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# IDEAS AT WORK

## Improving Your B2B Marketing Strategy and Results

### Takeaways

- The best agencies want to understand your business first.
- Know whether you want help with strategy, execution, or both.
- Be clear on roles and responsibilities.

None of us can succeed on our own. We all need other people. On the football field, I needed coaches and teammates who completely bought into what we were doing. We need partners who can make us better.

As I've built partnerships over the years, I've learned that I only want to work with people who want to work with me. If somebody doesn't believe in what our organization is doing, then even if the deal looks good on paper, it won't work. Trust and commitment have to be at the foundation.

This article from one of our most trusted partners provides great advice for finding the right marketing agency. I encourage you to keep it in mind the next time you're looking for a partner to help grow your business.



*Jon Tarkenton*

# Improving Your B2B Marketing Strategy and Results

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For leaders of B2B companies, marketing is a controversial subject. The sales cycle is long, and the investment you need to make is so significant, that conventional consumer marketing tactics don't make sense.

With the explosion of digital marketing techniques and data, B2C marketing is easier – and more transactional. Meanwhile, B2B leaders face increasing competition, increasing noise, but little guidance on how best to promote their brand and market their product or service.

It's no surprise that many B2B leaders choose to bring in an outside marketing expert for help. Whether that's an individual consultant or an entire agency, their experience can be extremely valuable. It can also be a colossal waste of money. So, what can you do to make sure a partnership with a marketing firm reaps real benefits?



## Finding the Right Partner

Joining forces with a marketing agency is a little like planning for a great marriage. If you want a successful relationship, you have to find the right partner.

There are many agencies and consultants vying for your business; the challenge is discerning when you're in front of a genuine potential partner, versus an impostor. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

The conversation should unfold in a certain order. A partner truly interested in multiplying your growth and footprint won't start by talking about their capabilities, fees, and ideas. They should pummel you with questions, one after the other, to get a firm grasp on your business as it currently stands.

Ideal partners are also slower to say "Yes." They should vet you, as much as you vet them. An agency that quickly says "Yes" to solving any problem you mention is a bad sign. An agency that promises a magic pill or a quick fix is, by definition, a bad idea. Run away.

One red flag is when a potential partner wants a paid advertising budget from the get-go. In most cases an agency needs to spend time learning your business and your brand voice, and gain some organic success before spending substantially for traffic. Be wary of a marketing firm that wants to shoot before you aim.

We all want results fast, especially when we make a significant investment. But agencies that are willing to explain their timeline and temper your expectations of a quick fix are usually the ones to trust.



### **Building a Change-Friendly Culture**

Beware of being penny-wise and pound-foolish. Agencies that promise to overhaul your entire marketing strategy for a surprisingly low monthly retainer often make up the difference in a million extra fees and add-ons. Be sure you know how you will be charged, what's included in the contract, and what to expect in your monthly bill.

The agency's reviews should paint a holistic and consistent picture. All marketing agencies worth their salt will have plenty of glowing referrals. Bonus points for you, if you can find a partner willing to share a negative review, perhaps from a recent client who fired them.

But even referral calls with an agency's happy customers can be instructive if you ask the right questions. First of all, is this customer's business similar to yours? Not necessarily in the same industry, but at the same stage of growth, or with a similar ownership structure.

Make a point of asking, "What problems did they help you solve?" If their answers include the same problems you face, you're on the right track. But if these are not the same kinds of problems you have, proceed with caution.

Be honest with yourself about whether you need strategy or execution – or both. Some marketing consultants and firms provide "strategy only;" they devise a plan, but then you are responsible for implementing it. An excellent plan is, of course, the vital first step. But the devil, as they say, is in the details – so if you are not prepared or staffed to implement the plan, be sure the firm you hire offers both strategy and execution.

There are also plenty of marketing agencies designed to provide “execution-only.” They might be experts in SEO, for example, or social media management. These skill sets are certainly valuable, but they cannot be done effectively without the proper overall strategy. If you already have an approved strategy, help with execution may be fine. Be honest and clear about what you need, and what your internal staff has the expertise and time to handle.

### **The Secrets of a Successful Relationship**

Once you choose an agency, there are also a few secrets to make sure you get the most out of your investment.

The agency should advise you, and not the other way around. Remember, you are paying them for their experience, as well as their skill set and work product. If you have chosen the right partner, you should listen to their advice. You set the goals, but let them provide you with smarter, better, more effective ways to reach those goals. The fastest way to waste money on an outside consultant is to micro-manage them every step.

One of the best reasons to engage an outside firm is their broad range of skills. A full-service agency will have different team members who are dedicated to social media, copywriting, design, media buying, video, and more – a range of skills you can't possibly justify hiring on staff.

You know the problems facing your business; an outside agency knows the problems facing all the businesses they work with. Leverage that experience to your benefit by listening to and learning from how the agency solved problems for their other clients.

Be clear at the outset on roles and responsibilities. When you bring in a new partner, it's easy for new strategies and tactics to collide with established procedures, which can lead to political and cultural clashes. As leadership legend Peter Drucker would say, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

As a leader, you must ensure that everyone knows what their role is, and how decisions will be made. If overall strategy must be approved at the executive level, make sure your team knows that – and give the outside agency access to leadership. At the same time, don't tie everyone up in knots by insisting that the CEO approve every decision. That's a recipe for gridlock.



Empower your internal team to work with the agency so that everyone's time and expertise is maximized. If you have people in place to implement certain daily tasks, make sure your outside consultants know who they are, what they do, and how to support them.

A good marketing partner should depend on your staff – for ongoing clarity and insight, as well as carrying out the plan. The strategy you develop together should be hammered out by letting it intersect with (and adapt to) the realities your internal marketing team faces.

At the same time, one of the most valuable roles an outside vendor can play is to challenge existing assumptions or practices. A vendor can (and should) say things employees would feel uncomfortable bringing up. Don't shoot the messenger – if you already had all the answers, you wouldn't need an outside partner! A new idea or a different approach might be exactly what you need to super-charge your growth.

B2B firms can reap great benefits from tapping an outside agency, provided you choose a partner well suited to your business and your needs. Many B2B firms trust Tarkenton to find these partner agencies. If you'd like to talk on a deeper level about your marketing strategy, [schedule a complimentary call with a member of our business development team today.](#)



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