

# Online marketing agencies: love 'em or leave 'em?

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



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On HGTV's hit show unsatisfied homeowners are given the chance to move to a new house or to renovate the one that they currently have. Some participants on the show choose to sell even after renovation, but many are surprised to find that their current home really was what they wanted... after a few fixes.

Business owners often find themselves in a similar situation when it comes to online marketing agencies.

Many companies are dissatisfied with their current agency. In fact, , 50 percent of companies that outsource their online marketing have changed agencies at least once in the last two years. But, much as with homes, sometimes it makes more sense to fix the problems with your current agency than take a risk on a whole new one.

In this article, we'll take a look at some of the best ways to make a “fixer upper” relationship with your agency into a productive partnership -- as well as some of the signs that it's time to just get out.

## **Expectations: Your blueprint for success.**

One of the most common reasons that businesses decide to look for a new marketing agency is the fact that they're not getting the results that they want. Of course, to get what you want you have to know what you want. Otherwise, how do you know if you're getting it or not?

Expectations are like the blueprint for your working relationship. If well-constructed and well-communicated, they keep you and your agency on the same page, working to achieve the same things.

If not, they can be the source of a lot of conflict.

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So, how do you know if you're setting good expectations? Let's take a look at what constitutes a good expectation.

Basically, good expectations are: 1) clear, 2) achievable and 3) agreed upon.

### **1. Clear expectations.**

It might seem strange to talk about expectations as if you draw them up and refine them. Normally, “expectations” seem like something you *just have* ... right?

Would it help if I called them “goals?”

When it comes to business, expectations and goals are virtually synonyms. If you expect an employee to come into work on time, it should be their goal to meet that expectation. Similarly, if you expect your marketing agency to behave a certain way or achieve a given objective, that should be a goal for your agency.

Now, we've probably all heard a few lectures about setting business goals. One of the keys to a good goal is specificity.

If you just want your agency to "make my marketing better," it will be hard for them to know where to start and it will be hard for you to tell if they've succeeded. An agency could do its best but still seem incompetent if it doesn't know what's really important to you. On the other hand, if you have well-defined, measurable goals for your agency, then they have something to shoot for and you have a reliable way to gauge their performance.

Of course, you could have the world's most perfect, specific goal, and it wouldn't do you any good if you failed to communicate it to your agency. Clear expectations need to be communicated clearly.

## **2. Achievable expectations.**

Even a clear goal can be doomed to fail, though. The goal "\$100,000 in sales in six months" might sound great, but if you expect to get it by selling \$20 items with a \$400 AdWords budget, you can also expect to be disappointed.

On paper, sky high expectations like this are obviously unrealistic, but you'd be surprised at how often businesses expect these sorts of results from their agency partners.

The problem is, companies often choose to outsource online marketing because it is an unfamiliar area and they don't feel confident handling it on their own. This same lack of familiarity can lead to confusion about what online marketing can and can't do, leading to years of frustration as one agency after another fails to meet an impossible standard.

But how can you ever be sure that your expectations are realistic if you're not an expert? Simple -- ask an expert. That's what your agency is for, after all.

Sit down with your account manager and have a talk about your budget, your timeline and your plans for growth. Together, you should be able to come up with goals that will be both aggressive and achievable.

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### **3. Agreeing on expectations.**

Let's imagine that you've communicated a clear, realistic goal for your industry -- "increase conversion rate by 20 percent per quarter, with into marketing" -- but when you next talk to your account manager a week later he reports that he's set up your account with analytics to .

This could be pretty frustrating. After all, you asked him to increase your conversion rate and what you got was traffic-tracking analytics.

You told him one thing and you got another. It's about time to go looking for another agency... right?

Well, that may be a little premature.

If your agency doesn't seem to be on track with your expectations, it's important to communicate your frustrations before taking any drastic action.

If (continuing my example) you let your account manager know that you aren't happy with the apparent focus on traffic instead of conversions, he might get the chance to explain that and set you up for more successful site testing in the future.

Just knowing this might be enough to satisfy you. Or maybe not. Either way, starting a conversation gives you the opportunity to explain your situation and why you expected things to happen a certain way.

By communicating why your expectations are what they are and asking *why* your agency makes the choices it does, you can start to develop a shared vision and get real on your goals. And, once you're on the same page about the what, the why and the how of your online marketing plan, you're probably on the road to success.

That being said, there are times when you've done everything you can to clear up your expectations and priorities, and discussed your conflicts and the agency still insists on pushing their own agenda. In this situation, remember, you're the customer and it's your account. If your agency simply refuses to play ball, it might be time to go find someone else to play with.

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## **People problems: Remodeling your relationship.**

I've talked a lot about the importance of communication, but to be fair, some account managers are tough to talk to. Sometimes you want to hear about the details of your account, but the manager talks in generalities. You want succinct reports and she loves to tell stories. You want to make hard-hitting, aggressive changes and he prefers a cautious approach.

Even if your account is performing well, these types of personality conflicts can make your marketing agency feel like the bane of your existence.

The good news is, these troubles aren't necessarily permanent.

If you feel like personality conflicts are at the root of your problems, requesting a new account manager can be a simple but effective way to remodel your working relationship. Chances are, your account manager won't mind the change either. If you thought they were annoying, the feeling was probably mutual.

Changing account managers isn't always a sure-fire fix, but it's usually worth a try, since it's a lot easier to change your point of contact than to go shopping for a brand new agency.

## **Red flags.**

There are some problems, however, that go far beyond mere personality conflicts. If your online marketing agency routinely exhibits any of the following, you might think about running for the hills:

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Does your agency...

- Make promises it can't keep?
- Fail to report on the status of your accounts or give you misleading information?
- Lose you money through inept choices?
- Refuse to adjust to the needs of your business?

If you answered " yes" to any of these questions, there's a good chance that you are working for a lemon of an agency—it's probably time to look for a new partner.

### **Dealing with change.**

When you own a home, sometimes you love your house, but the community around you changes. For example, if the city builds a high school across the street, the noise level may suddenly become intolerable. It's not something you had control over, but it can make staying in your current situation difficult.

The same thing can happen in business. Budgets get cut, executive priorities change, mergers take place and markets vary -- there are lots of reasons why your old standby agency just might not work for you anymore.

Or could it?

If you really love your house, there are often ways to deal with external problems ( eg , soundproofing your walls). Similarly, if your business has undergone changes that affect your online marketing agency, it's worth talking over these changes with them.

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A flexible agency may be able to change your contract to better suit your new needs. Even if this isn't an option, they may be able to point you in the direction of another high quality agency that would be a better match.

So, if you're not happy with your current online marketing agency, should you love it or leave it? Consider the following:

Signs that your agency relationship needs a remodel:

1. Unclear, unachievable or undiscussed expectations
2. Personality conflicts
3. Poor communication

Signs that you need a new agency:

1. Deception or other red flag behaviors
2. Refusal to work with your reasonable expectations
3. Large changes in your business

In the end, the choice to love or leave your marketing agency is ultimately up to you, but in many cases, if you're willing to do a little remodeling, you just might end up with the agency relationship of your dreams.