Deanne Napurano
Stone's Throw, Inc.

Making Your Mark (et)
How and When to Use an Agency

It doesn't hurt to think big if you're a small business owner, especially when putting together a marketing communications or advertising campaign. The challenge is figuring out whether you can do this yourself or if you'd be better served budgeting for outside help.

We spoke with four advertising and marketing communications professionals about this issue and the general consensus was that doing this in-house is rarely as effective as hiring a professional or a team of professionals to do that job for you although there are still situations where doing it yourself needn't take you beyond your comfort zone.

Stone's Throw is a 20-year-old marketing communications firm based in Cranbury that offers a variety of communications services, including marketing planning from concept through execution. They serve small and medium size clients the same as any old-school ad agency would except they do it on a project-by-project basis, which makes a lot of sense for SMBs. One of the primary reasons for hiring a firm like Stone's Throw is access to a diverse talent pool.

"I can sympathize with a small business because we're a small business and small businesses typically don't employ someone dedicated to their marketing efforts, and they certainly don't have specialists on staff like copywriters, graphic designers, photographers, and illustrators," says Deanna Napurano, partner and creative director.

The costs associated with hiring of all that talent are a good reason to bring in an outside firm such as Stone's Throw. And while some tasks can be handled in house, others are more effective when handled by an outside firm. The challenge is figuring that out.

"They can cobble something together using a computer and [software], but it's tricky to determine what can be done well in house and what can yield a better end result and be more cost effective when hiring [an agency]," says Napurano.

What should a SMB look for in a marketing communications firm? Consider why clients choose Stone's Throw.
It’s About Relationships

“They come to us primarily because we are passionate about working with our clients,” states Napurano. “Although the end product is critically important, what’s just as important is the relationship. If you’ve ever hired a contractor to work in your home, they’re in your space and you’re working with them day to day and you want that to feel comfortable and you want to trust them. We’ve established ourselves and I hope most of our clients would say they feel comfortable and trust us and they know we’re all about telling their story.”

A fresh perspective on your business is another reason to take it outside. Although the SMB may know their product or service inside and out, the outside agency can tailor that message to the appropriate audience and not get bogged down in unnecessary details that might confuse the audience or target the wrong audience.

“A lot of our clients have complex technology platforms and our job is to translate their marketing objectives into a story that resonates with their target audience,” says Napurano.

It’s not unusual considering the economic ups and downs of the past decade for companies who were outsourcing these services to cut costs and try and do it themselves. When that happens and results are disappointing or the message mangled, they understand why they were outsourcing those services in the first place.

“After 2001 a lot of companies stopped investing in new trade show materials and started doing them in house,” recalls Napurano. “After a couple of years we started getting calls, ‘We tried to do it and it was a disaster and it wasn’t saying what we wanted to say’ or ‘it didn’t look professional and didn’t reflect well on us.’”

Local agencies that target small businesses typically understand the budget constraints and their pricing often reflects their client’s and potential client’s budgets. While a full-blown marketing campaign is tops on the agenda, it’s not unusual for firms such as Stone’s Throw to encourage clients to take it slow.

“You don’t have to get everything from soup to nuts from an ad agency or marketing communications firm,” she says. “Be selective and focus on your brand identity. Get some marketing consultation for strategy and plan your activities. Then look at that list together and determine what you can do in house and what is better left in the hands of specialists.”

Stone’s Throw handles the planning for several clients and also provides them with a template the client can then use for creating print ads. The client just tweaks the copy as necessary. The same with Websites; Stone’s Throw can get it up and running and then train clients on content management so they can revise and update content themselves without having to rely on the agency for every little thing.

What Can I Afford?

“Invest in the things that reflect best on you and are going to show your customers you’re invested in yourself,” adds Napurano. “And work with a consultant to make sure you can handle some of those things in house. The things you can do will save you on the day-to-day costs.”

Michael Keeler describes Quicksilver, the company he runs with his business partner as a virtual ad agency. Talent is outsourced as needed for media, design, etc. Asked if the expectations of an SMB are any different from those of a larger client, Keeler references budget considerations.

“It’s not just the size of the budget,” he says. “A big client isn’t going to question if there’s an extra charge from a printer for something they weren’t expecting whereas you can get yourself into trouble with a small client by doing a rerun or making a change on press and really blow up their budget. To them $250 is a lot of money.”

The benefit of working with a small agency is they understand the needs of SMBs and dedicate themselves to their clients in a way that larger agencies can’t always. Plus because Keeler and his business partner have big-time agency experience, clients receive that too albeit from a smaller firm.

“We have a lot of expertise and the people we hire are some of the best talent in the New York area. Clients get the best of both, high quality and very affordable.”

Take an Active Role

Like any business relationship communication is critical.

“Most small business people have some sense of who they are, where they are in the market, their strengths, and what didn’t work before,” says Keeler. “They should proactively feed that information to the agency rather than take a passive role and have the agency pull that information out of them.”

Being up front about budgets and other likes and dislikes is helpful too.

“If you have $10,000 for a project, don’t beat around the bush,” says Keeler. “Or tell us, ‘I’m not going to do direct mail because I hate it.’ Some people have strong ideas...’I like red’ for example. If you have ideas that might work for you, share them with the agency otherwise everybody just spins and spins and spins and ends up in the same place anyway.”

Keeler concurs with Napurano about taking it one step at a time rather than doing everything at once.

“Most small marketers don’t need it all at once plus there are time and budget parameters,” says Keeler. “Do it in a linear fashion, be the driver, say ‘For the first project I want a new logo’ and then roll it out with collateral.”

A final bit of advice he shares is never tell an agency you’re going to make them your one-source agency.

“Don’t give it to them at once, make them earn it,” he says.

Jeff Barnhart, president and CEO of CMA, a comprehensive marketing and creative services company, is seeing more firms that used to handle marketing communications functions in house now farming them out.

“There’s a tremendous downsizing and outsourcing of marketing and marketing services and we’re seeing more small companies turn to organizations like us,” says Barnhart.

They often turn to CMA to bolster their brand relevance.

“That helps build businesses and ensure long-term relationships,”
states Barnhart. “Our unique selling proposition is we work with clients on developing a strategy.”

The aforementioned small budgets or lack thereof are the reason more firms don’t invest in advertising and marketing communications, however, those in the know like Barnhart feel that’s not the best tactic, especially in a competitive business environment.

**Investment vs. Expense**

“Look at marketing as an investment not as an expense,” he says. “Those that look at it as an investment, tie analytics to it so when you measure success it is easier to validate and justify what you’re doing,” contends Barnhart.

One of the challenges he’s experienced working with SMBs is that many have no idea what they should be spending on marketing and some are hesitant about sharing their budget, which makes it difficult when hiring an outside firm to handle the marketing communications and advertising.

“If you have a budget in mind share it with the people you’re working with, don’t have them navigate in the dark and try to figure it out,” says Barnhart. “Then we put together a plan and come back and you say ‘That’s not in our budget.’ If you know what the budget is and work with us up front we can save a lot of time down the road.”

Asked if the expectations of smaller businesses are any different from those of a large business, Barnhart responds, “There’s no unrealistic expectations, only unrealistic time frames. If your expectation is to grow 50-100 percent, you have to put a lot of fuel into that fire to get there. That’s why a lot of times when small businesses say ‘I want to do all this stuff and do it right away,’ sometimes you have to throttle them back a little bit. Let’s walk then run a little bit so we can manage the success of program and not do everything at once.”

Barnhart’s opinion as to why an organization might not want to handle these activities in house goes back to what others have said about the various disciplines necessary to put together an effective plan and campaign.

“They might have someone savvy about project management, or someone who is a good writer, or someone who can program or design Websites, but it’s difficult to find someone strong in all those areas,” states Barnhart.

Another issue he’s seen with companies that try to do it themselves is they think just because they hired someone who knows how to use a computer and do graphic design, they can create ad materials.

“If your wife doesn’t know how to cook, you can’t buy her a stove and expect her to be a chef, it just doesn’t work that way,” says Barnhart. “A lot of people are too tied into the technology and think the technology is going to be an art director and is going to build them a Website, and it’s not. You need people versed in those areas.”

**Strategic Marketing Communications Key**

Beth Hyre, owner of BMH Community Relations feels that most SMBs should focus on marketing communications rather than advertising and traditional public relations primarily because strategic marketing communications has proven to be more effective in the long term.

“I don’t mean any disparagement of advertising or ad agencies, but most SMBs cannot afford the kind of advertising that will be successful for them,” she says.

Hyre feels traditional public relations efforts are often ineffective, explaining that what her firm does is media placement.

“Media placement is not public relations,” she explains. “It is driven by good public relations. It does not define it. Editorial coverage is always more valuable than placed coverage such as advertising or a canned press release.”

Hyre doesn’t think the average small business can handle the marketing communications on their own mostly because they’re involved in the day to day running of their business and also have certain assumptions about their business.

“You need somebody who comes at it from a viewpoint of they have no idea who you are and what you do,” she says.

Hyre adds that any business can hire someone to write a press release or write it in house, but if it’s a boilerplate press release and posted online or in newspapers looking to fill space, the effect is modest at best. She concedes advertising can be effective if it’s in publications that everyone in the businesses target market reads.

“But you need to be very clear, very strategic, very analytical and very selective,” emphasizes Hyre.

That’s why it’s important to identify the target market and is one of the reasons a SMB would bring in an expert such as Hyre. Strange as that sounds, not every small business owner understands their target market.

She recalls a client who was a grief counselor. When asked to identify her target market, she told Hyre everyone who is experiencing grief. After Hyre pointed out that people experiencing grief aren’t going to pick up the phone book and scroll through the Yellow Pages to find a grief counselor, the client came to the realization that her target market was the people who would refer those experiencing grief to her. That’s something an organization trying to do in house might not even think about because they either aren’t looking at the big picture or are too close to their product or service to identify the true target market.

“Sometimes it’s not the person who you actually deliver the service to, sometimes it’s the person who is the referrer who sends the ultimate client to you,” says Hyre. “After you identify your target market then look at strategies to make you look visible to that market.”

While all that sounds simple enough, it’s not always clear to small business owners and goes a long way towards making a case for not doing these things yourself. The bottom line is, if you have the talent on staff, which most small businesses don’t, then consider yourself lucky and give it a shot realizing that there are some obstacles to avoid. If not, there are plenty of firms in the region with the talent to effectively do it for you.