

When looking for a Search agency, or simply evaluating the quality of the services provided by your current Search vendor, it is common to consider such factors as size, experience, thought leadership, location, and cost. One factor, however, that sometimes escapes consideration is the level of customer service.

A Search agency's ability to provide quality customer service is of paramount importance. Poor customer service can lead to miscommunication, delayed deliverables, and ultimately lower revenue and increased costs. While certain customer service expectations are obvious, others are hard to define. What should you get in the way of access to engine representatives? Business transparency? Campaign customization? The very best Search Engine Marketing agencies will excel in all of the following areas: responsiveness, relationships, transparency, and flexibility.

Responsiveness

It goes without saying that the Search industry is highly volatile. Changes in customer preferences, new technologies, social networks, and engine tools take place every day. Economic shifts and changing consumer trends only add to this volatility. Search agencies must be able to respond to these changes quickly and effectively. Those agencies that deliver excellent responsiveness are:

1. Quickly adapting to changes in the industry: Your vendor should be notified in advance of changes in the Search industry caused by events such as new search engine tools or new searcher customization features. As this information becomes available, your vendor should be notifying you of the news. They should also take steps to educate your company about what these changes mean for your campaigns, and what strategic measures need to be taken moving forward.
2. Proactively suggesting new strategies: Your vendor should be consistently suggesting ways to improve your campaign, even when your company strategies and the industry have not changed. They should be continuously searching for ways to progress your campaign and increase positive results.
3. Efficiently analyzing data: When you request campaign information from your vendor, they should have a reporting mechanism set up that can quickly gather specific data so that you can receive what you need in a timely matter.

Relationships

Relationships are extremely important in the success of an agency's Search strategies. If the agency is unable to build relationships between your company, search engines, and your other vendors, their ability to yield positive results will be limited. Building these relationships allows for many opportunities and a much smoother execution of campaign goals. The search engine, agency-client, and inter-vendor relationships must include the following attributes to provide the best customer service:

Search Vendor's Relationships with Search Engines:

1. Quick results: When your vendor has a strong partnership with search engines, you will see a quick response from engine reps for any issue. This includes working steadfastly to identify/resolve problems themselves and/or escalating when appropriate to technological or management teams. With a strong partnership, there is a greater sense of accountability with the engine teams.
2. Good relationship with Account Representatives: Dedicated search engine representatives, who have a good working relationship with your vendor, provide inside information on the engine. These representatives visit vendors with which they have a strong relationship on a quarterly basis. During these visits they present what is happening in Search and what is on the product roadmap for that engine. These vendors are made aware of beta offerings and changes occurring within the engine before others. The representatives also provide information about what the agency can be doing to take advantage of these changes and how to use new offerings to your company's benefit.
3. Good relationship with Vertical Representatives: Search engine vertical representatives provide valuable information for your company if your vendor has a strong relationship with them. These specialized engine reps analyze a particular industry and can give your vendor recommendations based on what they have seen work for your competitors in the past. If they see that your campaign is struggling in a particular area, the representatives may also contact your vendor and suggest methods to fix these problems.
4. Beta offerings: Your vendor should be informed about new tools before engines release them to the public. If your vendor has a strong relationship with the engine, they could be offered a beta partnership with the engine. This would allow your company to test new tools, services, and applications before your competitors.
5. Deeper insight into your competitive space: Vendors with a good engine relationship receive reports on their client activities and their client competitors' activities. These reports can provide vast opportunities for growth moving forward, and are much more in-depth than the automated responses most companies receive.

Search Vendor's Relationship with You:

1. In-Depth understanding of your competitive space: Your vendor should do in-depth research on the competition in your industry. Since online competitors are many times completely different from the normal, day to day, competition (ie- affiliates, un-related and semi-related companies), your vendor must analyze both your online and offline competition.

2. **In-Depth understanding of your Company:** Your vendor should take the time to fully understand your company structure. They should understand your company needs and the reasoning behind those needs. They should also take the time to understand and be aware of your company's brand restrictions, legal issues, usability circumstances, and even internal politics. Through this knowledge, they can calculate the time needed to plan a new strategy so that campaign transitions run efficiently. The vendor should also have an understanding of how each part of their campaign affects other areas of your business to decrease problems and restrictions.
3. **Flexibility for your involvement in your campaigns:** Do you want access to the minute details of daily campaign changes and decisions? Would you rather take a hands-off approach and let your Search vendor sweat the details? Your Search vendor should work with you to determine the level of involvement you are comfortable with. Your partnership should provide the level of information and oversight that you need while balancing the efficiency of campaign management. Your level of involvement should be based on your needs and not a boilerplate project plan forced to fit your situation and environment.
4. **Trust and comfort:** Your vendor should show respect and concern for your ideas and needs. If you have questions about a particular strategy made by your vendor, you should feel comfortable enough to speak up. When speaking up, you and your vendor should be able to make a successful compromise to solve the problem so that you feel comfortable with your campaign strategies.

Search Vendor's Relationships with your Other Marketing Vendors:

1. **An understanding of your vendor relationship:** Your Search vendor should take the time to understand other vendor relationships and how they can affect your Search campaigns. The vendor should also maintain an awareness of your other vendors and their current projects. This allows them to understand how your Search campaign will affect other vendors' projects and vice versa.
2. **Involvement, Interaction, and Coordination:** Your Search vendor should work to build strong relationships with your other vendors. They should allow for full transparency across these relationships so that each vendor has a better understanding of how their campaigns affect each other. By continuously sharing information, the vendors can also work together to coordinate your campaigns for optimal results across channels.

Transparency

The agency-client relationship shouldn't just be about showing results; it should also be about providing the tools and knowledge necessary to act on those results. For an agency to be considered transparent it must provide its clients with:

1. Up to date information: Your vendor should have a program set up where you can easily follow the campaign plans. This program should be continuously updated with information so that you and your vendor can keep campaign strategy flowing, without having to figure out what is happening next.
2. An understanding of all campaign strategies: Your vendor should have data to back up any decision being made and they should provide that information at all times. They should provide information on the strategies, tactics, and the reasoning behind each decision being made. This will help you understand your campaign better and provide a feeling of comfort about allowing your vendor to make campaign decisions.
3. Ability to gather campaign information anytime: Your vendor should have a tool set up that is accessible by you 24/7. This tool should provide all information pertaining to your campaign – current, past, and future – so that you can access particular information about the campaign as it is needed.
4. Continual education on Search: Your vendor should help you not only understand your campaigns, but also the industry as a whole. They should provide you with a solid education in Search so that you can confidently talk to others in your company about the industry and your campaign. Vendors should provide educational material, such as point-of-view papers and articles, that will keep you up to date with industry changes and the steps needed to take advantage of these changes.
5. Don't own the data: Your vendor should never own your Search data with the search engines. They should have a transitioning system set up in case you decide to stop working with them. This transitioning system should keep track of everything your vendor has done for you since your relationship started. Your company will not have to start over if you end the vendor relationship and provide all of the information needed to pick up where they left off. As counter-intuitive as it may seem, an important question to ask when starting with a new Search vendor is what will happen if/when someday you decide to switch vendors.

Flexibility

One rule of Search is that many times, there really are no rules. Sometimes it takes an innovative and adaptive strategy to yield successful campaign results. An agency's ability to customize its services to particular client needs will dramatically affect campaign successes. When shopping for agencies, try to understand how they adapt to situations beyond the ordinary. If a client has a unique situation or they suddenly have to meet an aggressive goal, does the agency have that "out of the box" thinking that can innovate and provide positive results? A flexible Search agency can provide:

1. **Report customization**: Your vendor should provide customized reports that pertain to information that is relative to your current campaign. Instead of providing each client with a boilerplate report, your vendor should provide information specific to your KPI's. They should also allow you to customize your own reports on their proprietary tools.
2. **“Out of the box” thinking**: Your vendor should look for new and innovative ways to provide positive results in difficult situations. They should never rely on standard ‘best practices’ alone. Your vendor should be able to produce customized solutions to particular problems, such as legal and corporate limitations.
3. **Scalable services**: Your vendor should have the ability to expand your campaigns over time, as well as the ability to add or test new campaigns or strategies on a smaller scale to evaluate the viability of a larger effort.

Conclusion

Working with a Search agency that provides excellent customer service is extremely important to the success of your campaigns and, ultimately, your bottom line. Excellent customer service means providing services that are responsive, visible, and customized while supporting strong internal and external relationships. If the agency your company is considering or currently working with leaves something to be desired in excellent customer service, you could be missing important opportunities. Perhaps things seem to be going along “just fine;” if so, ask yourself whether “just fine” is the best that you and your Search vendor can do.