

5 Tips for Hiring the Right Communications Agency

Use your online dating skills to find the perfect business partner!

By Joseph LaMountain



Reingold was founded in 1985 to advance causes that matter, helping organizations that do good, do well.

Nonprofit focus areas include:

- Issue Advocacy
- Member Marketing
- Public Awareness

When you boil down to the basics of hiring a communications agency, the goal is to forge a meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship with someone you know, like, and trust. In an ideal world, this develops into a long-term, meaningful partnership.

Sound like dating? It is.

In both cases, you're seeking the perfect partner: someone who looks out for your best interests, who is your biggest champion, whose strengths complement yours. And you want to experience chemistry.

You may have a vision of an ideal mate, but finding one can be a struggle.

In dating, this typically starts with creating an online profile and checking out who responds. But endlessly swiping right and left can produce disappointing results. It's actually a pleasant surprise when you finally find a match who's NOT a total creep or nut job.

Eventually, you meet someone for coffee or a drink and decide to meet for dinner. Then your new flame meets your friends and you start making plans together. Before you know it, you're leaving stuff at each other's place and spending a weekend with the family — until bingo! You seal the deal by signing a lease, exchanging rings, or walking down the aisle.

Hiring a firm should be no different. Organizations often start this process by creating a request for proposals (RFP), which serves the same purpose as an online dating profile. The RFP outlines the organization's attractive qualities, its needs in a partner, and its specifications for a perfect match.

But the similarities often end there. Too often, the RFP becomes the entire hiring process rather than the

first step. And rather than getting to know an agency and its people, the organization issuing the RFP may receive stilted responses telling them what they want to hear instead of what they need to know, leaving them vulnerable to making a bad choice.

It's like to picking your life partner based on a response to your online profile.

Trust me, there is a better way! Having seen and responded to hundreds of RFPs over the years, I can offer five tips for hiring the agency that is the perfect match for your organization.

Tip #1 – Try a new approach!

Most people I know would prefer to meet someone in person, preferably introduced by friends. Why not try that approach when hiring an agency?

That's exactly what team members at one nonprofit did. Instead of issuing an RFP, they scheduled introductory phone calls with about 10 agencies. Based on those calls, they invited five candidates to meet in person with their communications team. Then they chose three finalists to meet with their senior leaders, who made the final decision.

What prompted them to "swipe left" on the RFP process? According to an organization representative, they wanted to engage a partner who would truly help them evolve to the next level, and that wasn't something that could be put into an RFP.



If you decide, for whatever reason, to rely on an RFP, it's essential to keep the following in mind.

Tip #2 – Define the problem, not the solution.

You may think you need to marry a doctor or lawyer, but you might be happier with the guy in accounting who flirts with you every day.

So instead of outlining, bullet by bullet, what you want, tell prospective partners about the challenges you want them to solve and the opportunities you want to seize.

When you allow agencies to come up with solutions for reaching your goals, you can better compare their experience, creativity, and value. And you get great free advice.

I once received an RFP from a leading nonprofit that wanted to use search engine optimization (SEO) to educate and engage medical professionals. The problem? SEO is a broad-based strategy to generate website traffic, and more than 97 percent of the people they'd be reaching wouldn't be clinicians.

For this client, a far more effective approach would have been a tailored email campaign and partnership

outreach with other medical societies. But since we weren't asked to recommend a solution, we had to craft a response that we knew had a poor chance for success. That's frustrating.

To use a dating analogy, it's like deciding a "bad boy" is right for you and then realizing, when it's time for church with your parents on Easter Sunday, that the match is never going to work. Agencies are the professionals who do this work each and every day. Let us work with you to offer the right solutions.



Moving Beyond the RFP

Follow these steps to choose a match that has staying power:

- **Research** the types of agencies you think might best suit your needs. Tap your own network, talk to your colleagues, and look through your LinkedIn connections. And pay attention to your own media consumption to identify campaigns that appeal to you; in most cases, you can trace who produced the work.
- **Select the top eight to 10** agencies that fit your criteria, considering your must-haves and non-negotiables first.
- **Hold an initial 30-minute phone call** with a leader from each of those agencies. If this sounds like a daunting task, delegate responsibility across your team. Think of this as a test to gauge compatibility and whether you want to go out on an actual date.
- **Narrow your choice to five agencies** and meet with their leaders in person. This is an opportunity for them to show their best work, their understanding of your needs, and the sharpness of their thinking. Think of this as a coffee date, where you make sure their photos are for real and they aren't catfishing you.
- **Choose three** to meet with your senior leadership. Just as your friends can validate your feelings about a date, your co-workers can validate or poke holes in an agency's ideas or capabilities. If these agencies don't pass the co-worker test, they're not going to cut it! One agency will likely rise to the top.
- **Ask for references.** It's common for agencies to talk about case studies of their work. Now it's time to ask the agencies to back up their claims and to make sure they all check out before you make a final decision.

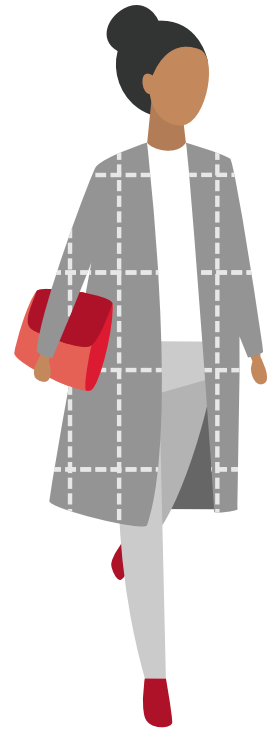
Tip #3 – Decide which type of agency is the best fit for you.

There's nothing worse than being set up on a blind date by a friend only to discover at first sight that this just isn't going to work.

The lesson here is to do your homework and define your non-negotiables. You may think you need a full-service firm, but you really may only need an individual consultant. Different scenarios require different expertise.

Projects usually require specific skills that you lack in-house. By pinpointing your unique needs, you can better identify where to look for your perfect match. It's the same as using specialized dating sites like FarmersOnly.com or JDate — or simply looking for someone who lives less than 10 miles away — and not wasting time with others.

Before deciding what kind of partner you need, think about what you need them to do. Do you need them to plug a hole because someone is on maternity leave? Do you need them to build a website and nothing more? Do you need them to develop and implement a multichannel marketing campaign? The answer will help determine the type of capabilities you need.



What's your type?



- **Full-service agencies** offer all the capabilities — in addition to strategy — that you need to meet your communications needs. These capabilities include website development, digital marketing, creative and graphic design, video production, writing and editing, social media outreach, and more. Plus, full-service agencies can also implement the work if you're short-handed. You'll be assigned a project manager who handles all the details, and because everything is in-house, coordination is simple and seamless.
- **Boutique agencies** typically have multiple capabilities within a specific area of expertise, such as website design or digital marketing. Because they are smaller with less overhead than full-service firms, they can be lower cost. But they also have limited capacity to scale up and may not be able to implement much of the initiative. And when opportunities fall outside of their expertise, subcontractors may be needed, which requires more time and typically more money.
- **Independent consultants** are even less expensive than boutique agencies because they have little to no overhead. They are usually either subject matter experts in very specific fields who provide guidance with limited implementation, or jacks-of-all-trades who can fill gaps in your staffing structure.

Tip #4 – Focus on outcomes, not topical knowledge.

It's easy to look only at agencies working in your field, like education or health care. But that's like dismissing potential mates who are short or bald when what you really want is someone who makes you laugh.

By focusing on outcomes, you can find agencies that will adapt proven approaches used in other industries to bring your project to life and get the results you need.

For example, Reingold built a search engine optimization strategy for the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology that has generated 8 million website visits and that results in 250,000 physician referrals annually.

That model is applicable for any association or business seeking to increase awareness and referrals to business or medical professionals.

When Reingold started working with the National Apartment Association, we knew little about the real estate industry, but they were impressed with our digital marketing expertise. Now, five years into our Residential Property Management Careers campaign for NAA, we know the industry — and so do the 88 million people who've seen our ads and the 300,000 who've visited the NAA website.

Tip #5 – Include a budget and set expectations.

This is that exhausting phase of choosing a partner when you have been on a few dates with the same few people, and continuing to juggle them is no longer sustainable.



Every RFP should provide a budget or a budget range. You may think leaving it out will help you get the best value, but you're actually making it harder for agencies to accurately scope their proposals.

And while a \$500,000 budget sounds like a better bargain than a \$650,000 one, it's not if they both include the same number of labor hours (which is how most agency budgets are constructed).

Ask your prospects: If we gave you a \$500,000 budget, what would you do with it? Agencies know you're not bound to spending that amount, but they'll have parameters for showing what they can do.

Proposing a budget also allows you to compare apples to apples when selecting an agency.

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You should also ask for the hourly rates and the percentage level of involvement of all team members who are proposed to work on the project. This usually provides the simplest way to compare



agencies: Lower hourly rates mean more labor at less cost. This approach also enables you to avoid the usual agency "bait and switch" — when the firm's senior leaders pitching the work are never seen again after the contract is won.

When it comes time for you to find your perfect match, you've got a few choices. You can see RFPs as dating profiles (a necessary evil) and do your best to navigate the league of suitable candidates. You can hope your friend (or someone in your network) sets you up on a blind date with the perfect suitor. Or you can transform your process and talk to that friend of a friend who always amuses you at parties, or reach out to that person you always see in your friend's Instagram story and tell yourself it's just lunch.

OK, Cupid, it's your call!



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