Selecting an SEO or Local Search Marketing (LSM) Professional – Part 2

In Part 1 of this three-part series, we defined some terminology along with covering important topics such as budgets and timelines, defining goals, and setting realistic expectations. In this segment, we will take things to the next step, evaluating the materials and the people involved.

Evaluation

Evaluating proposals you receive is the first major hurdle to clear. You will want to evaluate several things to determine the right fit for you, including: a) the **credibility** of the person presenting it, who is probably a professional at sales or the entity behind it; b) the **answers** to the questions you ask; you DO need to ask questions…a lot of questions, and finally; c) a **report** you will undoubtedly receive as part of the sales process along with a written proposal.

In the end, the report and written proposal are what really count. They are the visual, tangible version of whatever the sales rep has said. Does it all match up? And remember, every proposal should reflect your unique website and an understanding of your needs and goals. There is no room for one-size-fits-all here; if it looks like cookie-cutter material, give it a thumbs-down.

Types of Providers

Individual Professional

An SEO or LSM professional typically has several years' worth of experience along with a stack of references and a good bag of tools and techniques. They should be able to converse intelligently about a variety of techniques and be able to remain objective when discussing them. Any pro will have their favorite go-to methods, and they will likely also have an area or two where they are not proficient. This is to be expected; there are just too many areas to expect one person to be an expert in everything. This Individual Professional option should provide you with a high degree of individualization in your plan.

Service as Part of a Comprehensive Group of Services

This type of provider will typically consist of a small group or team that has perfected certain techniques, has a dialed-in bag of tools they like, and has several "plans," one of which will hopefully be a good fit for you. At this level you will likely pay a higher price, usually due to the fact that you are paying for several layers of management and additional overhead. However, for some this level can provide a more enhanced sense of having a "team" working for you, which can be comforting. As with any provider though, check the references, and remember that bigger is not always better.

Major Media Player

These providers are polished, have their presentations down pat, create a certain sense of awe when they discuss what they can do for you, and generally give you the sense that you are in solid hands with them. The downside, however, is that there is usually minimal flexibility with a one-size-fits-all, high price (many layers to pay for), and little if any personalization. With this type of provider, remember that you are the little guy…they don't need you. The upside is that if you fit all of their criteria, they can often produce well-delivered results in whatever their specialized niche may be.

Evaluating the Provider: Credibility

First things first: is this provider someone from whom you would even want to bother getting a report/proposal? There are a LOT of shady operators out there, and separating the good from the bad right up front will save you a lot of time and grief. The following tips can be applied to individual professionals as well as firms of all sizes.

Experience

Do they have any special training? How long have they been offering this particular service? You can look for Google certifications or check their LinkedIn profile to see if they have completed any special courses of study. Sometimes, though, they may simply have a wealth of experience from hands-on work over many years; ask questions. If it is a firm, will the person who is working on your account have the experience needed for your job? Remember that certification in one area does not make one an expert in all areas.

Integrity

I recently had a client who had encountered a LSM "pro" who strongly suggested that they begin a Pay-Per-Click campaign because "it will help your organic ranking." NO!!! That is absolutely false. This "pro" either didn't know what he was talking about, wanted to sell additional unneeded services, or both. You can often tell when there is a lack of integrity because you get too many happy smiles, too much reassurance, too much "great news," and not enough real news.

Another client recently asked me my opinion of an LSM company that had contacted him. I began investigating and soon found a bunch of red flags, including:

- Broken pages on the LSM company's website
- Social media links on their own template website that they did not know how to fix or remove
- Grammatical errors throughout their site
- The domain name was owned by a company in Oregon
- The business address was not shown on the website
- Further digging found the business was operating out of a mail drop in Florida
- My client was in Utah where the LSM company presented a UPS store address as their place of business
- The LSM company was not registered to do business in Utah

- Their business ran under multiple names
- Their website pages were not search engine optimized (yet this was their business?)
- They had presented the client with a report designed to Scare and Sell rather than inform

These were all warning signs which were readily available to any client who wanted to take an hour to do some due diligence.

References

Does the provider have a list of clients they will share? If only two or three are provided, then those are probably cherry-picked. Try to get at least ten referrals and call them ALL. Better yet, jump online and look for reviews, the kind with stars. If you Google their business name you should see a panel on the right side of the page, which is a Google Business profile. Having this shows that they have created a Google Business page; a good sign. Not having this show up would be a big red flag, as setting up a Google + Business page is one of the first things a competent professional provider will do. What kind of reviews do they have? Four or five is plenty; more than that and you want to look at the dates they were created. Was there a sudden surge in reviews around a certain time? This could indicate fake reviews.

Another good source for reviews is Yelp. Again, read the reviews along with considering the number of stars. Nobody is perfect, so having an unhappy client or two is not necessarily a red flag, but multiple negative reviews all touching on similar types of problems and over a period of time should raise warning flags.

Types of Reports

Written summary, a produced status report, or combination of both.

Written Report

Is the report understandable? Is there a clear and concise flow of thought? Does it explain what issues they found, propose solutions, etc.?

Status Report

There are a number of companies that offer subscription-based report-generating programs to web developers and SEO people. These reports will typically show where your website ranks for various keywords, how many citations you have mentioning your site, and how many sites link to you, along with perhaps the age of your site and/or how well your site is organized for SEO, among other things. They can be a very helpful tool for getting a quick "snapshot view" of your situation.

The quality of these reports varies widely, as do the purposes for which they are created. Some report building programs are actually created as a tool for professionals to use in accurately evaluating the health of a website and identifying areas for improvement. They will be well organized, present information, data, and suggestions in a neutral tone and, while there may be a red flag or two, they are typically presented in a subtle and yet meaningful manner.

Then there are the other types of status reports. These are created with a clear intent to be used as a sales tool to persuade the client into buying whatever services the "professional" happens to be offering. These types are often heavy on the negative visuals, filled with *Warning Signs!* in eye-catching colors such as red and yellow, and hold promises of doom and despair if you don't immediately correct the items in question; i.e., buy the services being proposed.

Until you have seen both versions it can be tricky to tell the difference. That is another good reason to get at least two proposals so that you have some comparison and perspective.

Combination

In my opinion, a good proposal should provide:

- A *Written Report* providing an overview of your site and an understanding of your unique situation
- A quality *Status Report* identifying key metrics relating to your website
- A **Written Summary** of your website's issues and solutions to those issues, as well as a proposed approach, cost, and timeline for addressing the issues and implementing the solutions. Also, there should be some way for you to track the work and evaluate the results.

This all gives you a good idea of the types of service providers there are to choose from as well as some important things to watch for so you can avoid the bad guys. In the next and final part of the series, we will dive into evaluating the pieces of a proposal so you can make a good and informed decision.

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