

Guide to Finding Your Next Digital Marketing + PR Partner

mixte

Congratulations – you're thinking about hiring a digital marketing + public relations agency.

This is an important step, and one that you should consider carefully. **Our team rides the divide between traditional agency and in-house communications director** (we call it our extension-of-staff model), so we have a unique perspective on what you should be asking and why you should ask it to help you find your values-aligned match.

Truth is, you will speak to a lot of people who will tell you they can learn your industry or they can work with businesses and nonprofits. We know because we used to say it too. But truth is—you are better off finding the right team with the right experience because they are out there.

We want to make things easier for you, so **we've created this guide to help you evaluate your options** and give you peace of mind in your decision-making interview.

But first, who is this guide for?

Community activist
Funding justice
Big investor in community well being

As well as anyone who:

Feels like they could be having a bigger impact but doesn't know where to start
Feels overwhelmed by digital options
Understands power of effective communications
Smart people who don't try to do it all themselves

This guide is three parts:

Before You Begin Your Search

Let's identify your needs to ensure you find relevant, helpful proposals in the first phase.

Things to Ask Agencies

What should you ask of the agency during the proposal and presentation stages? We included a list of questions to consider during the vetting stage.

Gut Check

It is the answers to these questions at a visceral level that can help you make the final decision.

Let's get started.

PART 1

Before You Begin Your Search



Know your budget

Get dialed-in proposals that allow you to compare what you receive from each agency relative to your budget and how those agencies approach work within that budget range.



Understand your goals

Ensuring that your agency can service your needs starts with a set of clearly defined goals that you and your team would like to accomplish.



Identify your in-house contact

Remember that PR agencies don't necessarily take things off your plate – we need input, access and connections, and these require attention from someone internally who has experience and decision making authority.



Set your process

Make sure your team has internal agreement on the development of your Request for Proposals: who needs to be in the decision-making process? Also, clarify your timeline and agency vetting steps to be transparent with your potential partners.



Identify the decision makers

Invite the right people to the appropriate phases of your agency vetting process.



Prioritize the characteristics you want to see in your partner

Location, team diversity, language skills, company size or depth, work culture, experience, current clients, values, and types of expertise.



Ask for agency referrals

The people you trust or companies of similar size with effective digital communications may have trustworthy agencies to recommend.



Understand how agencies self-identify

Public affairs or advocacy, lifestyle, retail, entertainment, product promotion, travel, nonprofit, multicultural or community-driven work. Then there's also:

SEO
Digital marketing
Public relations
Social media
Digital organizing

Influence
Content marketing
Website development
Branding
Video creation

PART 2

Things to Ask Agencies

You can ask all or a selection of these. You certainly should ask other questions, too. Most importantly, ensure the final set of questions determined in this phase match the core needs and characteristics that you defined in the Before You Begin Your Search phase.

Size and make up

- How many people work at the agency?

- Who will be our main point of contact and why?

- Does the staff speak relevant languages to your business?

- What's the experience level of your account team members, and what are their respective roles?

- How much of the CEO's or leadership's time do you get on an ongoing basis?

Logistics

- How do they report to clients, and how often does this occur?

- How do they work with your in-house communications person?

- What is the process when they have interested media ready to interview your company?

- How do they manage your budget—what does the process look like if they're going over or under budget?

- Tell us about client work similar to what we need.

- Ask a scenario question: if we want to do XYZ, how would you approach that?

- How do they handle courageous conversations?

- What's the process to address your concerns about the team or the results, should you have any?

Services

- What is the suite of core services that they provide as an agency?

- What is their onboarding process for a new client? And how does this result in a strategic plan?

- How strong are their local media relations and national media contacts?

- How do they measure or quantify outcomes and results?

- What happens if you have an approved plan, and your marketing priorities change?

- How do you ensure brand voice consistency across all assets?

- How do you ensure all efforts are moving toward big picture client goals?

Rank from 1-10 their experience in these different categories. 1 should be most experience and 10 should be least experience (shorten or lengthen the list to match your needs).

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Multicultural or multi-lingual | <input type="checkbox"/> Organic social |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lifestyle or Product | <input type="checkbox"/> Paid social |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public Affairs | <input type="checkbox"/> SEO |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grassroots | <input type="checkbox"/> Media relations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Issue-based | <input type="checkbox"/> Events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Non-profit | <input type="checkbox"/> Influencer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business to business | <input type="checkbox"/> Content |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crisis communications | <input type="checkbox"/> Email |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Website |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Branding |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Search ads |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Pay per click |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Video production |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Native ads |

Fees

- What are their hourly rates? Do they offer a blended rate?

- How do they make use of your monthly retainer fee? How do they communicate what they're working on to you?

- How do you know that you're getting your money's worth?

- What items do they mark up and by how much?

- Do they have a nonprofit rate?

- What additional costs may pass through?

- What are payment terms?

- Will they provide a time report tracked to funding codes?

PART 3

Gut Check

When sizing up agencies generally, consider these categories as the final gut check to the more matter-of-fact information gathered in the interviewing phase.

- What's the cultural fit with your company?

- How well did they respond to your needs or concerns?

- What's their experience relative to your business?

- What does this agency stand for and would you feel proud to have them on your team?

- Does the agency stand for values like yours and how do these values play out in their actions?

- Is their proposal custom created to address your needs or a cookie cutter approach offered to all clients?

- How will their creative thinking service your needs?

- How well does their size and corporate structure fit your company's size and structure?

- Does this agency have clients or bodies of work that are in conflict with the goals that you're trying to achieve?

- How much do they understand about your industry?

- What does this agency's reputation say about you?

FAQs

Is it OK to ask the agency for a three-month contract to test the waters before determining a long-term fit?

We're not big fans of this approach. If this feels safer or more comfortable to you, then it would appear to us that you did not fully consider the questions in the Before You Begin Your Search phase.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of commitments – a launch phase and a brand-building phase. Many agencies are great at one- to three-month public relations programs to launch a new product, service or company. Other agencies are great at long-term brand-building, revenue driving educational or strategic programs that could run consistently for years on end.

Be clear on what you need, and find the right partner to fit your need. If you're looking at long-term communications needs, know that communication is often a long-term investment that takes time for efforts and momentum to build, in which case a three-month test contract might be testing the wrong things and unnecessarily stress your internal and external teams. Instead, what we may recommend is making a long-term commitment, but create your contract with a 30-day cancelation clause to ensure that you can stop services if the team isn't the right fit for you.

Can I ask the agency to write a plan or strategy for a fictional launch as part of the vetting process?

The short answer is yes. You can do whatever you want, but we wouldn't recommend this step. This runs a thin line between interviewing an agency and getting work for free. The value that outside consultants bring is strategic thinking, creative processes and planning. When you ask for this for free, you're undermining that value and will likely lose interest from talented agencies (for instance, this one would decline to participate). Agencies come in all sizes, and for agencies of our size (18 people), we don't have the staff time to do work for free. We are also committed to paying people their value (for example, we pay our interns), and we expect that same respect in return. If you want to see how potential agencies think about your particular challenges, then build those questions or exercises into your vetting process, but don't ask for agencies to give away their secret sauce for free.

Is public relations still relevant? Do people even read the newspaper anymore?

Public relations can be a powerful strategy for many businesses, but it doesn't mean that it's the right fit for every single business. To determine if public relations should be an integral part of your marketing or communication mix, it's up to you to determine your audiences and your goals for those audiences, so that you can determine if public relations is the right channel to reach them. If you have determined that PR is one of the right tools for you, it doesn't mean that you are only focusing on traditional media relations (placements in print newspapers, on the radio or on TV). Your right public relations campaign could be an integrated mix of media relations, blogging, social media, email marketing, events and community integration.

How much is the right budget for digital marketing + media relations?

Only you can answer this question. If you cast a wide net for proposals, you'll get budget recommendations across the board – hourly rates as low as \$75/hour to monthly retainer fees in the tens of thousands. The difference between the two is how much experience comes with those hourly rates and how much time you're buying. It's up to you to find the right mix of experience at the right budget to help you implement the right campaign to reach the right audiences to reach your goals. If you don't know the right budget, lead with your goals and see what agencies come back to you with.

How will I know what successful digital communications look like?

It will be different for everyone. For some, it may be changing hearts and minds about a social issue. For others, it may be driving action in new audiences or engaging existing ones. Whatever it is, you and your agency can identify the key indicators of success to measure your progress as well as you'll feel good.

What about a pay-for-play model?

While this may feel nimbler or price secure, we don't think this is the best route to go for strategic communications. You want your person thinking about your best, most effective strategy to help you meet your goals, not which will have the highest impressions to help them get paid more. Especially in today's overcrowded digital realm, high circulation doesn't translate to effective exposure.

What if I don't have a lot of money to buy ads?

It's ok. Neither do we. What's important is that we understand your goals and work backwards with your resources at hand (money, time, and assets) to create the best plan to reach those goals. We've worked with paid budgets as low as \$50 and guess what? It worked.

**We would love to
be one of the digital
communications
+ PR agencies you
consider.**

Mixte is based on doing business the right way with good people who want nice things for our communities. We're grounded on the simple principles that meet at the intersection of small business, community, sustainable choices, healthy living and fun.

Much like our clients, we believe - and have seen - that social justice organizations and small businesses have the power to influence, educate and lead our communities for good. **We're proud of our extensive work crafting and telling stories** that change the narrative, for local, state, national and international advocacy organizations and businesses that are invested in their communities.

Want to learn more? Visit gomixte.com or contact us at mixte@gomixte.com, (619) 732-0790 x526. We can't wait to hear from you.

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