



**THE 10 MOST IMPORTANT
QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD
BE ASKING YOUR AGENCY**

INTRODUCTION

At some point in your career, you may have wondered (and for good reason) how effective your current marketing firm is in helping you accomplish your goals. Just because you get truckloads of data and reports, how do you know what they truly mean? And how do you interpret your agency's explanations, especially when performance is flat or declining?

And if you're not currently working with an agency, how can you be sure which one(s) can actually help you measurably succeed?

Whichever scenario you find yourself facing, you're not alone. These are all great questions.

There's a lot at stake when hiring an agency. Established companies typically spend 6 to 12 percent of their gross revenue on marketing—which can add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for some, and millions for others. It's a huge capital investment, not to mention a sometimes scary investment in trust.

We believe the relationship between the client and the agency is sacred ground. It's built on mutual trust, open communication and complete transparency.

But at the end of the day, it all comes down to results. Agencies are measured on the results they achieve for their clients, and marketing executives are measured on the return on the ever-elusive ROI.

In that vein, Commit Agency has developed a list of the 10 most important questions marketing execs should ask their current or future marketing partners.

And now, in true Dave Letterman style, here's our top 10:

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HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT CHANNEL MIX PRODUCES THE BEST RESULTS?

There is a lot of research and brand intelligence that goes into developing an effective marketing plan.

It was a lot easier decades ago, when a company's options were primarily limited to print, broadcast and out-of-home.

But today, with the growth of digital and social channels, we're naturally seeing a shift in marketing spend allocations. Just take a look at some of the more recent changes we're seeing:

- The growth in marketers' digital marketing spend is greatly outpacing that of traditional marketing (The CMO Survey)
- TV advertising spend dropped 1.5 percent in 2017 and will drop another .5 percent this year and 1 percent in 2019 (eMarketer)
- Digital platforms accounted for 43.6 percent of total ad spend in 2016 and is expected to grow to 56.8 percent by 2020 (eMarketer)
- Social media spend has grown 243 percent since 2009 (The CMO Survey)
- Mobile marketing spend is expected to increase 93 percent in the next three years (The CMO Survey)

Why the shift in allocations? It's simple, really: consumer behavior has changed. Take a look at what some of those changes are:

- On-demand streaming and "TV Everywhere" is up 114 percent over the past two years (Adobe)
- Growing retailers had 48 percent more visits from smartphones compared to 2016 (Adobe)
- 26 percent of Facebook users who click a Facebook ad make a purchase (Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers)
- Effective user-generated content (UGC) can generate about seven times more engagement than brand-generated content (Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers)
- Mobile marketing ranks at the top in terms of media consumption with 1.8 hours, above TV (1.5 hours) and other platforms.
- 91 percent of consumers read online reviews, and the number of those who don't read reviews (only 9 percent) has dropped dramatically, from 29 percent in 2010 (BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey)

The best marketing plan—the one that will accomplish your goals and objectives—is developed with your target audience at the core. Who are you trying to reach? Where are they? What do they want to see, hear, touch? We take their demographic, geographic and psychographic breakdown into account when we allocate budgets for each channel.

The result? A channel mix that works together—unified, integrated, consistent.

HOW SHOULD I BE EVALUATING MY SEO PERFORMANCE?

This is an important question to ask your agency partner since changes in search happen at a neck-break speed in many cases. From voice search to schema markups, there are more opportunities than ever to be found for the things you should be found for.

With this in mind, we've prioritized some questions you should ask your agency regarding SEO and why they're important questions to ask:

How do I give consumers the best online experience possible with my brand?

When it comes to online experience, the gold standard is providing consumers a frictionless experience—meaning they got what they came for with ease and without frustrations like long load times or multiple clicks to complete one action. According to Google, the three big things consumers are demanding are (1) to be helped faster, (2) to be known better and (3) to be wowed everywhere. Why these three things? Straight from Google, here's why:

- **Help Me Faster.** Consumers are shifting their thinking from "Who does it best?" to "Who does it best right now?" Google elaborates that more than half (53 percent) of mobile visits are abandoned if a site takes longer than three seconds to load and that the probability of a bounce increases by 90 percent when a page loads from one second to five seconds.
- **Know Me Better.** Today's consumers don't want a one-size-fits-all experience. In fact, about two-thirds (63 percent) of consumers expect brands to use their purchase history to serve them more personalized experiences. These types of

interactions have a positive impact for companies, too. Most organizations (90 percent) that employ such practices see a positive impact on profitability.

- **Wow Me Everywhere.** Here, consumers are looking for consistent experiences from a brand across myriad channels, but only 42 percent believe brands are delivering on that. Remember when we talked about "frictionless experiences" above? More than half of consumers polled (59 percent) say they will recommend brands to their family and friends if the brand deliver a frictionless experience across the board.

What is the breakdown between direct and discovery searches (or branded versus non-branded) for my company and how are we allocating budget to each?

You likely have your branded search locked down, but the biggest opportunity for most companies is in discovery-based search, where users find you when they use keywords or phrases that describe your company's products or services, like "best restaurant in Phoenix" and "hotels in Denver." Your agency partner should be spending more on non-branded terms to help establish you in those kinds of searches.

Is my Google My Business listing optimized?

For most of our clients, views of a company's Google My Business (GMB) profile far outnumber website traffic. In a nutshell, GMB has become the first source of truth for consumers who research brands online. It is essentially a mini website since it includes almost anything you'd want from a website: photos, reviews, address/directions, hours of operation, content/posts and so on. You want to make sure you put your best foot forward here with updated imagery, new content/offers, responses to consumer reviews and

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correct attributes. Speaking of reviews, Google is the fastest-growing review site and boasts more reviews than Facebook, Yelp, TripAdvisor and FourSquare. It's important your agency is making this a priority, as it will have a significant impact on your business.

What are we doing to manage our online reputation?

Your online reputation should be among a small list of priorities your agency should proactively manage, because it can go from "good" to "bad" rather quickly based on customer experiences, ratings and reviews. The key here is to have a 4.0 rating or above; once you dip below 4.0, you will not be included in the search results when users are searching for businesses with the qualifiers of

"best," "great," "top" or similar. Think of it this way: if you're searching for the "best sushi in Phoenix," do you really want to go to the place that's rated 3.5. Yeah, we didn't think so.

Another reason your online reputation is so important is because members of the news media have indicated that they will pursue a story idea based on the results of an online search. If your online reputation isn't up to par, you could be missing out on some favorable news media coverage.

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HOW WILL I SEE PROGRESS?

A good agency partner will be very transparent with the results of your marketing initiatives. Typically, you will see a report each month (or perhaps more frequently for specific campaigns) that provides the outcome of each marketing channel's activities to date.

But, there's more to the story than just numbers.

It's the "so what?" factor that's way more important than any number you'll find in a monthly results report.

A great agency partner will not only provide you with the raw data, but will tell you what those numbers actually mean. Your team is responsible for analyzing the data to uncover themes and, in some cases, opportunities for enhancement. After reviewing the data closely, your agency team may recommend changes to your plan that will enhance your results.

One thing to remember: it takes time to see true, long-lasting results.

Waiting around to see results isn't fun—we get it. You want to see how everything is performing now.

But for marketing efforts to really take root and grow—for real change to take place—it takes time. In fact, according to a

former Google executive, search engine optimization (SEO) efforts can take anywhere from 4 to 12 months to see results. That doesn't mean you won't see immediate progress. In fact, certain efforts, once implemented, will show results pretty quickly.

Your agency partner will likely provide you with a monthly report or dashboard that includes the results of all of your marketing initiatives.

Here at Commit Agency, we use Google's Data Studio for our regular client reporting. This platform does exactly what Google promises: it "...turns your data into informative reports and dashboards that are easy to read, easy to share, and fully custom."

Data can be sorted and analyzed different ways and over different periods of time (year over year, month over month, and so on). It pulls in all of your digital and social analytics seamlessly, and your agency team can add pages for your traditional marketing efforts as well, like radio, TV and out-of-home. With everything in one report, you now have at your fingertips a 360-degree picture of your brand marketing efforts.

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HOW DO I KNOW YOU HAVE THE EXPERTISE I NEED TO PRODUCE QUALITY WORK?

You need to feel confident you have the right team to manage your marketing initiatives.

But how do you know?

Ask your agency contact (likely your account manager) what credentials the various team members working on your business have.

In the “everything digital” world we live in today, it’s important for your team to be well-versed in digital and social technologies, especially.

You may want to ask if your digital team members are certified in Google Analytics, which will tell you that they know how to read and analyze data, track conversions, understand where your website visitors are coming from (and where on your site they are spending the most time), uncover opportunities to optimize pages that experience higher abandonment, and so much more.

On the social media side of things, you should feel confident knowing your social advertising manager has a Facebook Blueprint certification, which means he or she went through a series of courses and exams developed by Facebook using best practices.

Another (easy) way to see if your agency has the chops to do the job is to take a look at their case studies on their website. In addition to inventive creative, what do the results look like? Look for gains in website traffic, revenue and other conversions that would be similar to your business goals.

Finally, read up on your agency’s reviews on Google and Facebook. If an agency’s clients are singing their praises on these public-facing sites, you should feel confident that they can produce quality work.

You commit to a marketing budget, approve the marketing plan and wait for all those customers to come bursting through your doors (or breaking the internet trying to get onto your website) and spend their money with you.

But what happens when they don't?

Lucky for us, we have the ability to see where consumers drop off and don't convert.

In Google Analytics, your agency should be able to see drop-off points and exit rates for each page, which may be a sign that something is broken on the page or there is some sort of poor user experience that compels the user to leave the site or not take an expected action on a specific page.

Your agency should also have access to other tools beyond Google Analytics that show where site visitors are going, clicking and engaging.

Beyond your website, what is the experience like for your customer?

Are they getting consistent messaging across channels? Are they having an exceptional experience in your bricks-and-mortar location(s)? Is your front-line team practicing instinctual service to engage with your customers?

In looking at the full picture, your agency partner should be able to identify what pieces aren't working as they should—and where to focus your energy and resources.



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WHAT ARE THE PINCH POINTS IN MY SALES FUNNEL WHERE PEOPLE DISENGAGE WITH MY BRAND?

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HOW DO YOU MEASURE WHICH ADVERTISING EFFORTS ARE WORKING BETTER THAN OTHERS?

There are a number of ways your agency should be able to tell what is working best.

Conversions

For most companies, the number one priority will be conversions.

Your agency should be tracking conversion rates for every single digital initiative, from email campaigns to digital display ads to social ads.

When proper tagging is in place and the tracking pixels are firing as they should, you will be able to see which initiatives are producing the most results. Your agency should be testing different copy, creative and targeting here to understand patterns and themes of what is converting at a higher rate.

Attribution

In Google Analytics, your agency partner will be able to look at marketing attribution to discover the paths consumers are taking to conversion. For instance, are they landing on a display ad that takes them to your website, or is their first experience with your brand from a Facebook ad? And in-between the initial touchpoint and the last one that directly leads to a conversion, what else happens? You will uncover

all kinds of conversion paths throughout this exploration, and your partner will help you understand how all channels work together to drive conversions (and that a last-click attribution mindset is not the way to go).

Lifetime Value

Calculating your customer lifetime value (CLV) will allow you to focus on the channels that not only bring in the most customers, but have the potential to grow the profitability of those customers beyond an initial purchase. Using CLV as a KPI will create a foundation for your marketing efforts to ensure you are only investing in those channels that nurture the most profitable customers.

Funnels

To turn consumers into customers, you need great brand experiences—both online and offline. Those experiences will nurture customers down the funnel, from brand awareness to conversion and every touchpoint in-between. Understanding the different stages of the funnel and what kind of messaging and content is appropriate for every stage is important. Your partner should be able to show you how your marketing funnel will work for you.

One of the first conversations you should be having with your agency is discussing appropriate key performance indicators and which ones are the best ones to measure success.

Depending on the business you're in, your target audience and even your budget, your KPIs will be different than other companies.

You and your agency collectively should determine what is most important for your brand. Is it brand awareness? Sales? Social sentiment? Online reviews?

The possibilities are endless here. But to make sure you have the right KPIs in place, you should look at your business plan, goals and objectives to make sure your advertising is aligning with your organizational goals.

If your goal is an increase in revenue/sales, conversions would be a natural goal to track.

If you're launching a new brand from scratch, you will want to see an immediate lift in brand awareness and media coverage.

In Google Analytics, we're able to assign values to virtually any action or conversion. And remember, a conversion doesn't necessarily have to mean a sale. It can be a newsletter sign-up, scheduling a meeting/tour, submitting a request for proposal, etc. Once you assign values to each action, you can track those conversions and measure your return on investment for each marketing channel.



HOW ARE WE MEASURING MY MARKETING ROI AND WHAT SHOULD MY KPIS BE?

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IS THERE SOMETHING I'M NOT DOING THAT I SHOULD BE IN ORDER TO BE THE MARKET LEADER IN MY INDUSTRY/CATEGORY?

Naturally, this is something all companies want: to be the best.

But to get there, it takes a lot of focused energy on the things that matter. Luckily, you have an agency partner to help you do that. Together, you should prioritize these three things:

Communicate Your Meaningful Point of Difference.

Your brand not only stands for something (pop quiz: do you know what that is?), but it needs to be the best at something in order to obliterate the competition. That's called your meaningful point of difference--the one thing that sets you apart from every other brand in your category.

Do you know what that is? If the answer is yes, do you feel that you communicate your meaningful point of difference at every customer touchpoint? Do your customers know your meaningful point of difference? It's important they do in order to establish brand affinity and loyalty.

Embrace the Three-Legged Stool.

We know that a well-defined brand creates customer experiences worth remembering and sharing. If you look

closely at that sentence you just read, you can see the three legs that hold up the stool (because, you know, sitting on a stool with two legs isn't a good idea). Those legs are:

- Brand definition
- Customer experiences
- Amplification of influence

A well-defined brand is great, but it won't be successful if that's the end of the story. Your brand needs to provide your customers with memorable experiences--the kinds of experiences that you want to shout from the rooftops and tell everyone about. The ones you amplify.

Listen to Google (Because They Know).

Remember when we mentioned Google's advice for brands back in Question #9 to "Help Me Faster. Know Me Better. Wow Me Everywhere."? We think it's so important that we needed to mention it a second time.

Today's consumers have virtually given brands a guidebook on what they want. Heed their advice.

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HOW ARE WE MANAGING OUR BRAND REPUTATION?

These days, your brand's reputation is driven by your customers.

It's the experiences they have with your brand—good and bad—that shape your online reputation.

Because online reviews are many times consumers' first stop when researching and considering a company (whether it be a restaurant, hotel, appliance repair, medical office or other), your agency partner must take a full-circle approach to online review/reputation management.

Why our prioritization of reviews? Consider the following:

- In a Nielsen survey, **92 percent** of respondents said they **trusted word of mouth**, including recommendations from friends and family, **above all other forms of advertising**.
- A study from Internet Marketing Inc. shows that **52 percent** of all Facebook users say their **friends' photos have inspired—or even changed—their travel plans**.
- The 2016 BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey shows that **91 percent of consumers read online reviews**, and the number of those who don't read reviews (only 9 percent) has dropped dramatically, from 29 percent in 2010.

- Also in that survey, **84 percent say they trust reviews** just as much as a personal recommendation.
- More than half (**59 percent**) of respondents in the BrightLocal survey **typically look at multiple review sites** before making a decision.
- Second to the star rating, **47 percent of those respondents said they pay attention to the review sentiment**, or the positive or negative comments within the commentary, to get a comprehensive view of that business.

And now, your online reviews can influence your chances of news coverage, according to a new survey. A new poll by Lumentus of 200 journalists across the United States shows that most journalists (70 percent) begin their information-gathering on Google. Not only that, but more than a third (35 percent) of those polled said a company's digital reputation is "very important" when developing story ideas.

It is no longer good enough to respond to reviews that are posted on review sites and social platforms. Instead, your agency partner should also work to cultivate more reviews from your customers to continue building and elevating your online influence.

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DOES MY BRAND'S ADVERTISING COMMUNICATE OUR BRAND BENEFIT TO OUR BRAND LOVER/CONSUMER?

When you went through your branding (or rebranding) process, your agency team likely gave you a brand guidelines book that encapsulates everything your brand is and stands for. In addition to logo guidelines, color treatments and PMS numbers, your brand book should communicate your brand pillars, category frame of reference, meaningful point of difference, brand lover and brand benefit.

Think of these components as your brand framework—literally, the structure that guides your brand's marketing to make sure it doesn't veer off-course.

With your brand book in front of you, ask yourself these questions:

1. Are all of our marketing messages aligned with our brand pillars?
2. Are we marketing to our defined brand lover?
3. Are we effectively communicating our meaningful point of difference?
4. Is the category frame of reference we defined still true and relevant?

When you stay true to who you are in each brand communication—from social media posts to email campaigns to press releases—you give your customers a seamless experience they will remember.

And sometimes, your brand benefit changes over time. Perhaps your brand lover looks a little different, too. Just think about it: Nike's customer today looks a lot different than she did 20 years ago.

Periodic research (focus groups, surveys, etc.) will help shed some light on changing dynamics that will shape your brand for success into the future.

IN CONCLUSION

While there is never a wrong time to ask these questions (or any questions, really) of your agency, the best time to have these conversations is in your agency selection process before a contract is signed.

If you have an agency partner now but haven't asked these questions yet, there's no time like the present to bring these questions forward because it's better to have the conversation now than not at all. If you're satisfied with their responses, you should feel good knowing you made the right decision.

And if you're not satisfied, you now have an idea of the most important questions to ask your advertising agencies into the future. You may decide the partner you have now is not the right one based on the responses you get.

Actress Vanessa Redgrave once said, "Ask the right questions if you're going to find the right answers." There are dozens—hundreds—of possible questions you could ask your agency partner, but asking the right questions may be the difference between success and failure.