

How to Assemble a Best-in-Class Vendor Team



By Lucio Maramba

When a direct marketer thinks of client-vendor relationships, it's often easier to think of assembling the various links on the supply chain in silos of expertise. Given the complexity of today's multi-channel marketing realities, however, that chain and its success are interlinked now more than ever. The keys to building a successful team include the proper due diligence to ensure you draft the right players for your team and ensuring that both communication and data are shared with expedience and openness.

We've all been there. A charismatic salesperson comes calling and regales us with tales of triumph. But more often than not, this is not going to be the person we work with on a daily basis. So how do you cut through sales puffery and make sure you stack the deck in your favor? It starts with identifying the crucial questions you need to ask of each of the major supplier categories.

- › **Experience.** Does your prospective vendor have demonstrable, relevant success in your product category? Having such experience can help you learn from not only their success, but the lessons derived from mistakes along the way. Don't just ask about their clients, but ask for vendor references too.
- › **Staffing and Communication.** Who will your day-to-day contact be? What is the breadth and scope of their category experience? Are there any competitive conflicts? What will the protocol be for communicating campaign results, course correction and assuring that all members of the team are rowing together? Will there be regular team meetings?
- › **Differentiation.** What differentiates one vendor from their competition? Broken down by category, here are some salient questions to pose:
 - › **Creative.** Request samples of successful DR advertising they have produced.
 - › **Media Planning and Buying.** In addition to a relevant track record, what is their inventory and market penetration? How are their buyers incentivized?
 - › **Teleservices.** What is their specialty? Are they order takers or order makers? Do they excel at inbound, outbound or customer service? What about lead generation, hard offer, soft offer or continuity? If they are a call router, what centers are integrated into their platform?
 - › **Fulfillment.** Where are their warehouses located?

ed? What call centers and payment processors are integrated with their order platform?

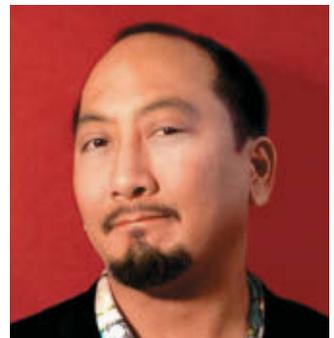
Remember, you are recruiting a team of vendors to form a network that must be capable of integration in order to give you the best possible chance of success.

Next, marketers must ask: how do I create accountability? One key is to seek out vendors who cannot only execute their core competency well, but also who can provide you with the most accurate, timely data possible. Second, it is imperative that you make sure their staff and your own know how to analyze and interpret that data and act upon it to optimize results. This may sound easy, but in today's multichannel era, where a preponderance of response may be realized online or at traditional retail, analyzing campaign effectiveness has become exceedingly complex. That is why transparency is so vital.

This may sound fundamental, but some marketers do not treat their vendors like partners. They believe that if they keep their vendors on a need-to-know basis or even pitted in opposition to one another, that they will somehow eek more productivity out of them. To be blunt, this is a completely counterproductive way of conducting business. Challenges are bound to arise, but if vendors are brought onto the same team and understand that the marketer is there to help them succeed, and not be scapegoated, barriers to success can be overcome more quickly.

Finally, there is always the question of price versus value. No marketer wants to pay more for vendor services than they have to, yet there is wisdom in the adage: you get what you pay for. That is why each marketer needs to understand exactly what the service differential will be for the higher cost, and carefully weigh the pros and cons of spending more money upfront, especially if that may get you better results in the long run.

The key for marketers is to think of their supply chain in organic terms: as an ecosystem that must work harmoniously in order to deliver optimal results. Such mindfulness is the best way to ensure success at launch — and beyond. ■



Lucio Maramba is manager, advanced services, for Dial800. He can be reached at (800) DIAL-800, ext. 138, or at lucio@dial800.com.