

How to Choose an Advertising Agency

Nov. 1990

by Charles Schoenhoef

The long process of choosing an advertising agency can be every bit as agonizing and insomnia-inducing as hiring a new partner for your company. The only difference is that this new partner might be made up of 30 to 40 bodies.

It's serious and important business and, like any marriage, should not be entered into lightly. During the course of my years in advertising, I've put together some tips, recounted here in an attempt to make your selection process bearable, possibly fun, and as successful as it can be. Before you read further, however, let me emphasize that you should trust your instincts above all else.

Courting Candidates. To begin with, you need to find candidates. This might well be the easiest part of the process; all you need to do is look around for ad campaigns you like and that seem to work. Then you contact a company whose product is advertised. More often than not, the company's public-relations people will be happy to identify the advertising agency they work with.

After you've selected a few candidates, sit down with the decision makers in your company and put together a list of the marketing and advertising services you feel you need. Ad agencies differ in the kinds of services they offer. Some just create ads. Others do market research, direct mail, packaging and collateral design (brochures, billboards, logos), promotional planning, and so on.

Once you've decided what you need, ask the agencies that seem to offer what you're looking for to come up with a list of what they view as your needs. Compare your list with theirs, bearing in mind that they have a good deal of experience to offer and may see your needs differently than you do. The best outside observers often notice things you've overlooked.

Matchmaking. Look for an agency that has experience with your general type of technology or product. But don't worry if it hasn't marketed a product exactly like yours before. Specifically relevant experience is of course helpful, but it's not crucial—the rules of marketing are essentially the same across product lines.

More significant is that the agency understands technology, has substantial experience working with high-tech clients, and—perhaps most important of all—is made up of talented individuals who catch on quickly.

Find an agency that can grow with you. Your agency should be the right size for your company (the agency's client base is a reliable barometer of size). Don't assume that a big agency is right simply because it has prestigious clients and flashy offices. If it's too large and has too many clients, you probably won't get the attention you want—especially if you're a small company developing your first ad campaigns. On the other hand, if the agency is too small, your company may soon outgrow it and you'll have to look for another one in a couple of years.

If you think you need international services, take the time to determine whether the agency can really provide them. Here too, ad agencies differ widely in what they offer. Some actually have offices abroad, and others simply have affiliates with whom they deal occasionally. Make sure you find out how your agency will handle your ad campaign in non-U.S. countries.

The Elements of Style. Review the agency's creative work carefully. This is obviously the most crucial step. Look at what the agency has come up with recently. Creative teams have a tendency to turn over, so make sure they're showing you their greatest and latest.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. For example, ask agency personnel to tell you how they came up with the ideas behind an ad campaign you like and think is particularly effective. Listen closely. Find out what the client wanted and how active that client was in the creative process. Ask them what kinds of budgets they had to work with. Keep in mind that all creative work is a combination of the advertising agency and client; try to separate the two so you can judge the agency fairly. You might then contact the client and ask the same questions.

Keep an eye out for a stylized or overly consistent look. Some agencies produce work that all looks the same. You're paying for ads that market your product, not the agency's identity. Look for a versatile assortment of work and a range of styles. (For more information on creating advertising, see "How to Create Effective Advertising," in the June 1990 issue of *Apple Direct*).

Meet as many of the individuals involved as you can. Ask who worked on the pieces that have caught your eye and whether they're still around. Find out who will be on your creative team. Some agencies have good-looking, fast-talking new-business teams that disappear once they've convinced you to sign up.

The people who will ultimately be responsible for your work and who are most important for you to meet are the creative director, who's responsible for the creative aspects of your ad campaign,

and the account supervisor, who's responsible for its overall management. Spend some time getting to know them before you make your decision. Also meet the copywriter, art director, and account executive who will be assigned to you—but keep in mind that it's not uncommon for a lean agency to hire new people once it's attracted a new account, especially a large one.

Again, hire people you like. Not only should you admire the work that this new partner, your agency, does, but you should also hire people you genuinely like and are going to enjoy working with daily. If you don't like the personalities of the people you're working with, chances are you're not going to want to be associated with their work. Advertising, incidentally, is supposed to be fun—and it's the people that tend to make it so.

Words Gets 'round. Talk to past and current clients. Call the agency's references and current clients—particularly ones that are about the same size as your company. Find out what they do and don't like about the agency. Does the agency respect their goals? Have their campaigns made any difference in sales?

Find out how much the agencies cost. Don't hire an agency unless you can afford it. Determine how much and what kind of work you want, and think about where you want your ads to appear. Keep in mind that media placements are expensive.

Ask about the agency's billing process, and make sure the agency understands your company's terms of payment. The last thing you want is to sign up with an agency only to find out later that it's out of your reach financially.

Don't ask for speculative creative work. Analyze an agency's work, but don't ask the agency to come up with an example of what it might do for you. This is not only a poor way to judge an agency, but it also wastes everybody's time and drains an agency's resources. If the agency hasn't had time to learn all about your product, it obviously won't be able to give you hard-hitting work.

Besides, an agency that's busy creating hypothetical advertising for you is neglecting its current paying clients. Remember: The agency is wooing you, and the courtship of any relationship is rarely representative of the marriage. The best way to judge how you will be treated as a client is to quietly observe how the current clients are being treated. What makes you think that once you've signed on and started paying, the agency won't put you on the back burner, using your money to produce speculative creative work for other new business?

Let It Do its Work. Once you've hired an agency, trust your decision and trust your agency. Give your creative team the time and freedom necessary to learn about your business and to do the job you've hired it for. If you've chosen thoughtfully and expressed your needs clearly, leave the agency alone and wait for it to dazzle you at the next presentation. If you let it happen, this can be the beginning of a very rewarding relationship.

Charles Scheonoeft is President and Creative Director of Transphere International, an international advertising agency headquartered in San Francisco.

© 1990 Apple Computer, Inc.