



# THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO HIRING AN INBOUND AGENCY



**11 Attributes & Core  
Values Your Next  
Agency Partner  
Must Have**



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# Introduction

## Inbound's ROI Cannot Be Denied

The return on investment businesses experience when shifting from outbound to inbound marketing has been well documented - and with good reason! Companies who part with traditional marketing methods to follow their customers online are blowing key growth metrics like marketing efficiency and sales productivity out of the water. The inbound combination of remarkable content and website engagement create a bedrock foundation for sales and marketing efficiency, effectiveness and growth.

## Agencies Can Accelerate Results

Marketing dollars have shifted away from traditional outlets like PR and cold calling. But the skill sets of internal teams lag behind. For some, the time and resources needed to train internal people on how to master inbound marketing must-haves like SEO and email marketing do not exist.

As a result, businesses wanting to take advantage of ROI charged online tactics like blogging and social media are looking to outside agencies for help. These agencies can use their deep online experience to help companies and businesses short on time and internal resources increase their online visibility and lead generation efforts.

However, it is not one-size fits all. Agencies come in all shapes and sizes, with different specialties and talents. But there are core values and skill sets that make some better than others. Here are the 11 most important values to consider when choosing an inbound marketing agency.

# The 11 Habits of Highly Effective Inbound Agencies

## Offers the Right Services

### Hire a Marketing Agency that Delivers the Inbound Services that Matter the Most

While a specialty or two like social media or email is to be expected (more on that later), any firm that asserts themselves as an inbound agency must offer Four Core services. These services are each comprised of several tactical components. But to execute in a way that delivers real value and maximum impact, all these tactics need to be performed together. Seeing that an agency can fold all these tactics together into one cohesive strategy is a good sign they know how to execute and get results.

The first core service of inbound marketing is an agency's ability to generate traffic to a website through SEO, blogging and social media sharing. Second, agencies should be able to tell their clients they can develop the premium content needed to capitalize on that traffic by building landing pages and managing online lead generation efforts. Third, agencies need to be able to construct targeted lead-nurturing campaigns aimed at converting those leads into customers. Finally, in order to iterate and improve, analysis and measurement needs to be present at every step in the process.

Being able to dig into the results of your online efforts is critical. Doing so on a regular basis will allow agencies to repeat successes, and tune underachieving campaigns to get better results. More on this later, but make sure reporting and analysis is second nature to any prospective agency you're thinking of work with.



### Key Questions to Ask:

1. Do you offer Traffic Generation, Lead Generation, Leads-to-Customers and Analytical-Focused service packages?
2. What tactic or tactics does your firm use to deliver each of these service packages?
3. What past or current client example(s) best illustrate success you have delivered for each of these services?



# Presents a Clearly-Defined Delivery Process

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Hire an Agency with a Solid, Proven and Logical Plan of Attack



They know you. They know your business. They know their capabilities and what is required for inbound marketing success. Therefore, any agency worth considering should be able to plot out the specifics and details for the campaigns and strategy they propose for your business.

Building on the goals and challenges identified in the sales process (more on this in #3), your potential partner agency should be able to outline their approach in terms of the four core services and explain all the tactics they plan to employ in their execution. Expect a timeline for each chunk and a description of the resources they're likely to need along the way.



Make sure each component of the strategy they are proposing to you, as well as what comes before and after each piece, make logical sense. Does your business have no web presence? Then traffic generation services like SEO, blogging and social media need to come first. Is your website underperforming from a lead generation perspective? If so, your agency partner will need to ensure that your site has decent traffic and then begin crafting premium offers and landing pages. Are too few sales being attributed back to the website? An agency brought on to help with that challenge will (again) need to look at the traffic and lead numbers to ensure quality is present, and then begin crafting targeted lead nurturing and email follow-up sequences. Obviously, the ability to measure and interpret data is a baseline skill for each of the core services, and each agency you consider should be able to set benchmarks, identify trends and take action.



## Key Questions to Ask:

Given your understanding of our situation, goals and challenges, what do you recommend we do first, second, third, etc?

How does our situation, and the plan you're recommending, match that of another customer you've worked with?

What do you see as the most critical piece of inbound marketing for our business and goals?





# Conducts a **Goal-Oriented Sales Process**

## **A Marketing Agency's Pitch Should be Tailored to your Business' Specific Challenges and Goals**

The sales process of a good inbound agency will start with your goals and challenges, and dovetail into how they can help you. You're sure to see slides about who they are and what they do, but they should understand that their services are most compelling when they can be seen as potential answers to the business challenges you are facing.

They should begin by asking about your goals, and the timing and urgency around meeting those goals. Also, how are you being measured? What are the metrics and benchmarks most important to you? Also, what does the size and makeup of your internal team look like?

Getting answers to these critical questions at the outset will allow them to prescribe a plan unique to your business. Your goals and challenges should be natural segues into discussions around their capabilities and case studies.

### **Key Questions to Ask:**

1.



2.



3.

*Have you worked with clients who have faced challenges similar to mine?*

*How does each piece of what you are proposing take aim at my challenges and goals?*

*What is the timeframe for achieving these goals, based on the strategy you have in mind/outlined for my business?*

# Maintains a Website Optimized for Inbound



## Hire a Firm that can Cite Itself as a Case Study

**They will most likely talk the talk, but does the agency you are considering walk the walk?**

Meaning: do they do inbound for themselves? Digging into their site for a solid YES or NO answer to this question could give you interesting insight into just how good they really are at what they do.

Because you're in "hiring mode," your trips to their site have likely been dominated by scouring their services and client testimonial pages. But take a step back from these self-promotion-heavy pages and ask yourself, do they do the things they're proposing for me? Do they blog with the frequency they say I will have to? Are they active on social media? Can Call-to-Action buttons and premium content offers that convey thought leadership be found throughout their site?

A truly effective inbound marketing agency should be its own best case study. Think twice about engaging with a firm that doesn't make the services they sell a priority for their own business.

### Key Questions to Ask:

1. What have been the results of your own firm's inbound efforts?
2. Does what you are outlining for us match what your own firm does online?
3. What are some key lessons you have learned from using inbound marketing for your own business?



# Presents Compelling Case Studies

Hire an Agency with Compelling Examples of their Inbound Marketing Prowess

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You're sitting at a conference table. A prospective agency partner is projecting some flowchart-heavy Powerpoint slides and outlining the inbound marketing strategy they've designed for you. While you're following the arrows and considering their capabilities, you should be asking yourself two key questions: "have they done this before, and if yes, can they replicate that success for me?"

Any inbound agency truly hell-bent on delivering ROI for you will be eager to show you how they've done it for others. Ask for these client success stories early on. These testimonials should include not only glowing remarks from their clients, but also numbers and campaign strategies that summarize the impact of their work.





Make sure you consider the four core services of inbound marketing when looking at these numbers and testimonials. Do these case studies cite proof that these guys were able to increase their customers' website traffic? Did leads increase? Did they help turn those leads into customers? Make sure the accomplishments that they are boasting match up with the outcomes you want for your business.

Ask prospective agencies for references. As long as there isn't a conflict of interest or a noncompete in place, they should gladly hand names over. Award them bonus points if the client they refer you to is still actively working with them. Retainer work means that an agency has delivered and earned an ongoing commitment.

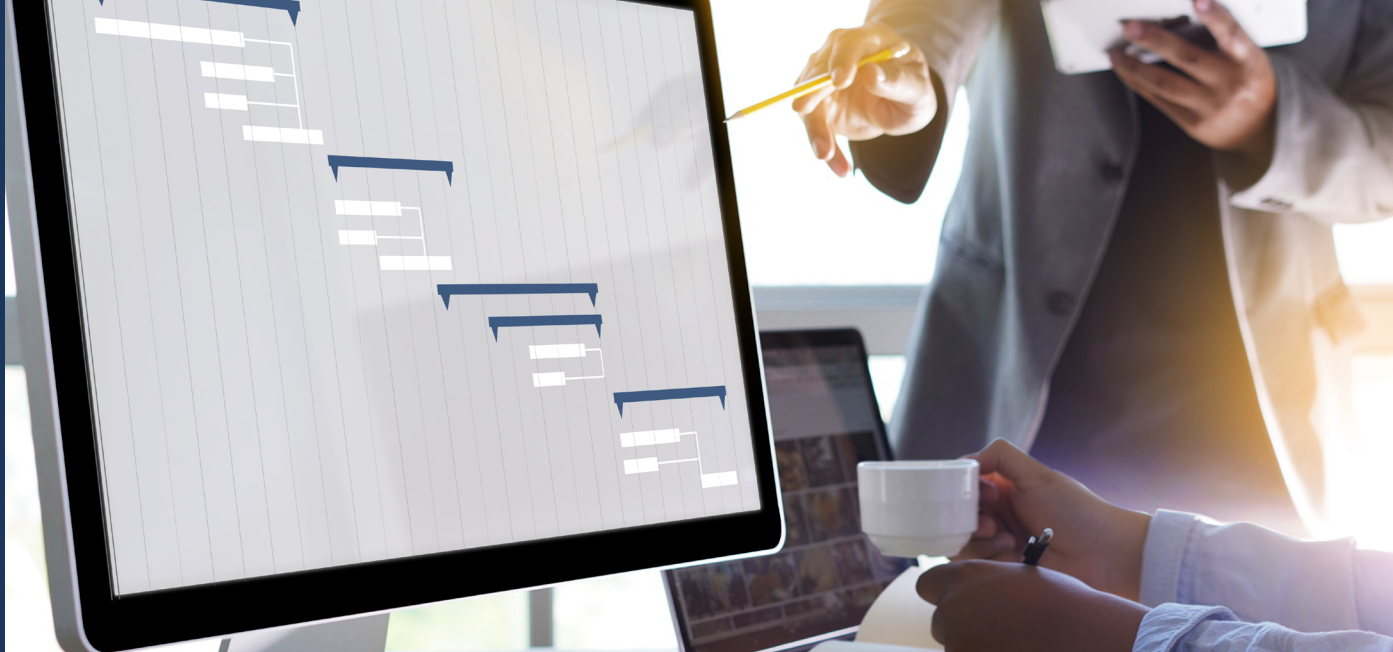


## Key Questions to Ask:

Can you provide case study materials and references from other clients you have worked with?

What lessons do you plan on applying to our business from inbound success you have achieved for other clients?

What are the critical success factors for inbound marketing?



# Showcases Their **Specific Areas of Focus**

## Your Agency Should Specialize, Not Generalize

Does the prospective agency you are talking with have a sweet spot? If yes, is that sweet spot service or tactic-specific? For example, maybe they've done SEO for years and received phenomenal results. Or is their sweet spot industry specific? Meaning they have crushed numerous client engagements in your industry (or a close relative to your industry) before. If they do have one of these sweet spots, look to see if they align with your challenges and goals. They should.

Use the sales process to get a solid handle on your prospective agency's areas of focus. If they have a service sweet spot, like social media for example, they should know the fastest and most surefire ways to leverage social media for traffic and leads. Or if they've worked in your industry before, it's likely they know lots of key industry terms and thought leaders – which will make content easier to create at the outset.

Specialties like the examples referenced above can shine extra bright when incorporated into a comprehensive strategy spanning the four core services. Just make sure your agency's biggest strengths make you stronger.

### Key Questions to Ask:

1.



Have you worked in my industry before?

2.



*Which piece of inbound marketing is your strongest capability, and how does the strategy you plan to lay out capitalize on that in particular?*

3.

*If you have worked in our industry before, how familiar are you with our thought leaders and key blogs? If not, how do you plan to go about finding these?*

# Teaches and Trains Your Internal Team



## Hire an Agency that Knows How and Wants to Leverage Your Team's Industry Expertise

### Inbound marketing hinges on effort.

Effort to create content. Effort to Tweet. Effort to research keywords for SEO. Effort to blog. Effort to think about conversion events on your site and how lead nurturing campaigns could be tuned to better perform. Lots of effort. Any agency you hire will need to spearhead and facilitate all these efforts, but should also be able and eager to train members of your internal team on how to do things like blog and use social media.

Consider all the different sides to your business. There is no doubt sales and marketing departments – but what about operations? Manufacturing? Research and development? Packaging? Think about the remarkable content folks from these different departments could contribute to your business's inbound marketing efforts. Consider how much more -> visibility a Tweet will get if it's tweeted out by 15 or 20 members of an organization, rather than just the company account.

An agency truly worth its weight will be eager to talk with all of your folks, train them on inbound marketing best practices and harness their brain power. The more hands on deck, so to speak, the quicker things take root and yield results.

### Key Questions to Ask:

1. To what extent do you plan on using members of our team for content creation, etc?
2. How do you plan on setting those folks up for success and ensuring the pieces they work on with you is a good use of their time?
3. How has involving client team members in your efforts worked in the past?



# Key Capabilities Reside Either In-House or With a Trusted Partner

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## Hire an Agency that Can Explain How It Does What It Does

A complete inbound marketing strategy is comprised of many different tactics. It's like a puzzle – but not because it's confusing. It's a puzzle in the sense that it's got a lot of pieces. Pieces that should not stand on their own, but when put together, make total sense. And to truly succeed online, business will need to execute a comprehensive strategy that is inclusive of all the right pieces.

Assembling the pieces together into one, cohesive strategy is the job of your agency. Each piece is crucial, and it is important that you understand a potential partner firm's capabilities at the outset of your relationship. Make your prospective agency provide detail around how each step of the strategy is going to get done.

Because they might not have the talent inhouse to deliver a service entirely on their own, ask who is responsible for creating/building each piece. They might outsource. Agencies that use partners for technical pieces of the work, like website design and integrations, will be relying on the schedule of another when they make the handoff. Probe them around who their partners are, how long they have been working with them, general timetables and what pieces of the work will get shifted to them.



## Key Questions to Ask:

Do you do all your inbound marketing work in-house?

If yes, who on your team specializes in what?

If not, to whom do you outsource what? And how long have you worked with them?







# Possesses Strong Project Management Skills

## Inbound Marketing is a Serious Production and the Marketing Agency You Hire Should Want to Run the Whole Show

Inbound marketing is an organic process. It requires time, elbow grease and coordination. Any inbound marketing agency you choose to partner with is going to need to make requests of your time. They'll do it at the beginning of your relationship to get up and running fast, and on an ongoing basis, to ensure their methods stay sharp and inline with your business.

They will need to understand who your customer is and get a sense of the types of content that will be most effective in attracting them to your site. They'll also need to add forms and other inbound elements to your site. To accomplish these tasks, an agency will need to get inside your head, and inside the heads of others on your team. They will also need to get on the calendar of your website admin!

Does the agency you're considering have the process and communication skills to make you think they will make reasonable and realistic requests of other folks on your team? Also, have they set clear expectations around what each inbound component will require in terms of time and resources? Do you get the impression that they can manage campaigns with lots of moving parts? They should. A good agency will make your life easier -- not the opposite.

### Key Questions to Ask:

1.



*What types of requests, technical or otherwise, do you anticipate making of myself and my team as our engagement kicks off?*

2.



*What types of requests do you anticipate making of myself or other members of my team on an ongoing basis?*

3.

*What project management software, spreadsheets or other orientation materials should we expect to receive and when?*

# Places an Emphasis on Measurement Optimized for Inbound

## Agencies that Measure Everything Succeed Faster



**The Internet is an infinitely measurable place.** This makes each piece of the inbound methodology trackable and interpretable. This should be a fact leveraged heavily by any inbound agency you are considering working with. Your prospective agencies should have presentations littered with the words "metrics," "benchmarks," and "analytics."

You have goals. You are trying to meet those goals by hiring this agency. Therefore, your agency should be as focused on charting success in a data driven way as you are. Progress made toward your goals should be measured at every step of the way, and an inbound marketing agency worth its weight will be able to track all campaigns and report on performance regularly.

### Key Questions to Ask:

1. How will you measure the success of the campaigns you are proposing?
2. How often will you report back to us on these campaigns and progress being made towards other key metrics?
3. What adjustments can be made if certain metrics are over/underperforming?



# Values Transparency

Your Marketing Agency Partner Should Want You to See Everything That They See

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Make sure the agency you are considering embraces transparency as a core value. While you're not likely to see this word next to a bullet on a Powerpoint slide, an agency can infer and prove they are transparent with their clients by citing and discussing the three main business practices below.

First, they should outline a regular meeting schedule in their sales process. These meetings allow the agencies a regular venue to raise questions and/or concerns as an engagement is ramping and progressing. Second, agencies should jump at the chance to train your people. The more you understand what is being done and why, the more you can thought partner with your agency and set their efforts up for success. Third, truly transparent inbound agencies will insist that you have login credentials to the online marketing software they use to run your campaigns. These accounts are loaded with data, and they should be open and comfortable with you walking around in their world.





Transparent agencies make their end client part of the team and get better velocity for it. They solicit input and feedback often, and couple their knowhow and judgment with their clients industry experience to craft killer inbound strategies and call audibles where needed.



## Key Questions to Ask:

What online software packages does your firm use to execute and manage inbound marketing?

Will we be trained on this software?

How often will you share wins and progress with us?

# Conclusion



## Find the Best Equipped Agency

You're short on the time and manpower needed to implement and execute key inbound tactics like blogging and social media. Fortunately, there are marketing agencies out there that specialize in the inbound methodology to help. But like any other agency partner, make sure this agency is a good strategic match for the type of goals and challenges you have, as well as your internal teams and processes. Agencies whose personalities, leaders, skill sets and core values map to the above 11 attributes will be well-positioned to deliver.

## Marketing Agency Resources

Creativate is a certified HubSpot Partner, Gold Level. We're an extension of your marketing team, marketing strategists, that brings best-in-class practices from our experience at multi-million and multi-billion dollar companies to your (small/medium sized) business. Our core competencies include inbound marketing, content marketing, website design and development, marketing strategy, email, social media, copywriting, SEO, and analytics & reporting. Our approach begins with finding the right resources to meet our clients' goals, putting an inbound strategy in place to measure ROI, then growing their communities. *We're here to help.*







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