"

Because consumers are doing so much online product searching and comparison these



BRIAN CASSIDY

Larry Weintraub said it can be convenient for a client to choose an agency with many capabilities under one roof.

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days, the Web has become an especially important tool in advertising, said Alan Epstein, partner at Clayton-based Adamson.

“Take new mothers, for example,” Epstein said. “We know they do a lot of research online to figure out what to buy for their babies and what to feed them. You need an agency that understands the whole life cycle of marketing to this group of people — from the time they are trying to get pregnant, to the doctor visits, to delivery, to when the baby reaches a year or 18 months of age. They’ll have different product needs at every stage.”

Epstein said a good agency will help you map an evolving journey of marketing to any such group of clients, suggesting creative ways to reach them every step of the way.

At the beginning of your agency search, it’s helpful to consult the American Association of Advertising Agencies, www.aaaa.org, a trade organization that represents members of the industry. “You can go to the AAAA site and enter all the criteria you’re looking for, including agency size, geographic standpoint, years of experience, and more,” Epstein said. “That will get you a list of agencies with which it might be good to start. Collect the ones that look best to you, and if one or more feels right, call for a meeting or send a request for proposal.”

The Web also has opened new avenues for ongoing communication between clients and agencies, according to Epstein. He advises looking for an agency that’s not intimidated by technological advancements in this area.

“Technology lets us serve clients pretty much anywhere geographically these days,” Epstein said. “We are doing some cool things such as online client campaign presentations right on the computer screen, like a videoconference, but without the transmission delays you’re used to seeing with video.

“When an agency is first pitching to an account, that should be done in person, of course,” he said. “There’s nothing like the personal touch upfront. But online presentations are becoming popular for the period of time after that, when we are continuing to service the client’s needs.”

Epstein said this kind of technology makes particular fiscal sense when the client and the agency are located in different cities. He said large companies often can afford to choose major agencies in cities such as New York, but smaller firms may fare best with a locally based ad agency because they tend to desire more personal, immediate interaction.

Another advantage of choosing a smaller, local agency is that you may get to work directly with its principals or owners, if that’s the level of service you are looking for, Weintraub said.

“On the other hand, some of the larger agencies do offer full creative, media buying and public relations services,” he said. “It may be more convenient for the client to have all those capabilities under one roof.” Often, in these cases, an agency can assign one account executive to be your company’s point person for all of these services.

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Lastly, don't forget to inquire whether an agency has a solid footing of experience serving clients in your industry. "Whether you sell floor coverings or computers, there will be less of a learning curve for the agency if it already understands and has worked with clients like you," Weintraub said. "That's very important to the success of a campaign."

Ask the agency

- Find out if an agency's work atmosphere is formal or casual, and decide which best fits your company's culture.
- Agencies' compensation practices vary. Inquire about fees and commission structures, and whether an agency typically receives bonuses based on ad campaign outcomes.
- Look for other clients' candid feedback on campaigns an agency has created for them.

Julia M. Johnson is a St. Louis freelance writer.

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