

WHY SHOULD YOU USE AN EXTERNAL AGENCY?

Many Local Authorities are facing increased pressure to use internal resources to develop advertising and communication campaigns, despite increasing evidence to show that using a specialised agency yields far greater results.

Stephen Bates runs Page Advertising and Communications Ltd, an agency fast gaining a reputation as one the leading social and public sector agencies in the UK. He explains here the benefits of using external services of this type as well as providing some useful tips in so doing.

Advertising, design and many other marketing communication services are often viewed with a degree of, at worst; scepticism, at best; a necessary evil. In truth, a vital element in determining the success of any initiative is the quality with which it is communicated to the target audience. Scepticism creeps in when those ads fail to deliver and when one looks at the reasons for failure, a common issue across most below par campaigns is that they were developed using often stretched, internal resources.

So, those vast savings that were achieved by doing it yourself, actually end up being a huge waste.

The range of skills and experiences an agency provides can never hope to be found in any organisation – public or corporate. For example, at Page, we work across many business sectors with clients of varying sizes, from small, start-up enterprises, global blue-chip concerns, local and central government. We see and experience first hand, how different types of organisations work and can identify those elements of campaign that work better than others and why. We employ over 50 people who have similar experiences in other agencies, so, when we're commissioned to develop a campaign, we can use all of this experience to develop an approach that really cannot fail.

Quite often, the only experience an internal resource can call upon when developing a new campaign is what they did on the previous one.

It's possible to identify the key benefits of using an agency as follows:

EXPERIENCE

As described earlier, most agencies work across many business sectors and thus provide a wealth of experience in developing successful

campaigns. They can approach projects with a far wider base of knowledge than can ever be attained from an internal resource.

SPEED

Good agencies can provide rapid execution of ideas into reality. Internal resources can often be stretched in many directions, which invariably means deadlines get stretched as well.

COST EFFECTIVENESS

Agencies can deliver far greater value through efficient purchasing and trade knowledge. For example, we recently saved a client several thousand pounds simply by reducing the width of a brochure by 5mm!

RESOURCES and CONTACTS

The address book in any decent agency will be brimming with contacts for all manner of services and products meaning you don't have to go traipsing through the yellow pages looking for them.

SIMPLICITY

Planning and implementing a campaign takes a lot of time, energy and logistical balancing. It's likely that when you took your job in local government, there was nothing in the job description about running marketing programmes so why complicate matters now? Agencies can provide a simple, one-stop-shop solution.

Agencies are a vital ingredient in communicating with a target audience effectively. They exist and should be used. Many local authorities have excellent internal PR, print and design departments but by their very nature, even the best cannot hope to provide the level and breadth of skills offered by external agencies.

One barrier that often exists when considering using an agency is how to actually go about selecting one. Here's a few tips on the best approach;

Who to go to?

Make an initial list of potential agencies. Ask for recommendations from colleagues, look at mailings you may have received.

Credentials Presentation

Invite the selected agencies to make a credentials presentation to you and your colleagues. This is an opportunity for the agency to tell you what they've done, how they do things and for you to assess the quality of their work. The number of agencies you select is down to personal preference but ideally, they should all be seen in a single day.

Selection Criteria

There are a number of important criteria that should be used when making the selection:

Experience

Does the agency understand the subject? Have they worked on public sector projects? Can they demonstrate positive results from previous campaigns they have developed?

Resources

Smaller agencies may appear very keen to win the work but do they have the resources to deliver? What happens when the Account Manager is on holiday or the Designer, off sick?

Do you like them?

Marketing and communications is all about people and that starts with the client/agency relationship. For that relationship to flourish into an effective campaign, you and your team will need to feel comfortable working with them.

Avoid the tender process

Marketing services (advertising, design, strategy, etc) is not something that can easily and effectively be tendered for as it dilutes the creative process and can often lead to the contract being awarded to the agency most adept at completing a tender application, not necessarily the most suitable for the work. There exists almost endless solutions to briefs, all of which may yield the required results. Tendering also forces a distance between the client and agency at precisely the time when closeness is paramount to its ultimate success.

If tendering cannot be avoided, keep the number of agencies invited to tender to a minimum (certainly no more than 4), and always provide a budget for the contract.

The bottom line is that an agency will deliver a better campaign that yields greater results from anything attempted in house. It'll also cost less in the long run. Proof? I hear you ask!

Just two of many examples; last year, we helped one local authority increase it's recycling rate from 4% to 17% in just 7 weeks. And in 12 months, we helped increased tourism in one county by 33%.

So, if you need to develop a communications campaign that truly delivers, then the use of an agency is really the logical solution.

Stephen Bates is the Managing Director of Page Advertising and Communications Ltd. They work with local authorities and the public sector across the UK, developing highly effective campaigns. If you would like to discuss this article or any projects, you can call Stephen on 01268 271858 or email: stephenb@pagemediagroup.com Their website is www.pagemediagroup.com and www.page-group.co.uk/waste