



Agency Digital Services

The Top 10 Mistakes to Avoid

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Introduction

Ten mistakes to avoid when delivering digital marketing services

If you are venturing into offering digital services to your clients for the first time, or you already offer some but want to provide a wider set of paid, owned or earned media, this whitepaper is for you. In it, based on my experience, I explain the ten most common (and costly!) mistakes that agencies can make. Plus, there are additional great insights in this article from some of the UK's most experienced digital marketing practitioners and agency owners.

About the Author – Mark Kelly



Mark Kelly is a freelance digital marketing consultant working with agencies and direct clients of Mark Kelly digital consultancy. Mark helps all kinds of agencies with the profitable growth of their digital offer. Advising on proposition, services, processes, teams and profitability.

He also provides practical support by planning and running digital / social / content campaigns and web site builds.

Mark is on Twitter: [@markkelly333](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

About Smart Insights

Smart Insights provides actionable marketing resources to help businesses succeed online. More than 130,000 Basic members use our blog, sample marketing templates and weekly Digital Marketing Essentials newsletter to follow best practices and keep up-to-date with the developments that matter in digital marketing.

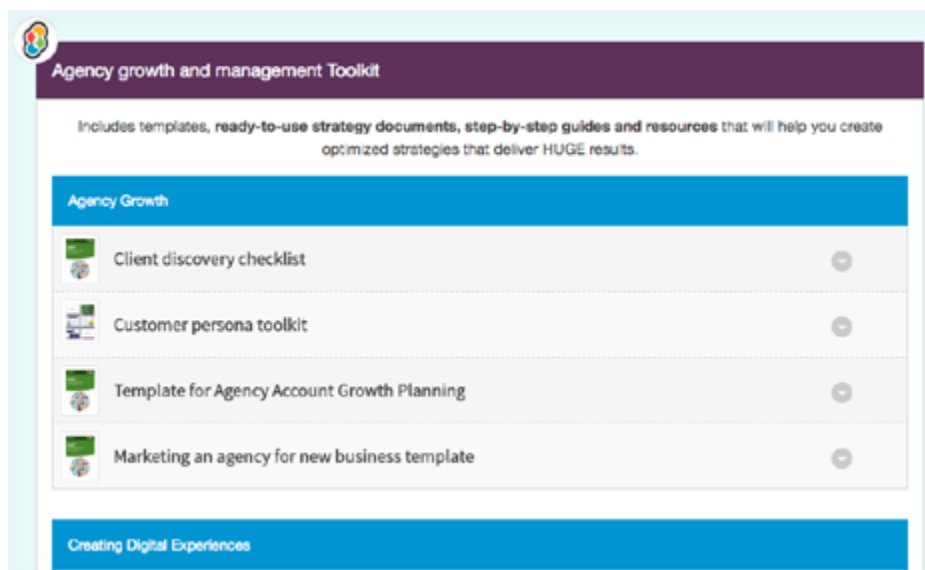
Thousands of Expert members from over 80 countries use our planning and management templates, guides and video courses to map, plan and manage their marketing using the Smart Insights RACE Planning framework.

For Expert members – The Smart Insights Agency Toolkit

This sample guide for Basic members will introduce you to some key issues for managing agency digital marketing services. For more practical recommendations on how to grow an agency, Smart Insights Expert members can consult the other resources in the toolkit in the members area.

Our comprehensive [Agency Toolkit resources](#) will help you improve your staff skills and improve the quality of your processes and deliverables for clients. The templates are editable checklists in Word or Excel which help you:

- ✓ Educate agency team members on best practices and key questions to consider
- ✓ Review existing agency processes including new business development and client project management
- ✓ Improve consistency through asking all team members to follow your own process guidance based on these



We also recommend these other toolkits to improve your key agency processes and results for your customers:

- ✓ [Digital Marketing Strategy toolkit](#)
- ✓ [Content Marketing Strategy toolkit](#)
- ✓ [Social Media Strategy toolkit](#)
- ✓ [Google Analytics toolkit](#)

10 COMMON DIGITAL AGENCY MISTAKES

Mistake 1. Start offering any and all digital services without a plan

Having a plan for your new / extended digital marketing services is important to give a focus to your service. It's really tempting (but wrong, if you can't resource it) to launch with a 'we do everything' approach to your digital work.

Build services in a step-wise fashion

In time and having built up experience and skills, you may well stretch across the full gamut of paid, owned and earned services. But build those services out in a step-wise fashion. Why? Because otherwise you'll immediately be a jack-of-all-trades and master-of-none (see later why that's a bad idea), confuse existing clients and you'll also be on a over-steep learning curve.

You don't need to be niche

There are schools of thought that say you will do best being hyper-niche (for example, to only offer website design, in one platform and for one industry sector) but to my mind that's too strict. You could stay niche to one industry or broad service area but it's okay to have a related constellation of services. For example, you start as a web design and build agency but could then add related site traffic analytics management and conversion optimisation services. They work together and are less 'random' than say starting to offer social media advertising.

Mistake 2. Taking on everything with a “we can always outsource it” model in mind

It pays to know that there is a burden to outsourcing any digital marketing services that you take on for clients. By burden, I mean you need to have at least an understanding of what is involved in the external partner's work. Are they are suggesting realistic timescales? Have they missed something important in their proposal? Having a degree of industry knowledge also means you can benchmark their proposed costs.

Knowing good value partner proposals

You shouldn't blindly agree to partner proposals without knowing if they are good value or indeed under or over-quoted. It's your relationship with your client that is at risk if the project delivers late and over budget. And even if a light touch, you'll need to allocate some project management time to liaising with that 3rd party.

That's not to say you shouldn't build connections with freelancers / contractors/consultants and other specialist agencies. That can often be the most expedient way to build out your own services and reduce the disruption when team-members leave the agency.

Use in-house talent

But before you do, do you already have some of these skills in-house? It's sometimes surprising when agencies of a reasonable size run a team skills and previous experience audit. That designer in the corner may well have some front end development skills that you can use for small sites, email and / or banner creation.

Mistake 3. Not knowing how to price up the different types of digital marketing services

This can cost you dearly. There are a wide range of agency costing / pricing (both terms get used) options for agencies to use: from time-based through to value provided. Knowing what rates to apply to different specialisms / seniority of team members and what a 'typical' project cost might be at varying levels of scope and complexity, will ensure you are not underpricing or under-recovering on your endeavours.

Managing costs and budgets

Have a look at our [article](#) that covers this subject and the accompanying budgeting template from the toolkit.

Capture all client's requirements

Whichever model(s) you use, you want to make sure that all elements of the activity you undertake for a client are captured and, for example, you are not 'giving away the thinking' in the rush to secure design or production work.

See our [client discovery checklist in the toolkit](#) for more ideas on this process.

Mistake 4. Offering a menu of services with no clear value proposition

Want to offer SEO services? Or 'general' social media marketing services? So do many thousands of other agencies – so why should a client choose you? Be clear about what sets you apart with a clear value proposition. And be conscious that every one of those services you offer will need to be marketed and promoted. Staying niche (in the service mix you offer) will help direct your resources to promoting your value proposition as well your selected services.

Mistake 5. Thinking you can offer social media as an easy win

There's nothing easy about social media strategy development, social media management, social content creation etc. Agencies are made up of smart, creative people but arming your intern or account exec with Hootsuite (other platforms are available) and calling them a ninja doesn't guarantee any ROI for your clients. And therefore long term account growth for you.

Serve the client with social media

That said, offering social media (and related) services to clients may well be a sound business move for you. But you shouldn't see revenue generation as the first reason for offering them. Start from the position of serving the client: If you have had the account for any length of time you'll know the client's market, services/ products and marketing plan better than anyone else. Putting you in the strongest position to help them increase their business / brand fortunes with those services.

Assign the right person

But to really serve the client well, employ social media / community managers who have a mix of technological curiosity, creative flair, communication skills and marketing and commercial acumen.

That could well be an exec (I have worked with some who are excellent) but don't start there as a default position.

Mistake 6. Chasing the money

Going for any and all types of digital work, whether it is a good fit for your skills, experience and / or value proposition is a trap that agencies often fall in to. It's tempting to stray from your stated proposition or particular service or industry niche. But by doing so you may well then water down your offer elsewhere.

Learn to say 'no'.

Client needs a blog and the content strategy / creation to support it? That might be in your 'zone'. It needs to be a multilingual ecommerce solution with integration into their inventory system? That might not and saying yes without thinking it through could well risk your whole relationship. You might be better looking at a partnership (with the caveats above) or referring the client on to a specialist. If you have no track record in technically complex solutions / software engineering then there's every chance the project will over utilise your time and erode any profit. So qualify out any conversations with existing clients or any new business enquiries, it might benefit you to say a qualified 'no thanks' more often.

Mistake 7. Not having a Client Services function

You may have thrived as a specialist agency (digital or otherwise) with the 'do-ers' working direct with the clients. But as soon as you broaden your offering, and / or start to attract more clients you'll need think about bringing in excellent Client Services / Account Handling folk.

Account handling function

Don't leave that decision too long. That's because clients aren't buying a commodity product (that App or Email campaign you built) but are looking for a great experience: service, thought leadership and 'chemistry', all areas led by Client Services. Not sure if you need an account handling function? [Have a look at our guide on account handling for more details.](#)

Mistake 8. Not having a Project Management function

Although there are related skills sets, Project Managers are distinct beasts from Account Handlers. When you start to take on either a lot of digital tech/creative production work or complex, multi-stakeholder site builds, you'll need a dedicated Project Manager. Don't expect the Account Handlers to take this role on, a degree of hybrid role can work for a while but the tipping point comes very quickly as you take on more complex digital work.

Two different worlds

- ☑ Account Handlers typically need to be 'outward facing' and mobile, serving their clients and being involved in strategy, planning, creative, marketing meetings on or off site.
- ☑ Project Managers are typically anchored to the agency office, focused on project

resources, internal team or external partner liaison etc.

Two different approaches which are hard to juggle in one person.

Mistake 9. Believing that being a platform / product specialist will bring you success

I'm not saying you shouldn't be a pure Wordpress build agency, or a HubSpot partner. It could be a great move for your Agency. But think it through: there are pros and cons to becoming a 'badged' services provider. Signing up to a vendor product does not guarantee instant revenue for your agency. You need to consider if that 'preferred partner' relationship is right for you in terms of your existing proposition, the overall market, revenue projections and your in-house technical / analytical and marketing skills. Platforms are just tools to help you solve a client's problems or realise their market opportunities. You need marketing / commercial strategies and creative thinking to make a success of the platform.

Question your developers

As a side note: if your only or senior developer lobbies hard for a specific, possibly esoteric tech stack / development framework that they know well, question if that is the best reason for you to offer only that to the market.

Mistake 10. Pitching your new services without a plan

This incorporates the selling in of the new services you offer to existing clients and pitching to new business prospects. In both cases you need a plan. For the former, look at our [Account Growth guide](#) and associated template. And for the latter, create great proposals and pitches that will win you business with our [guide to agency selection](#). This is aimed at client teams but can be used by agencies to glean what clients will be looking for in your approach and pitch.

Agency Owner ‘Nuggets’ of advice for agency owners

Richard Sharp, Creative Partner, The SHARP Agency

<https://twitter.com/SHARPIdeas>

Nugget 1:

“Truly effective digital marketing, the type that helps you win and retain clients – comes from a blend of Art and Science. So if you are development / analytics startup or agency looking to offer a more rounded service to clients, look to team recruitment or external partnerships for your ‘Art’. Those people will bring the creative, brand-building idea to complement your Science. And vice versa. Fully embrace collaboration”.

Richard explains this ethos in more detail at <http://www.thesharpagency.co.uk/artscience-of-digital-marketing/>

Liane Grimshaw / Founder and Managing Director, SupaReal

<https://twitter.com/supareal>

Nugget 1:

“Offering and delivering digital marketing services isn’t just about the “doing”, it’s also about the “thinking”. If you want to do this right and create true value for you and your agency, you need to THINK DIGITAL from the beginning, built right into the client’s strategy, not as a cheap bolt on as an afterthought.”

Nugget 2:

“Don’t scrimp on talent! If you are starting small, hire the best specialist you can, who has as much experience as you can. You’ll only cock it up if you don’t!”

Nugget 3:

“Digital marketing is very process driven and success often relies on having the right systems in place to deliver. Get your processes defined early and keep improving them as you go. Find the right tools to help you too and bake them into the defined processes you develop.”

Chris Conlan / Managing Director / Joe Public Advertising /

<https://uk.linkedin.com/in/conlanchris>

Nugget 1:

“Ensure you align your offering with a consumer or client benefit, not a platform. I have seen so many agencies calling themselves ‘Drupal specialists’, or styling themselves as Twitter experts. Fine, have those things as part of your offering, but remember that no matter how dominant a platform seems to be, or how much it is the flavour of the month at the moment, you can guarantee it won’t be a couple of years down the line. And then you’ll have a serious restructuring job on your hands.”

Nugget 2:

“If a digital team is being established within an existing business, pay attention to how it will integrate culturally. The offering of the digital team has to resonate with the company’s wider offering and the people you employ should also fit in to company culture. I always opt for what I call the water cooler test - would every person in the company be able to talk to every other person in the company if they met at the water cooler? Might seem a little frivolous, but it really helps to provide the glue that binds a team together.”

Simon Latham / Founding Partner / Marvellous

<https://twitter.com/marvellousleeds>

Nugget 1:

“If I had one must-do tip I’d say: Focus on a particular sector. Find out all you can, and develop a real empathy for that client, their challenges and the wider market. You can then build services that are extremely effective and valuable.”

Nick Pauley/ Managing Director / Pauley Creative

<https://twitter.com/PauleyCreative>

Nugget 1:

“Practice what you preach - Can you realistically tell folks that an inbound strategy works if you haven’t proven it for yourself?”

Nugget 2:

“Be specialists, use specialists, grow internal specialists - Clients are more clued up digitally than they used to be, you will soon be found out if you play at

being experts across all media and platforms.”

Nugget 3:

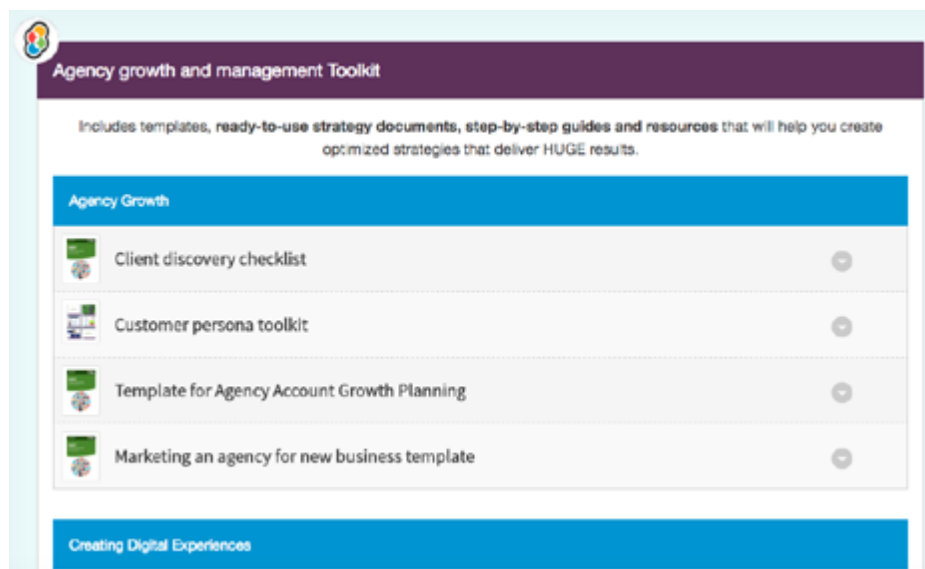
“Employ for attitude and train skills. If it’s feasible, employ good people who have a track record of self-improvement, learning and an obvious passion for the channel.”

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