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Choosing the Right Ad Agency for Your Hotel

It's estimated that there are well over 10,000 firms spread throughout the United States that call themselves advertising agencies and that number is growing every day. Why are there so many? Because it's easy to be an ad agency. All you have to do is say, "We're an ad agency." Here, you try it. Simply repeat after me, "We're an ad agency." There's no special training or certification or licensing necessary. Anyone who wants to be in the profession can, merely by saying the magic words, "We're an ad agency."

The proliferation of advertising agencies, marketing firms, marketing consultants, interactive agencies, database marketing shops, and all other forms of communications-related companies plying for your business means that today's hotelier needs to make their choices wisely and apply the legal principle of *Caveat Emptor*—buyer beware.

Choosing an agency should be viewed in exactly the same way that you would a business partner, and done with the same scrutiny, due diligence, inquisitiveness, proof of performance, honesty, candor, humor and affection.

So where do you start? The first thing you need to do is to find appropriate agencies to consider. Call your colleagues at other hotels and businesses and ask who they work with and who they might recommend. Websites like www.AgencyComPile.com and www.agencyfinder.com can help you identify agencies with experience in your industry or who are located in your area. The American Association of Advertising Agencies and The Advertising Redbooks (www.redbooks.com) are also viable starting points and publications like *Advertising Age* and *Adweek* regularly cover the industry and can also help you identify appropriate options. If your account is large enough to warrant it, you can even elect to hire an agency search consultant who will work (for a fee) to help you source and select the agency best suited to your needs.

Assuming that you've surfaced a worthy group of candidates, what should you be looking for?

Number one is to know what you want. Don't be that client who smiles and says "You're the expert." If you like something about the agency, tell them. If you don't, tell them that too. If you can't speak to them openly and honestly before you hire them, what makes you think you'll be able to do so once you hire them?

Make sure the size of the agency fits the size of your account. Unless you're an unusually tasty fish, you don't want to get lost swimming in a huge ocean. Big agencies can't afford to divert top talent to little accounts. And should your account require extra attention, it's much easier for a big shop to walk away from your business than a little agency that really counts on your revenues to keep their agency afloat.

Look for great strategy and great creative—great creative as defined by what you feel comfortable with. Too many clients pick an agency because they love that wild creative, then freak out when they see their brand portrayed in such a manner. And don't be afraid to ask what they know about your business or their perceptions of your property or your position in the marketplace. It will be a test of how much thought they've been giving your business and it will give you a deeper look into how they process information and think strategically.

See past the black suits, heavy rimmed dark glasses and goatees. Judge them on what they say and do, not what they look like. Talent can come in all shapes and sizes including those that dress like Goth rock stars. Take special interest in meeting and talking to people who will actually be working on your account

and gauge the comfort and style that permeates the conversations. Remember, the goal is to find people whom you really feel can help to grow your business. If they also prove to be the type of people with whom you want to hang out with and have a beer it's a bonus, not a requirement.

Look carefully at what they have done for others and look for parallels in their case studies to your own. Make sure that their experience and skills are relevant to your business situation and that they can translate to you and your needs.

Use your bullshit detector. If the agency's marketing materials are filled with jargon about processes, if their pitch is filled with platitudes and hyperbole, run.

Make sure the work matches up with the promises. Too many agencies talk it much better than they do it. You're a much better judge of creative than you think.

Get references. Ask clients how much they see of the people promised to them, what the agency is like to deal with day to day, do they listen, how they come through in the clutch, are they people you'd want to spend time with? And don't be afraid to ask for a list of past clients. They'll be able to give you a unique and candid perspective without worrying about the repercussions of saying something negative or being too honest.

Don't ask for speculative creative work if you can help it. These agencies don't know you yet, so how can they figure out the solution to all your marketing issues in a week? Too often, the spec work process rewards the agency that makes the best guess. Asking an agency to give you work for free is like your hotel being asked to set up an entire banquet hall for a wedding just so a perspective bride can see if it's a place she might like to have her event. You wouldn't do it. Why should they?

Make sure the agency is truly integrated. Too many agencies still have different media groups and departments set up as distinct profit centers or business units. They will each be fighting for their share of your marketing dollar and not thinking about your overall brand. Today's marketplace requires your agency to be nimble and to take a holistic approach to marketing that embraces everything from direct sales and direct marketing to advertising and e-marketing.

As you narrow your search, spend the time to meet with the agency several times. I'm amazed at how this vitally important decision so often hinges on one two-hour meeting. Anyone can look great for an hour or two (think of someone on a date or performing on stage). It's only over time that you can really get to see an agency's strengths and flaws. Plus, make sure you spend time visiting the agency's offices. The style, energy, laughter and buzz of their work environments are often a true reflection of the type of agency that you'll be choosing.

Don't jerk the agencies around just because you can. Sure they're all smiling when you say you've changed the budget parameters or added a few things after a scope-of-work or compensation number is decided on. They smile for a living. But they deeply resent it, and it comes back to you in lots of little ways. Be clear and concise regarding the parameters of your business and the expectations you have for your agency.

Treating agencies as your business partner starts from the moment you invite them to participate in pitching your account and you should be able to feel a relationship getting progressively stronger throughout your selection process. If you've been paying attention, asking the right questions, and committing the proper amount of time required to make this important decision, the right choice should soon be readily apparent.

Finally, after you've picked an agency, don't be a chicken. Call up the others and tell them exactly why you didn't select them. Don't hold back. They're grown-ups and the smart ones really want to know so they

can improve. And what about those that don't like getting the feedback? Well, aren't you glad you didn't pick them?