

The title is presented in a graphic format. The number '8' is inside a white thought bubble. The words 'QUESTIONS' and 'TO ASK' are inside a white speech bubble. The background is a golden-yellow sunburst pattern.

8 QUESTIONS TO ASK

The text is on a dark grey horizontal band. It is preceded by two white circles of different sizes, resembling a list item.

● ● your next marketing agency, partner, or freelancer

8 Questions to Ask Your Next Marketing Agency, Partner, or Freelancer

Sustaining and growing your business requires a solid marketing strategy, and achieving these goals requires expert attention. A number of missteps can happen before you ever begin working with a marketing partner. **When you're considering working with a marketing agency, partner, or freelancer, there are eight key questions you should ask.** Their answers will help you choose wisely where you invest your marketing budget, and can save you valuable time.

Have they done this before? Are you sure?

There's something to be said for experience. If it's YOUR marketing budget, do you really have the time or money to mess around? If the vendor you're considering hasn't done this before, let someone else break them in.

Do they have experience in your industry? Don't get us wrong, it's good to get a fresh, unbiased perspective. But if you are in a niche industry, it's really helpful to work with someone who understands all of the little nuances that come with your product or service.

So, what exactly *does* marketing experience look like?

- ✓ First, the potential marketing partner could have a lot of agency or freelance experience marketing a similar product or solution in your industry.
- ✓ Better yet, they could have actually been *employed in your industry*. Bonus points if they filled a marketing role in a relevant business or industry.

Are they (and their team) really marketers?

Typically, the reason you hire an outside marketing resource is because you're seeking expertise that you don't already have.

Did the potential marketing service provider wake up one morning, tired of their old career, and decide to become a freelance marketer? With no training? It happens more often than you think. They may have been a teacher, or tech support, or in sales – all great professions, and yes, full of life experience, but just not exactly the kind you'd look for in a marketing partner.

And don't get us wrong, we love graphic designers. Their talent is valuable for excellent marketing. But they usually are not *marketers* – there is a difference.

- Can the marketer provide a portfolio or work samples?
- Do they have a website? What about business cards? A legitimate business — *especially in marketing* — will have these very basic marketing tools.
- Can they provide quantifiable metrics, case studies, or success stories? Can they demonstrate that they have successfully helped their clients do things like grow demand, generate qualified leads, increase website traffic, improve email click-through rates, etc.?

A legitimate, reputable marketing vendor can do all of the above. A fly-by-night vendor cannot. Period.

When it's YOUR budget, do you really have time to mess around?

Let someone else break them in.

Once you are a client, who will work on your account?

The account manager or your first point of contact can really make or break a relationship.

We'll assume that if you've gotten satisfactory answers to the previous questions, the account manager also knows their stuff. But does this person know your business?

- Do they demonstrate curiosity and prioritize learning?
- Are they a good communicator, asking lots of good questions and listening to your answers?
- Do they have a track record of replying quickly and clearly to emails and phone calls?
- Are they patient with your questions?
- Do they take the time to explain time frames for project deliverables and milestones?
- They don't have to be your new best friend, but are they personable and easy to work with?
- Will they play nicely with your other vendors?

If you can, talk to someone else they've worked with. An agency with an excellent customer service reputation should be open and willing to share testimonials from satisfied clients, as well as their names and contact information. You can also tap into reviews online.

Is your potential marketing partner focused on your long-term strategy?

Even if you hire a marketing professional for a one-off project, are they tuned into how it fits in your overall, long-term strategy?

Do they bother to ask these questions? Really GREAT marketers do. They take time to really understand your business goals and how marketing will help you achieve them.

If you end up working with several independent marketing partners, over time, your efforts can become glaringly "disjointed." It's like having a bunch of puzzle pieces that don't necessarily fit together. Try as you might, you can't assemble a cohesive whole. At the end of the day, your external marketing resources are extensions of your team, and having members of your team working in silos never turns out well.

You need a comprehensive plan, someone to coordinate it, and team members who all understand how their contributions fit with your plan.

Will each project and piece of content produced be approached from an SEO mindset?

Nearly everything is online these days. SEO rules.

Eighty-nine percent of sales start with a search query, as reported in 2012 by Fleishmann-Hillard International Communications.¹ If that was true in 2012, just think how that percentage has likely increased since then.

What's more, 67 percent of the buyer's journey is completed before a prospect ever talks to someone from your company.² Your market is not waiting for you to tell them what they want to know. They expect to search and find most of it themselves using the devices they carry in their pockets.

You can see why it's absolutely crucial that your content be discoverable through a keyword search. Then once they find you, the actual human beings whom you hope to reach must find your content engaging enough to want to reach out to you. Delivering SEO results with effective storytelling takes skill.

The best marketing partner is one who does the research needed to arrive at a strong keyword strategy, then pushes to ensure your content meets this standard.

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¹Fleishman-Hillard, *2012 Digital Influence Index* (2012)

²SiriusDecisions, *B2B Buying Mythology Debunked* (2015)

How will they manage your marketing assets?

Do they have an automatic online backup system?

One of the worst (and most angering!) words a client can hear from their marketing partner is that a computer failure occurred — and that the vendor didn't have a backup. Seriously?!

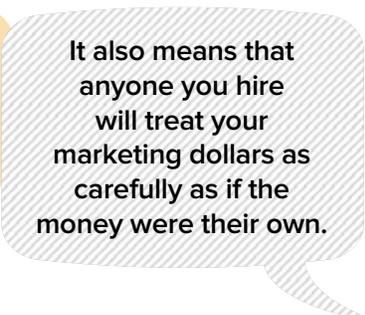
Disasters happen, whether natural, technological, or human error. Security safeguards and recovery procedures should be mandatory. And online backup services are a fairly small business expense.

If the marketing vendor is a legitimate business, they will have backups in place. Saving your data in two different places will help them, and you, weather the worst storm that can happen.

Unless you want to run the risk of losing irreplaceable files and having your project incapacitated for who knows how long as you seek to rebuild what's been lost, make sure you ask this question.



Good stewardship requires transparency.



It also means that anyone you hire will treat your marketing dollars as carefully as if the money were their own.

Will they be good stewards of your budget?

This means that anyone you hire will treat your marketing dollars as carefully as if the money were their own.

Good stewardship requires transparency. Budget integrity means everyone clearly knows and agrees on what is included, as well as what deliverables are expected from both the client and the vendor.

Of course, you don't have money to spend willy nilly, but on the subject of budgets... A good marketing service partner is worth their weight in gold. Resist the urge to think of marketing services as a commodity — shopping

for the cheapest option will likely shortchange your results, and therefore is not the wisest move.

You know this is true: store-brand white sandwich bread is less expensive than artisanal whole-grain sourdough, but your gut and your guests know the difference.

You can get a bargain chain-salon haircut or pay more for a high-end shaping – guess which one most likely will result in hair that flatters you and holds its style? Set up an out-of-the-box basic Squarespace website yourself, or hire a talented designer to custom build one for your needs? You can guess which likely delivers better results.

Do they have a portfolio? Can they provide metrics or case studies?

Have they successfully grown demand, generated leads, increased web traffic, and more?

What's in the fine print?

A reputable marketing company will ask you to sign a contract or other written agreement. It pays to read the fine print. Before you sign anything, make sure you read all – ALL— of the terms and conditions.

Make sure terms and conditions are written in a way that protects both parties.

- Who owns the rights to things like artwork when the work is completed? If you (the client) choose another marketing vendor, will this one be difficult about relinquishing your files?
- What happens if the relationship just isn't working out? How can you part ways? Will any penalties come into play?
- What is the vendor responsible for? What are the deliverables?
- What is the scope of the project? What's outside scope? Is there anything extra you'll be charged for?

- Are there protections in place for intellectual property, confidential information, and news not ready for public consumption? Language like this protects both parties.

If you have any doubt, run it by a lawyer. Yes, that costs money, but it will be less expensive than the entanglements you can find yourself in if you sign something you don't understand.

So, there you have it. These eight questions will help you establish the basis for a productive marketing partnership – or avoid a costly mistake. The best partnerships start with honesty and knowledge – ask away!

| About Lumen Marketing & Communications

Lumen Marketing & Communications specializes in inbound and account-based marketing — things like marketing content, emails, marketing automation, social media, branding, graphics, WordPress websites, Google Analytics, and more.

Our strategy-first marketing programs help clients generate demand, attract better leads, engage more effectively, and increase qualified sales opportunities that lead to measurable revenue.

Whether you need to augment your existing team on a single project, or a completely turnkey, outsourced marketing solution, Lumen can help.

Our Denver-based team serves clients in a diverse set of industries, including: startups, technology, software (SaaS), resorts and attractions, banking and finance, real estate, professional services, HR and talent management, and more. Visit lumenmarketing.com to learn more.