Need to develop (or Re-develop) your website? What you should know before you dive in

BY KELLY L. CAMPBELL

Over the years, we've listened to clients voice their concerns about developing or re-developing their organization's website. With so much geek speak at the core of the industry, it's easy to understand how intimidating the process, terminology and various costs can be for a business owner or director: domain name registration, website hosting, search engine optimization – the list goes on.

Unfortunately, there are firms that try to capitalize on a client's confusion about services, deliverables and what's considered 'out-of-scope'. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Finding the right firm from the onset can make all the difference in the world, especially since professional websites should be overhauled about every four years.

The truth is that a business without a well-structured web presence simply cannot compete with one that does. A successful website instills consumer confidence in a brand's integrity, and that is the #1 reason one company is chosen over another at decision time.

Knowing the right questions to ask before developing a website, you'll get an idea as to how the process should flow, be better prepared, feel more involved along the way, and be more than satisfied with the outcome. Guaranteed. Here are a few key things to remember when putting your website out to bid:

Ask For a Detailed Proposal and Service Agreement

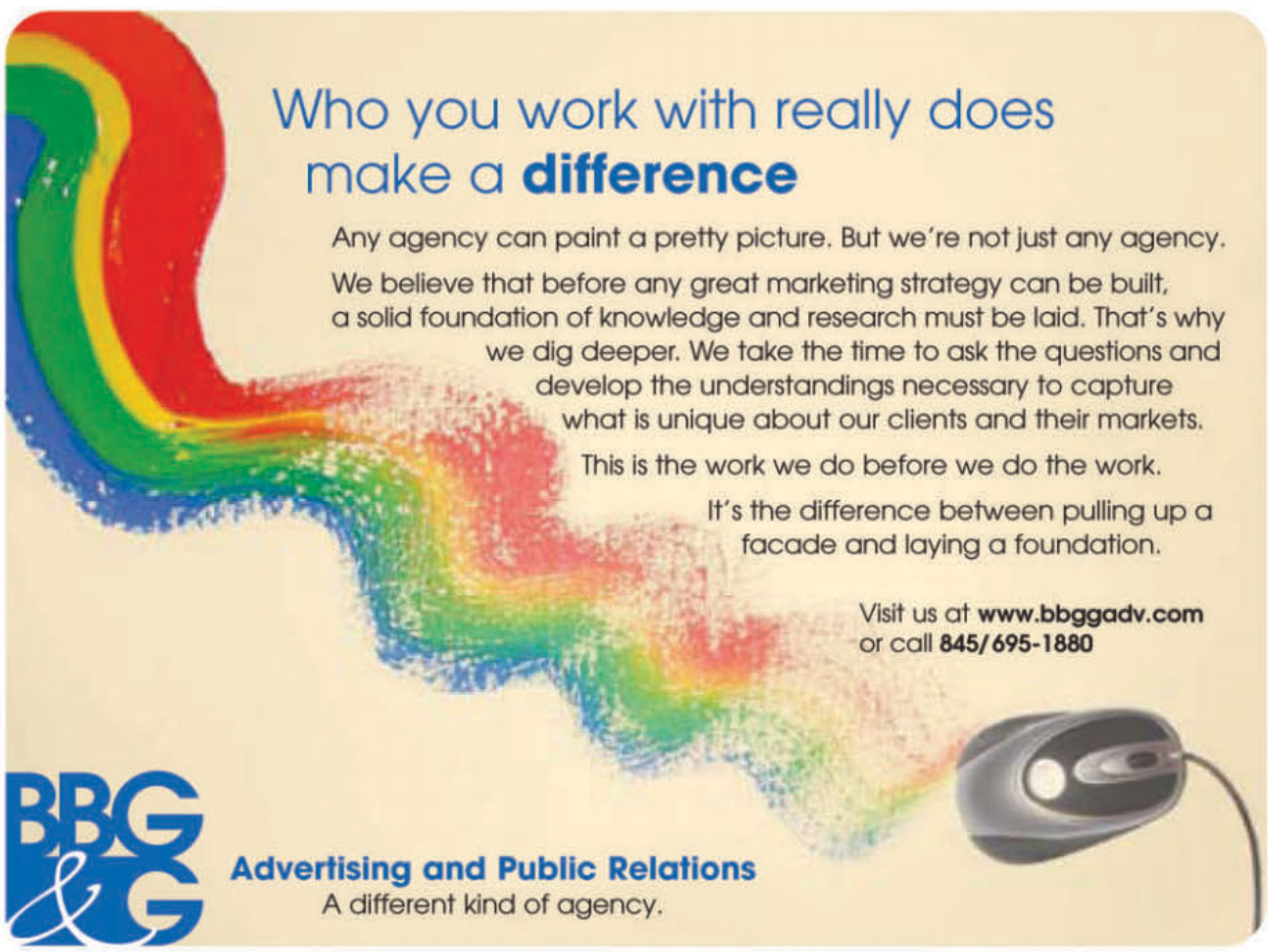
Don't settle for a ballpark figure in the body of an email in response to your initial inquiry. Contact a few firms and provide an RFP or ask them if they have a prospective client questionnaire for you to review or fill out. This is a great way to focus your next phone discussion. Each expense associated with the website should be clearly detailed on the proposal you receive. These include, but are not limited to, yearly domain registration (for www.YourCompany.com), monthly website and email hosting, content management system or 'CMS' (you update the site in-house) or website maintenance services (you pay the firm to update the site for you) and third-party services (such as integration of an email marketing service). And don't forget to inquire about discounts for non-profits or start-ups, if applicable.

Search Engine Optimization 101

Better known as 'SEO', Search Engine Optimization is the way in which websites are structured to garner their respective natural rank on each and every search engine. Getting SEO right is more of an art than an exact science because it involves content refinement and depth of keywords therein, descriptive meta tags, search-friendly URLs and more. Most website design firms completely neglect this part of their responsibility to the client. After all, providing a client with an aesthetically-pleasing, fully-functional website is great, but if no one can find it by searching relevant keywords and phrases on Google, Yahoo or MSN, that's a problem. Ask each firm to explain how they'll optimize your new site. And because you know your products and services best, be sure to participate in the meta tag development portion of the process (titles, descriptions and keywords – which need to be developed per each individual page on your website).

If You Have Questions, Get Answers!

Don't be afraid to ask questions. After all, this is not your area of expertise, so rely on the experts for some education. You'll be able to tell during your first interaction if a firm is willing to take the time to explain things to you or not. If you're looking for an e-commerce website or a more complex application, ask for a list of relevant sites the firm has completed, and browse through them. You're looking for a good combination of engaging design, user-friendliness, robust functionality and good SEO tactics. Is the firm a one-stop shop with specialists on staff to complete your entire project, or will they be outsourcing much of the work to a freelancer or somewhere overseas? If you're interested in harnessing the viral power of blogs, podcasts, social networking or discussion forums, do they have the capabilities to integrate or set those up for you? Can they offer online marketing suggestions, and are they interested in a long-term relationship with your company?

Obviously, there's a lot to remember, but with these questions in mind you'll make the right decision in choosing the firm best suited for your specific needs and goals.

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