

The 7 Biggest Warning Signs That the Advertising Agency You're Working With Is a Poor Fit ... and How to Find the Marketing Communications Firm That's RIGHT for Your Needs

At this stage in your business, you recognize the importance of putting a good “face” on your company. Professionally designed marketing materials can help you build a brand ... communicate your values ... and most importantly, increase response rates.

Hiring a marketing communications firm is a significant investment ... and a significant gamble. If you hire the wrong firm, you could end up with a brand identity that doesn't resonate with your customers ... confusion about what you're offering ... and even materials that are destined to fail.

To really know whether the firm you're working with or considering hiring is a good fit, you must be able to see through the smoke and mirrors that surround many advertising agencies. Here are 7 insider secrets to help you spot the “bad” agencies ... and instead find a marketing communications firm that can deliver exactly what you want and need.

Warning Sign #1: A shelf of shiny awards.

Advertising agencies love to show off their awards. And you logically assume that the gleaming trophies and plaques are accurate measures of the agency's skill.

Unfortunately, that's not always the case. The dirty secret that few advertising professionals like to admit is that awards like the Clio, Mobius® and ADDY® recognize “creative excellence.” And creativity – at least as defined in these competitions – isn't tied directly to results.

But results are what you want. You want to generate leads ... not make visitors think “How cool!” when they hit your site. You want to make sales ... not make prospects laugh when they read your ad.

If the firm you're working with has won awards for creativity in the past, chances are they'll want to do it again. Your precious project will be viewed as a vehicle to which they can ride to advertising glory.

So instead of getting starry-eyed when ad execs proudly roll out their awards, ask a few pointed questions about advertising outcomes. Look for firms that can prove that their work produced results. And reserve your respect for awards given to recognize marketing that generated leads and sales ... not giggles.

“The ad you created for us increased response rates by 200%. To date, it's generated more than \$4,000,000 in revenue. I'm so glad to see that the Chicago Area of Direct Marketing gave you a Tempo Award in recognition of your ability to create marketing materials that work.”

~ Marc Rosenberg, General Manager, Marcus Evans, San Diego, California

“The 7 Biggest Warning Signs That the Advertising Agency You're Working With Is a Poor Fit ... and How to Find the Marketing Communications Firm That's RIGHT for Your Needs” is provided compliments of Bohringer Creative, Inc., a marketing communications firm that develops world-class brands for small- and medium-sized businesses. For more information about finding and hiring the right marketing communications firm for your business, contact Principal Gary Bohringer at 1.630.270.6635 or garyb@adrepairman.com.



Warning Sign #2: A patronizing attitude.

You've successfully run your own company for years now. So why does your advertising agency treat you like a dummy?

Too often, ad professionals act as if marketing is a mystical science that only a few wizards – namely, them – are able to understand and control.

That's ridiculous. You may not know the finer points of effective ad design. And you may not know the intricate details of building an eye-catching, fast-loading web site.

But you know your industry. You know your competitors. And you know what messages your clients will respond to ... and what not to say.

The bottom line is your advertising agency should listen to you.

That means asking a lot of questions before beginning your project. Look for a firm that does thorough research into the type of image you want to project ... what your prospects are looking for when shopping for your product or service ... and how you're different and better than your competitors.

It also means communicating a vision for your design in plain English ... not convoluted, fluffy, philosophical dissertations. The ideal marketing communications firm will solicit and incorporate your feedback. And then go out and create marketing materials that succinctly transmit your benefits and appeal to your audience.

"Gary, this was the easiest the design process has ever been. You're the first designer I've worked with who has been interested in how my product works ... and you really listened to my answers. The concepts you gave us were dead-on – perfect 10's all around!"

~ Cheryl O'Donoghue O'Donoghue, Marketing Executive, Ulysses Learning, Charlotte, North Carolina

Warning Sign #3: Ignoring your feedback.

Going hand in hand with warning sign #2 is your ad agency's deliberate disregard of your feedback.

It's not a fun situation to be in. You finally see concepts for your marketing materials, and they're nothing like what you had envisioned. But when you offer input or criticism, you just get a patronizing smile and verbal equivalent of a pat on the head. Then the "pros" do what they want anyway.

You can gauge how much respect an agency will give your feedback by testing the waters during initial interviews. Offer suggestions for what you want and judge for yourself how well your ideas are received. Ask how involved the typical client gets in the design process ... or better yet, ask to talk to a few clients yourself.

Your design team should listen to your feedback and then offer suggestions for incorporating your suggested change – or, alternatively, offer a logical argument for why the materials shouldn't be changed.

For exceptional marketing materials, you want a marketing communications firm that can balance your input with their expertise. In other words, you don't want a designer who will do exactly as you say, nor a designer that completely ignores your input. The best materials result when a designer hears what you're saying, then uses your feedback as the basis for their own stellar design.

"Gary, thanks for taking the time to listen to my suggestions for revising the brochure design, as well as explaining why we'd be better off leaving some of the elements as-is. Your explanation made perfect sense, and we ended up with a better brochure because of it."

~ Kathy Rezny, President, York Furrier, Elmhurst, Illinois

Warning Sign #4: Charging too much for too little value.

You've been inside the hallowed halls of advertising agencies. So you've seen where a huge chunk of your hard-earned money goes.

To the glass-walled offices the creative directors live in. To the artsy, but impossibly uncomfortable, chairs in the lobby. To the designer coffee you're served while you sit around the highly polished conference table.

You have to ask yourself ... "Am I really getting better creative materials because my designer is surrounded by chrome, glass and exotic wood?"

Probably not. But you are guaranteed to get a high price tag. Because somebody has to pay for the wining, the dining, and the impressive address ... and that somebody is you.

So if you don't want to pick up the tab for your account exec's deluxe, lumbar-friendly throne while you toil the days away in typist's chair that should have been tossed during the Regan Administration, consider marketing communications firms located in less flashy locations.

Shop the suburbs, not the big cities. Be open to meeting over coffee, not over dinner at a big-name steakhouse. Look beyond the Armani suits and Mercedes to consider the equally talented folks wearing jeans and driving Hondas. Because ultimately, you're footing the bill. And would you rather invest your money in someone else's clothes, car and office ... or just get the expertise and talent?

"Gary, thanks for opening my eyes! You've shown me that the type of environment a marketing professional works in has nothing to do with the quality of creative. After seeing the impressive work you do, I was expecting glitzy, glamorous digs in a fashionable part of town. But your office is very modest ... and I never walk away wondering how much more I'm forking over to pay for the overhead. Bohringer Creative delivers value for the money."

~ Jackie Koglin, Principal, Ask It In A Basket, Park Ridge, Illinois

Warning Sign #5: So-so design work.

It's easy to give the OK to design work that's clean, even if it's uninspiring. After all, if you knew how to make it better, how to make it pop off the page, you'd do it yourself.

But just because you don't have the necessary technical skill to create attention-grabbing ads, brochures, web sites and other marketing materials doesn't mean you should accept average work from your design team.

All marketing materials share the same basic ingredients – graphics, text, and color. It's how these elements are combined that makes the difference between a postcard that flies towards the trash and one that sends the prospects running for the phone.

When choosing a marketing communications firm, request samples – lots of them. Then ask about response rates. The best creative materials aren't just those that grab your eye. The best creative pieces are the one that achieved their goals of making sales, generating leads, or raising audience recognition of the company.

"Gary, excellent work, once again. I'm continually amazed by your ability to take a few basic ideas, some copy and a photo or two, and create absolute magic. The extra 10% that you deliver sets you apart from the other, average design professionals ... and consistently translates into more leads and sales for us."

~ Marie Francis Barry, President, New Barry Publishing, Chicago, Illinois

Warning Sign #6: Dragging project timelines.

Getting a marketing piece created by an ad agency can take weeks, if not months. No wonder. Just think of the countless steps that must be scheduled: strategy sessions, brainstorming sessions, concept presentations, copy sessions, design sessions, critiques, tweaking and revisions.

The more layers there are in your agency, the more schedules must be coordinated, the more approvals must be secured ... and the longer it takes to get your project done.

If you want to see results in this lifetime, you need projects completed in a reasonable timeframe. So shop for a firm that has minimal layers ... two, maybe three at most. Ideally, you should have access to the firm's head honcho; at the very least, your account executive should have report directly to the company's top manager.

Also demand direct access to the creative professionals who will be handling your work. Not only does this ensure that the designer understands explicitly what you want, but you'll no longer waste precious days for your account executive to sit down and talk to the design team.

"Gary, what a refreshing change it was to be able to sit down and discuss with you directly what I wanted from my brochure vs. hoping an account executive would remember and correctly communicate my wishes. When you left my office, I knew that I could safely check you off my to-do list without fear you'd be coming back for clarification days or weeks later."

~ Donald Thorp, President, Greenfield Thorp, Carol Stream, Illinois

Warning Sign #7: Not delivering print and web design.

Having a web site is practically a requirement of doing business today. At the very least, having an online storefront adds a sense of legitimacy to your business. Ideally, your site will enable a new mode of communicating with your customers and generate revenue.

Yet despite the popularity of online marketing, some agencies still don't offer web site design and hosting in-house. Instead, they contract with a variety of outside programmers and designers ... and the quality of the creative these subcontractors produce can be sub-par.

Even agencies that offer in-house site design rarely use the same people to design both print and web materials. The worst-case scenario is that you end up with two different "looks" – one for the real world and one for the virtual world. And trying to resolve the situation usually means more review time, more costly revisions ... even developing tedious written design standards.

Here's the easier (and better) way to ensure your print and web identities are the same: choose a marketing communications firm that has multi-talented designers on staff who can navigate the print and web worlds with equal ease. You'll save time, and because your materials have the same look and feel, they'll help generate instant recognition of your company name and brand.

"Gary, your efforts at branding my web sites to ensure consistency with my print identity have really paid off. I can't tell you the number of clients who have commented that www.HambyCommunications.com 'looks just like your business cards' ... and www.SeminarMarketingPro.com leaves little doubt that it's my site, as well. That 'instant recognition' helps me get more bang for my buck when I'm marketing. Now my on- and offline marketing efforts can build off of each other, and I can more effectively use a multi-channel approach to building my client list."

~ Jenny Hamby, President, Hamby Communications, Inc., Plainfield, Illinois