

# **The social media agency relationship – a guide for businesses**

A Guest Article by Kate Spiers  
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### **Seven tips for buying social media services**

As more and more businesses buy social media services from agencies and consultants, there are some grey areas around exactly what you can buy and outsource, what you can't – or shouldn't – and how the whole relationship is supposed to work. Here is a seven-point guide to buying social media services for your business.

#### **1. Whatever you buy, it's a partnership**

Whether you want a full-blown strategy, campaigns, specific training or ongoing coaching in social media, this is a partnership with your agency or provider.

A great agency will take as much time as is needed to really get under the skin of your organisation and to understand, first and foremost, what it is that you need to achieve. They'll need your help to understand this, before translating it into social media goals, tactics and measurements.

#### **2. Sometimes you need to take a step back from social media**

If part of social media is to do with engaging your target audience and sharing relevant messages (and of course there are other uses – see below), you'll need to be very clear first of all about who that audience is and what your messages are.

Before you can start engaging, are you clear about the "who" and the "what"? If not, you need to get this defined first of all. A good agency can work that through with you, if you find it hard to articulate. Clear and consistent messages make your social media efforts impactful and relevant.

#### **3. Good social media consultancy is about empowerment**

The ultimate aim of any agency worth its salt has to be to educate, equip and organise their client brilliantly in their social media endeavours, to the point that the client is empowered to manage at least a good chunk of its social media activity in-house.

Why is this important? Well, to be authentic and responsive, and to be able to seize the social media initiative, an organisation needs to be actively engaging first-hand with its audiences. To completely outsource that is to compromise authenticity.

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### **4. Training has a few different faces**

So you can't buy authentic engagement, but you can buy the means to do it well. And that's a worthwhile investment. A good agency or consultant will ensure that those involved in social media activity (even on the periphery) understand and know how to use a whole range of tools for engaging, sharing, listening and monitoring.

But more than that, they'll ensure that those people also understand the bigger picture: that is to say, the context in which social technologies are used, motivations and behaviours, standards and policies, and the bigger social picture.

### **5. Scoping, policy and strategy benefit from the outside-in approach**

Assessing an organisation's scope for utilising social media can be hard to do from the inside. Internal pressures, barriers and preconceptions can fog the vision and make it hard to see the full range of possibilities ahead. Opportunities can be missed. Without a doubt, an external and objective view is valuable. For this reason, agencies can deliver much value through this exercise.

If scoping should be a visionary and aspirational examination of opportunities alongside the uncovering of hard facts, then strategy and policy are rooted firmly in an organisation's reality and should reflect the barriers and limitations that could affect social media activity there. Done well, it's a balance of ideal scenario and measured ambition, tempered with reality and achievable aims.

An outside view should bring vision, ideas, creativity and inspiration, but also should be able to apply these to your organisational reality (which could be lack of resource or buy-in, parallel communication activity, specific objectives, and so on) and to provide creative solutions for overcoming any hurdles in your way.

The same applies to revisiting an existing social media strategy. In this case, in particular, an external view will provide the most rounded and candid take on what's working and what isn't, and on perception and sentiment in the marketplace, and will provide industry best practices to benchmark against.

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### **6. Agencies should be able to save you time – with added value**

So far, it's pretty clear that agencies can empower and educate, but that time and effort from the client organisation is very much needed to make the most of its social endeavours. So where can agencies bring most time-saving benefit?

A key activity that is well worth engaging an agency for is monitoring and listening. We all do that to some extent in any case, in our every day social media use, through RSS feeds, alerts and Twitter search streams. But agencies can add value by monitoring and listening against some very specific terms, themes and audiences.

And the genuine value is when they can take that information, analyse it, and provide you with insightful statistics, trends and recommendations as a result.

### **7. Agencies should be able to help you be you, but better**

Another area where agencies can add value is in providing ongoing coaching, to ensure that you have a good grasp of what's working, what isn't, and where there are additional opportunities to be leveraged. They should be concerned with helping you develop as a socially-engaged business and as individual users of social media.

If they are not actively offering that, demand it!

*Kate Spiers*  
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If you would like more information on any of the points covered in this Guest Article, please contact **TCii** on **020 7099 2621**.