

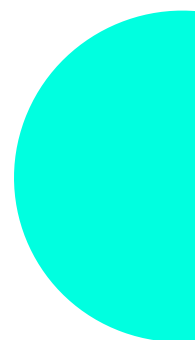
WHY YOUR DIGITAL MARKETING FAILED

An Unapologetic Guide to Achieving Digital Success

Dim Apostolovski

Contents

Introduction	2
Business viability - the health & maturity of your business	5
Are you ready?	8
Service Costs - service options & investment levels	12
Capability - requirements and options	16
Accountability - it's a two-way street	20
Responsibilities - identify, assign and be specific	23
Collaboration - communication, building trust, feedback & recognition	25
Expectations - shooting for the stars, reaching for the moon	27
Campaign performance, promises & results	31
Final words - are we there yet?	36





Hello!

“What you are about to read will change your life forever!” No good? How about, “I’m going to reveal the insider secrets that have led to *insert ridiculous and outlandish claim* and how you can do the same!”

Am I getting warmer?

I hope your answer is a firm and resounding “no” but there is also a chance that my inference to what may have led you here is the reason you may be reading this right now? Am I getting warmer now? I think I may be, so let us begin.

First, let me introduce myself, my name is Dim Apostolovski, General Manager of the Australian based digital marketing agency, Clearwater Agency. I love Prince (the musician, not the royals!), I enjoy running, meditation and long walks along the beach, oh wrong audience, wrong forum and wrong on all fronts!

Where am I going with all this, this is nothing like what the title of this article suggested!

Really? Let’s tackle that assertion for a moment, shall we?

Having spent over a decade in the digital marketing space, boy could I tell you some stories, like this one time... Woops, did it again, sorry – I think you get the point by now.

Let’s get to business

My name, position, location and obsession for the artist Prince I can assure you are legitimate, also my time within the digital marketing industry which is edging close to fifteen years but hey, who’s counting?



I've had the honour and pleasure of leading some of Australian's most successful digital marketing teams and specialists and along the way, working closely with some of the most successful Australian businesses, large and small.

The massive slabs of content you see below was born out a weekend conversation with former peers and colleagues when asked the question, "how's business?" Typically, this is a question asked as pleasantry, but this time was different.

It wasn't long before each of us were riffing with one another about the state of digital marketing, our trials and tribulations, successes, failures, frustrations, joys, well you get the gist. As our conversation went on, I began to wonder, was this a form of confirmation bias? Was I hearing what I wanted to hear? Were these my opinions, beliefs being confirmed in an echo chamber? What about the facts? What facts I ask you, do facts even matter?

All facts (and jokes) aside, what was clear was that this wasn't the first time I had heard this soundtrack. Unlike the incredible and arguably greatest soundtrack of all time (by you know who), the ending of conversation did not leave me satisfied, but simply frustrated, realising our conversation was a broken record.

What was confirmed was that we were discussing the same things we did when we spoke last, oh and the time before that, and the time before... You get the idea; a broken record was the best way to describe it.

The following day I decided to settle this once and for all and knew it was time to attempt to set the record straight. Is that even possible with scratched LP records? At the very least, it was time to record a new soundtrack.

What you are about to read is my view, my opinion, my experiences and quite frankly, my attempt to set the record straight. My experience leading digital marketing agencies, advising and consulting business owners and ultimately my insights, thoughts and advice to support both digital agencies and Australian business owners in achieving business growth and success.

In my time I have seen the success and failure of countless businesses due to the impact of their digital marketing or lack thereof.

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An unapologetic guide

My intention is to provide an unapologetic guide to help digital agencies provide exceptional performance and service for their clients. “Wait, you are going to help your competitors?” Well, I truly hope so, competition breeds excellence!

It equally (if not more so) serves to support Australian businesses with their digital marketing journey and provide both a cautionary tale and straight forward ways to plan and achieve success.

Shall we begin?



1. Business Viability

The health & maturity of your business

Now I am sure this question may leave some readers feeling anywhere from a little anxious to downright offended and rightly so, for many it can be a rather confronting question, especially if success has eluded them. “Of course, I have a viable business!”

Unfortunately, it's difficult to argue with the data indicating that approximately 60% of business will fail in their first three years. What may surprise you is that 50% of the businesses that fail are actually profitable. In this article we will not tackle all the reasons businesses fail but I think it's important to call out the most common reasons.

Reasons businesses fail

These include: lack of leadership, poor management skills, poor planning, poor governance, mismanagement of financials, business model and unsuccessful marketing initiatives.

I'm sure you can see why I wanted to call these out and more importantly those reasons for failure that we will tackle today – care to take a guess? If you said business model and failed marketing initiatives you would correct, unfortunately today's guessing game does not come with a prize but it will serve as a cautionary tale of the impact the guessing game can have on your business.

Your business model

So, let us begin. When we talk business model, we are essentially describing a conceptual structure that supports the viability of a business and describes how it will operate, generate revenue and how it expects to achieve its goals. The digital age has ushered in dozens of new, viable business models that have revolutionised industries, commerce and the way we live.



When we talk business models it's important to know that most businesses do not operate on any one model but are often a combination of many.

Some of the most common models include; manufacturing, distribution, retail, franchise, bricks-and-mortar, eCommerce, bricks-and-clicks, subscription, advertisement, agency-based, affiliate and drop-shipping to name just a few.

As you can see each provides a unique set of considerations; when businesses operate with a combination of multiple models you can see how complexity and risk can quickly grow. Each model has its advantages and limitations, do you know what they are for your business?

It might surprise you how this simple and ordinarily straight forward question can leave business owners tongue tied.

Ensure that you understand your business model inside and out. What may feel like a trivial question and exercise is often overlooked and/or misunderstood resulting in one of the most common reasons that a business will fail.

Now, the reason why we are all here.

Unsuccessful marketing initiatives

I am going to spare you my sermon on what should be rather obvious, that is, businesses would fail to exist if it was not for marketing, why? Marketing drives sales, sales drive revenue and revenue will lead to... you get the idea.

Marketing is an essential channel and the lifeblood of a business. Hang on, I thought sales was also the lifeblood of a business? Right you are, let's label marketing and sales as the "vascular system" of a business, as you can't move blood without veins.

Unfortunately, many business owners approach their marketing much like the quote from the classic 1989 Kevin Costner flick, Field of Dreams, "if you build it, they will come". Leaving them wondering, "where are all my customers?"

So how do you ensure your business has a healthy "vascular system"?

There are many reasons why the marketing initiatives fail, these can include its business plan, campaign strategy, market research, capability (strategic and execution), cost and budget, value proposition, branding or brand name to name just a few.





First step, get your diet and exercise in order. Wait, are we still talking about marketing? Yes, indeed we are, much like getting in shape it can take a lot of heaving lifting at first, it can take time to see results, requiring patience and sticking to a plan and routine, until one day? You guessed it, the fruits of your hard work pay off as you continue to take steps on the pathway to success and in this example, health.

There is an important reason I am using health and fitness as an example and the vascular system to represent the health of your business.

Much like diet and fitness fads promoting and making outlandish claims to get in shape, we typically find similarities within the digital marketing space.

Let's cut to chase, getting shape does not require a personal trainer used by Hollywood stars or the sports nutritionist from your favourite sporting team, neither does your digital marketing.

Today we will go back to basics, whether you are new to digital marketing or looking to get your "vascular system" in order, I promise to do my best to make this exercise as enjoyable as possible. No pain no gain?





2. Are you ready?

So, someone has told you that you should be doing digital marketing, perhaps SEO in order to get onto the front page of Google and drive free traffic to your website? No? Was it that you need social media marketing and a new website after seeing your competitors on Facebook and visiting their newly launched but enviously stunning website?

This is a very common path for small business owners at the early stages of their digital journey.

Unfortunately, this can come with many misconceptions, expectations and lead to business owners investing with a digital marketing agency when they are not ready.

Alternatively, you may currently or have previously partnered with an agency but success has evaded you.

This is a very common place we find small business owners in. Many partnering with an agency, often moving from one agency to another, leaving them disenchanted and discouraged if this bloody digital marketing thing actually works? Inner conflict can occur as they see their competitors organic search results, social media presence and brand name appearing everywhere, leaving them asking, why not me?

Think you're ready? Can you answer the 7 questions below?

So how do you know if you are ready to partner with a digital agency? Here are essential questions you need to ask:

1. Do you have a clear business plan; clear goals, targets, objectives including financials such as your budget?



2. Can I afford the required investment? How long can I wait until I see a return?
3. How will I measure performance, what are these metrics? These should be metrics connected to your goals & objectives, i.e. increase in sales, leads, enquires or conversions
4. Are you investing in lead generation or building your brand and business?
5. What are your expectations from a potential partner, performance and service levels?
6. Risk mitigation – is the success of your business overly reliant on digital marketing working?
7. Are you clear on what the services offered are and how they work? You don't need to be technically-minded, but you should have a clear view and conceptual understanding of the service provided.

There are many incredible digital marketing agencies in Australia, many providing exceptional work but their success and those of their clients is often dictated by answering the questions I have outlined above.

Why you, yes you!

This question can often leave a bewildered look on the face of business owners as if a cardinal sin has been committed. It's mortifying how often this bewildered look is seen. I won't mince words when I say that if you cannot articulate and state why your target market should pick you over your competition then it's time to stop what you are doing and answer this question right now.

In a nutshell it forms part of a company's overall marketing strategy and informs consumers as to why it deserves their

business. It also serves as a statement informing consumer what the business stands for and how it operates. It is the promise your brand is making to the audience that it intends to build a relationship with.

What's your value proposition?

The importance of a value proposition cannot be overstated for not only your marketing but brand.





If you do not have a clear value proposition, I recommend you break it into the following tasks:

- What are all the benefits of the product or service you are offering?
- Describe what makes the benefits of the product or service valuable;
- What is main problem of the customers in your target audience?
- Connect the value that you provide with the customers problem;
- What makes your business the one they should choose to provide this value?

One of the biggest mistake business owners can make is to outsource their business to a third party. In many cases we see digital agencies becoming this third party where expectations are often unrealistic and fanciful.

If you find yourself expecting an agency to drive and deliver your business success from start to finish it might be time to step back and reassess your focus. Often this leads business owners moving from one agency to another like a game of musical chairs. Do not outsource the responsibility and ownership of your business, a harsh truth that many find themselves facing.

Your agency should be seen as an extension of your business, a partner if you will, providing capability and expertise to help you achieve your business goals and objectives.

This takes us back to the original question, are you ready to partner with a digital marketing agency?

Are you planning to fail?

Do you have a business plan? Do you have a clear understanding of what the problem is that you are trying to solve? Do you understand your numbers and financials? Does your business have a clear value proposition?

Do you have your house in order?

Are you left scratching your head with the questions I have outlined above? If so, it might be time to reassess whether you are ready to hire a digital agency for the first, second, third or even forth time.

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You've likely heard how Benjamin Franklin once stated, "if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail", a statement that should remind us of the importance of having a plan in place. Sadly however, this step is still all too often overlooked.

Ok then, I will assume that you have answered yes to all the questions and your house is in order.

Great, we are ready to proceed!



3. Service Costs

Service options & investment level

Understanding your financials and numbers is critical for the success of any business; furthermore, understanding how your digital marketing service costs should align to your business goals.

This principle rings true whether you are looking for a full-service agency, in-house specialists, contractors or freelancers.

One of the biggest drivers of the level of investment required is determined by the “problem you are needing to solve”, the objectives you have set and the goals you would want to achieve.

I will take you through other drivers and influences in determining costs and budget requirements shortly.

Let’s look at some basic examples and answer the question I posed earlier, “are you investing in lead generation or building your brand and business?”

Oh, I hear some of you saying that you have eCommerce websites and require more sales, yes, please consider eCommerce in the “lead generation” category.

So, what are some examples of what this might look like?

- Service based businesses looking for clients (enquires -> leads) such as lawyers, architects and locksmiths;
- An eCommerce business looking to generate more traffic and visitors to their website to increase sales and online revenue;
- A bricks and mortar business looking to build its brand name;



- A bricks and clicks business wanting to increase the foot traffic to its physical stores and generate more sales online;
- A subscription-based business looking to increase the number of its subscribers.

These are basic examples to illustrate that on paper, they don't tell us much, let alone determining what service(s) would be the best fit for each. By services I am referring to the most common services offered by digital marketing agencies, such as SEO, PPC marketing, social media marketing, content marketing and email marketing to name just a few.

How would one begin to suggest services and applicable fees without understanding a client's business goals, targets, timeframes and expectations, much alone a marketing strategy? The answer is typically a somewhat arbitrary service recommendation and attached service fee.

Unfortunately, this is common and maybe the reason you are reading this right now wondering why your current or previous digital marketing campaigns have failed.

Failing to plan is planning to fail.



Rent or Mortgage?

What is it that you are trying to achieve?

Let's review and step back for a moment and once again ask, what are you trying to achieve, are you looking to generate leads or are you looking to build your brand name, or both?

You see, much like the physical reality of renting or owning a house by having a mortgage, both have their pros and cons. In some cases, it makes sense to follow one path versus the other and this simply depends on your business and the position you are in, including any dependants you may have.

I see lead generation and building a brand much in the same way. Lead generation websites, campaigns and other assets are much like renting, regardless of the digital



channel(s) that maybe utilised to do so. Whether it's through paid advertising such as the Google Ads network or search engine optimisation, I consider this approach similar to paying rent, it serves a clear purpose and a simple one – pay to play with lead generation as the focused objective.

With the “rent” example for lead generation, what is the marketing investment you can afford and feel comfortable to pay to play? With this, comes knowing what your required ROI and margins are.

Now you might be saying, I don't want to be a renter, I would rather purchase a home. In our example, I liken a mortgage loan to that of building your business and brand. Your brand name and equity will govern the value of your “home” and in this case, your business, and the investment you have made in it.

Vision of the future

When investing in your brand name and business you are doing so with a vision of the future, considering the value of your asset, years or even decades into the future.

Much like the reality of home prices and cost of living, digital real estate is no different. Whether it's the cost of paid advertising or the digital real estate of being on the front page of the Google search results, costs typically increase as time goes on.

It's important to consider your digital investment in your business for your domain and brand name much in the same way.

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of the future

When determining your budget for your digital marketing, consider your business needs, goals & objectives before all others. With our basic example it can be rather binary, do you need to drive traffic to increase your online sales, leads, enquires or subscriptions as an example or do you require more than simply “renting” at this stage by wanting to build your brand with a multifaceted marketing strategy and campaign?

How much do you need to spend?

You might be asking, so how much should I be spending? That depends on several factors, one of them being the capability of the agency or the existing team members within your business. “I thought this article was meant to answer questions not create more of them?” You are right and that's why we will break this into three factors that



should build guiding factors that will determine costings, timeframes and budget requirements

- **Competition** – how competitive is your industry/market? One of the biggest factors that will influence the level of your investment
- **Locale & Targeting** – local, metro, national or global targeting? Targeting will greatly influence the level of investment
- **Domain & brand authority** – two factors that money alone can not influence as they also require time as well as factors that can and do, sit outside of the digital space exclusively
- **Capability** – capability of your digital marketing team will drive your costs. Note, more expensive does not necessarily equate to better performance and more affordable does not equate to substandard results. We will explore this further in our capability section.
- **Complexity** – often overlooked, complexity to deliver campaign success extends beyond those of digital specialists. This can include utilising resources within an agency that sit outside of “people” and those relating to external partners, data and technology.

There are many factors that will determine cost, I’ve outlined five that can greatly influence budget requirements but did not include one that is commonly overlooked that I have intentionally left off the list – that being, timeframes.

Timeframes are the output of the five inputs above and can differ greatly, an agency will typically provide a range and should consider the above factors, client expectations and budget.



4. Capability

Requirements and options

Where does one start with determining whether you should partner with an agency, hire in-house specialists or contract freelancers?

Without sounding like a broken record and stating the obvious, that depends on several factors. Your requirements, timeframes, existing team capability and budget will be drivers in determining the right approach. Let's examine these options and help you better understand how they can be applied and utilised effectively by your business.

1. Digital marketing agency

Let's start with the option that probably got you here to begin with, hiring a digital marketing agency. It should come as no surprise that partnering with an agency can quickly inject capability into your business without the overheads, legal obligations and costings of hiring dedicated marketing specialists.

One of the most compelling benefits that they can provide is the leveraging of talent and expertise that extends outside of that which can be provided by dedicated specialists whether within your team or freelancers.

What do I mean by leveraging talent? Well, I see on a daily basis what team work looks like within an agency. Team members coming together to provide their expertise, insights and experience for campaign strategy, planning, execution and delivery.

Unlike having dedicated staff or freelancing, a digital agency can inject capability that can scale with your requirements and business growth. Instead of having one resource on your campaign, it is common to have several and if things get tricky; agency team members are on hand to provide their colleagues with support.



Another benefit is agencies will typically have dozens, hundreds and in some cases thousands of clients and this is often an overlooked benefit. Why is that?

Well, in this space data is king as it provides insights into digital strategy, techniques and the impact on performance, the result is the ability to quickly understand and determine what works and what doesn't and pivot if required.

There is no shortage of options out there and agencies you can partner with. It's critical as we outlined in section 1 and 2 that you are indeed ready to partner, that you have a business plan in place, clear understanding on your targets, goals and objectives and financials, yes, your budget.

2. In-house specialists

In-house specialists can be an expensive option and one that typically provides very specific expertise and capability. In-house specialists do not provide the scalability that an agency team provides.

Often these specialists are often under utilised and often business owners find themselves attempting to expand their role and responsibilities to justify the cost of an in-house specialist.

Whilst the capability maybe there with in-house specialists, it may not make financial sense and often what we find is that the business owner him or herself attempting to bridge or fill capability holes where possible.

An example of this maybe running a paid adverting campaign or social media profiles and accounts themselves. Results and performance can vary greatly but like much small businesses, budget and cost considerations lead to business owners wearing many hats, including ones that require specialists such as digital marketing expertise.

We often see in-house specialists working closing digital agencies as this collaboration can provide both the cost benefits, scalability and capability of an agency coupled with existing capability and team members within the business.

This combination can provide fantastic results and performance as in-house specialists can be a conduit for both businesses and teams.

3. Freelancers

Freelancers can provide fantastic value and capability for your business, unlike having dedicated in-house specialists, they can provide the flexibility in regards to costings and service hours; alleviating one of the pitfalls of having full time, in house staff.



They can provide complementary capability and expertise and can be cost effective additions for any business. Examples of where we often see freelancers utilised include: web design & development capability, copywriting, creative design such as photography and videography.

Freelancers provide you with talent that extends far outside of local talent. There is no shortage of sites where hiring freelancers is straight forward and simple, providing you with insights such as client feedback and reviews, cost effective project options and flexibility.

Much like in house specialists, it's imperative that freelancers and agencies are in the position to work together in a cohesive fashion, the last thing you want is to be project managing both parties if it can be avoided.



Where to now?

As you can see, there are benefits for all three options and you may find utilising all of them during various stages of your digital journey.

How do you assess capability before you decide which agency, potential recruit or freelancer you should go with?

There is no shortage of review websites such as Google My Business reviews, as an example to hear feedback and testimonials from real world clients including reviews sites and forums.

As I mentioned at the very beginning of this section, the capability and expertise you require will dictate the level your investment. This should align with your requirements; your digital objectives and goals.

Most agencies will provide the usual “suite” of services such as search engine optimisation, paid per click marketing, social media marketing, email & content marketing with many also supporting web design & development requirements.



Their portfolio size of clients may range anywhere from the teens into the thousands and costs can vary significantly as I outlined earlier.

Ensure you ask questions of a prospective agency, with questions such as:

- “What are some of the clients you have worked with”
- “What industries do you specialise in?”
- “What are your service & management fees, what is your pricing based on?”
- “Can you provide case studies of clients you have worked with?”
- “What are your service deliverables and timeframes?”
- “Do you have contracts for your services?”

When speaking to an agency, ensure they clearly understand your requirements and expectations. We will discuss both later on in this article and how to validate which partner is right for you.

When looking to hire in-house or freelancers, the same applies. Ask to see their portfolio, example of previous work, employment references and interview them as you would with any other potential recruit.





5. Accountability

It's a two-way street

Far too often we see business owners moving from one agency to another. As I outlined above, there can be many valid reasons for this and this transience is the very reason why this article has been written. Our goal is to help you navigate through endless options, choices and ensuring that your first, second, third or even fourth attempt at digital marketing is a successful one.

A simple definition of accountability is taking or being assigned responsibility for something you have done or something you are supposed to do.

Essentially, we view this as taking ownership and the initiative to deliver what is expected.

Whether it's from your employees, employer, friends, family or partner, accountability of oneself is also something we are going to dive into.

This may jar a few of our readers and rightly so, it can be difficult to self-reflect on one's influence when determining the reasons for failure, setbacks and challenges.

Taking ownership

I mentioned earlier in our first section, "Are you ready" of the dangers of outsourcing the success of your business to a third party. By this I mean, the responsibility of your business relies on you taking responsibility and full ownership of it, including missteps, mistakes and failures. Far too often I see business owners blaming others for their failures, blame is one thing, taking ownership of this failure is another.

So where am I going with this? Well, it's important to see your current or future relationship with a digital agency as one of partnership and collaboration.



This includes the understanding that you too are required to be engaged, committed and clear on your responsibilities within the partnership.

Far too often we see clients abdicating their responsibility within the relationship, leading to frustration, mistrust and typically the end of the partnership with an agency. I can't stress enough how often we see this happen, unfortunately this can have dire consequences to not only the business owner but the agency whose reputation it can put in question.

On the flip side, a client can experience a lack of responsibility and accountability from their agency, in-house specialist or freelancer. As such, the vicious cycle begins again, the finger pointing and consequently another potential game of musical chairs?

How did this happen? Was it the agency? Was it the client? Was it the Mayan calendar 2012 end of the world prophecy (kidding)?



“If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail”

The naughty finger

The reality is usually the lack of accountability from both parties to varying degrees. If we set our minds back to the first two sections of this article “Are you ready?” and “Cost & budgets”, we discussed critical factors such as understanding your requirements, having a clear plan with objectives, goals and targets, timeframes, as well as your budget and marketing costs.

When we state “are you ready?” we weren't kidding, accountability can only come with a clear line of responsibility and accountability to drive those outcomes. The lack of clarity, or in some cases, no plan at all, leads us to the vicious cycle above.

Who is ultimately responsible? Is it the business owner who was not prepared and ready to partner with a third party? Was it the agency who failed to ask the necessary questions and instead failed in their responsibility to ensure the partnership would be a suitable fit for both parties?





I feel the answer is a little from column A and a little from column B and in some cases a complete misalignment from start to finish.

If it hasn't become clear just yet where this is leading, let's take a couple of steps back.

It begins with your plan, your vision, your requirements and the problem you are trying to solve. We often talk about discovery sessions, pre-sales questions and measures taken to understand you and your business. The quality of these sessions, the depth of questions and understand is fundamental to setting up the base for a successful partnership.

Stemming from this initial consultation should be the proposed strategy on how to deliver on your business goals & objectives.





6. Responsibilities

Identify, assign and be specific

We now understand that accountability is to take or be assigned responsibly for something you have done or are expected to do. So, where does that leave us? It should leave us with a clear view of where responsibility lies from both you as the prospective client and the agency as a prospective partner.

What responsibilities do each party have and also share? Ensure these are clearly stated, documented and understood, failure to do so can quickly lead us to that vicious cycle of musical chairs!

Delivery and service

I recommend separating them into two sections, a very simplistic view could be; strategy, planning, implementation and reporting from a delivery stand point. The other from a service level & engagement perspective. This may include; the frequency and cadence of scheduled performance meetings, i.e. fortnightly, monthly or quarterly reviews. You may also like to determine response times for questions and enquires made via email and phone as basic service level expectations.

This would include clearly noted responsibilities from both parties. An example maybe that a client must provide access, data and approval prior to execution of work and services. An agency will be responsible to for campaign performance and results with a clear understanding of what these are and what they are “on the hook for.”

An example of this maybe an increase of organic traffic of x by a date/period. Or, it maybe, reduce cost of acquisition by x and drive a return on ad spend to y.

These are very basic examples but it would shock you learn how often they are overlooked. If you are unable to provide an agency with your requirements and what



you are trying to achieve, they will often attempt to fill in the blanks for you and could in turn provide a very generic approach.

This could still yield positive results and performance but it could also be likened to crossing the highway blindfolded – you may be lucky to get to the otherwise unscathed but it does not make it a good idea and certainly fraught with unnecessary risk.

What does “good” look like?

So how do you know what’s a good performance KPI, goal or target? That depends on many factors but it will ultimately be led by you and your requirements as well as understanding your numbers inside and out. An agency may have experience within your industry and provide guidance around performance metrics they consider average, great or exceptional.

Ultimately, the ROI you require on your digital marketing investment will determine the performance KPI’s and targets you set your agency, in-house specialist or freelancer. It’s imperative that you do not move the goal posts unnecessarily if it can be avoided.

It can take a lot of time, resources and heavy lifting to implement and execute on a digital campaign, it can also take time to see the fruits of this work so it is important to stay patient, which I know, can be difficult, especially for business owners who are new to the digital space.

We will tackle this further in our section that discusses expectations.



7. Collaboration

Communication, building trust, feedback & recognition

Every successful relationship is built on trust and when it comes to finding a partner for your business you should not disregard the importance this will have for the success of your business. A digital marketing investment can come with significant risk, this extends far beyond the financial – this includes invested time, additional resources and dependencies.

The non-negotiable

I strongly recommend any relationship you enter into to be seen as a partnership, so with this in mind, what does that look like for you? What are the most important and non-negotiable elements? It's surprising how little business owners communicate this and on the flip side, agencies being direct and clear with their clients of the expectations they have of them.

These typically include proactiveness, response time, having a sense of urgency and commitment. These relate to both clients and agencies; they are interchangeable as you would expect in any business partnership.

If you are currently partnered with an agency, it's never too late to communicate the above, in fact, I strongly encourage you to do so if the expectations of your relationship have not been clearly stated and communicated.

You would be surprised how quickly that can yield positive outcomes. Please keep in mind, whilst you are the paying client, the team on the other side of the phone or email are real people. It can be easy to forget this, especially when the foundations we have outlined in our first few sections are not in place.

Don't I sound like a broken record right about now? Planning and preparation is key! Spoiler alert, this won't be the last time you read that in this article. Sorry, not sorry.



Building trust & confidence

It's hard to build the foundations of trust when these elements are missing, furthermore, having the transparency you require and expect. Unfortunately, we are creatures of self-preservation, in order to override this natural urge to defend we must look to create a space to change this.

Much of what creates the space to build a great relationship and partnership has been outlined in our earlier sections and in particular our section on Accountability. So, what's left, what's left that you need to know?

I liken the following to having fun and enjoying this space as much as possible. "Fun you say? This is business!" Yes, but we are in the business of people, people are interesting creatures who have different drivers and motivations for their behaviour and actions. A great leader knows and understands this and will transcend differences by connecting and resonating with those things that ring true to all.

Recognition & feedback

Having worked in the digital marketing space for over a decade, running teams ranging from small to large, including leading an organisation with over 120 team members, what I am about to say may sound blatantly obvious to you but I challenge you to ask yourself how often you do this with your staff and team.

“

We are wired to feel connected, respond to feeling appreciated and valued..

What is this that I speak of? It's recognition. We are wired to feel connected, respond to feeling appreciated and valued, it leads to higher states of engagement, productivity and motivation. Let's remind ourselves of the importance of recognition and in particular, gratitude and the impact that this will have on your business performance.

Are you asking yourself what just happened, did this article suddenly turn into a self-help book? Well in some ways, isn't that why we are here to begin with?

I have witnessed countless times the stunning effects this can have on team members when hearing this type of recognition from a client. To say they could light up a room would be an understatement, the impact that this has on team members both within the team itself and the relationship with clients cannot be overstated.

I told you it was blatantly obvious right? Who would have thought that communication was the answer? Unfortunately, it is often forgotten.

8. Expectations

Shoot for the stars, reaching for the moon

Now, the mother of disappointment and failure for both business owners and agencies – expectations – or better stated – the failure to meet or exceed them.

I spent a considerable amount of time thinking about this section, moreover, the vast and broad list of things that could be said about expectations. Admittedly it was an exhausting experience.

In service-based businesses, expectation setting will drive the direction and trajectory of projects and ultimately the satisfaction for both parties. No business owner wants to leave clients unsatisfied and disappointed, the impact this can have on the reputation of a brand can be devastating, yet expectation setting is often performed without a framework or guiding principles.

What do the numbers tell us?

According to a Marketing Agency Growth Report conducted by Hubspot, one of the industry's leading CRM software companies for inbound marketing, sales and customer service platforms, the data around the impact of expectation setting is striking.

In summary, 15% of agencies neither have customisable service offerings nor deliver these services on time. It should come as no surprise then that one of the biggest reported pain points for agencies is the acquisition of new clients.

With almost 60% of agencies calling out this pain point as one of the biggest struggles, with a further 16% struggling to solve client retention problems, it shouldn't be surprising that you are reading this article, right?

So how do you set, reset and manage client expectations as an agency and, as a

client, how do you ensure you do the same to ensure not only a successful marketing campaign but a successful partnership?

I put my hand up early in this article to proclaim that you would hear common themes repeated throughout, so, here we go again.

5 Tips for setting & managing client expectations

Let's look some tips for agencies to set client exceptions. In the spirit of attempting to keep this as concise as possible, I am going to reference the sections where I provided my thoughts and commentary that tackle these areas.

1. Set objectives, goals & targets –

These goals are to be mutually agreed between client and agency. These goals must align to the client's business goals, not be arbitrary statements or numbers – tie these into metrics that matter and KPI's connected to goals. (see "Accountability")

2. Campaigns must have a plan in place –

Often missed by agencies as many clients often want the outcomes and ignore the planning to get there. Ensure each campaign has a plan in place. This includes; project milestones, timelines, deadlines and deliverables. Referring to this plan will help manage expectations or concerns along the way (see "Are you ready?")

3. Trust, transparency & performance –

Even with clear communication, planning and capability, things don't always go according to plan. Ensure you are upfront with clients when this occurs and when it does, have a proposed solution or remediation measures ready.

Be clear with what you can achieve, share case studies and results achieved in previous campaigns. Demonstrate that goals can be achieved, timelines can be met even with bumps along the way (see "Collaboration & Accountability")

4. Benchmark assessment –

It's important to help clients understand where they are currently placed in their market as well as the level of previous marketing investment (time & dollars). This is a critical step in setting expectations, campaign budgets, resources and timeframes.





How do you communicate with a new business owner with limited business and marketing maturity, versus an established business and brand? I hope you see these can be two vastly different conversations but how often do we see new business owners expecting similar success in a short time frame?

If you have been in the digital space for even a short period of time, I think your answer is “many times” right? What you need to communicate is the “why” and often this is where agencies miss the mark. Remove the technical jargon and educate clients on the drivers and the impact these have on what’s achievable and why. (See Are you ready, Service costs and Accountability sections”)

5. Under promise –

Self-explanatory right? Well, we often hear statements like “this is what the client wants” during the sales and/or client onboarding process. With the numbers above from HubSpot’s industry report highlighting the struggles agencies face acquiring new clients, is it shocking that salespeople may become “highly optimistic” in order to sign new clients in fear of losing a deal? Provide context, give examples and discuss their benchmark assessment as outlined above. Trust built at this stage through education and transparency is the desired goal, it should not be seen as an obstacle for client acquisition (See “Are you ready?”)

5 Measures to take to improve the performance of your campaign as a client

What if you are the one looking for an agency to partner with or currently have one, you ask? Well much of the above for agencies requires engagement and transparency from prospective and current clients. Here are some tips and measures to take to ensure that you provide your agency with everything they need for a successful campaign:

1. Have a plan in place –

Provide clarity around your business goals, targets and objectives. Be specific and not vague, of course you want to “get more leads” or “make more online sales”, but provide granularity with goals and targets as well as your required timeframes (if required).

2. Disclosure & transparency –

Provide your agency with as much information as possible. You may feel understandably uncomfortable providing sensitive numbers surrounding your costs, margins and profitability. If you do, ask why these are required and what they will be used for.

This includes past digital marketing investment whether currently in place or not, this can become a big determiner in regards to required budgets and





costs, timeframes as well as troubleshooting or fixing technical issues such as possible penalties from search engines, as an example.

3. Trust & autonomy –

Allow agencies to do their thing without micromanaging each stage or step, this can slow progress as well as lower team morale. If you are concerned with progress and have questions, be direct and provide constructive feedback of your concerns and why.

If you find yourself having serious concerns with your campaign progress and performance then review the above sections such as “Are you ready” & “accountability” to determine if there are areas that you and your agency need to review and discuss.

4. Communication & accountability –

It can't be stated enough that communication is the heart of all successful relationships. We often find clients who often innocently miss emails, voicemails and time sensitive requests. Business owners are busy people and it's important to communicate your availability and the best forms of communication to reach you. Do not underestimate the impact that missed or ignored communication can have on the success of your campaign. Ask your agency what they need from you, ensure you have clarity as to what you are responsible for and any dependencies there may be on you.

Remember, you are accountable for your business. Earlier we made it clear that you should not abdicate this responsibility onto your agency or any other party.

5. Constructive feedback –

Ensure you provide as much feedback as possible and whilst at times you may have concerns or frustrations, it's best approached in a direct and constructive fashion. This does not mean that you are acquiescing, it simply provides the most constructive space to resolve any issues or concerns to get the outcome you are looking forward.

I will stop myself right here. As I mentioned earlier, the task of unpicking this section for our readers was a daunting one for obvious reasons as expectation setting is one of the most impactful determiners of client satisfaction, agency success and brand reputation.



9. Campaign performance, promises & results

One of the most difficult positions to align outside of expectations, is campaign performance and results. If there was ever a time to use the phrase, “how long is a piece of string” it would be when discussing performance and results with clients. This is where the rubber meets the road and where campaign strategy, implementation and execution come together to produce outstanding campaign results, leading to smiling faces and high fives right? Not necessarily.

Meeting performance expectations is the culmination and alignment of all that we have discussed thus far. It shouldn't shock you to learn that assessing and reporting campaign performance can leave both clients and agencies in a state of frustration, bewilderment and dissatisfaction.

In a sea of possibilities and opportunities mixed with levels of expectations ranging from conservative to downright fanciful, nothing will test the trust and confidence of a partnership more so than the numbers on scoreboard.

Whether you work with clients within a digital agency or a business owner currently partnered or looking to partner with an agency, it's important that you have your ducks in a row. Surprise, surprise – these ducks look and sound like those that we have discussed thus far.

The reality is that the name of each of these ducks is the title we have given to each section in this article. Whilst ducks might seem like peaceful creatures, these ones in particular can have a devastating impact on your business when ignored and not fed.

Performance guarantees & promises

There are many agencies with interesting value propositions to say the least. Typically, these centre around performance guarantees and can range anywhere from

reasonable to downright outlandish. These may include promises and guarantees such as Google rankings, increase in organic traffic, enquires and more.

I'm not going to besmirch competitors, agencies and those who promise such things can appropriately deliver these promises at times, however the difference here is the "when and how". Unfortunately, many of these are blanket statements and can be misleading and inappropriate, I want to stress the words, can be.

Examples include:

- **We will double your traffic –**

Sounds great but what's the benchmark? Are you starting with 10 visitors a month? Doubling won't be difficult. Or is it thousands of visitors, now doubling becomes challenging and over what time period? Is it qualified traffic with high relevancy and intent?

- **We guarantee to get you onto the front page of Google –**

Another interesting promise as not all keywords are equal, the traffic volume, relevancy and user intent, where on the front page? Does spot 10 count?

- **We will guarantee x enquires each month –**

Not quite outlandish when quantified with the "how" if possible and validated, but often stated as a blanket promise and one that jumps out at you; quantity over quality, possibly?

Do you see a pattern?

Let's focus on what we have learnt and discussed today and answer the question with that lens.

First, do any of these align with your business goals and objectives? I'm sure right about now you are saying "yes, yes and yes" and rightly so, who wouldn't want those "wins" above? They sound great right?



Sounds incredible, what's the catch?

The reality is that these are agency-lead and not client-lead; i.e. connected to business goals and objectives. They are alluring, attractive and quite compelling.



To clarify – traffic, front page results and unqualified enquires are not what you are trying to achieve with your “goals”.

I’ll take a punt and speculate that your goals may include, increasing your revenue, improving your margins, reducing costs, growing your business and building your brand?

Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that improving the above promised metrics in our example would not achieve your business goals, to the contrary, they may and can. I am merely suggesting to dissect these statements and review them with a different lens.

If your agency or one that you are considering hiring garnered your attention with such examples, great, they have sparked your interest and attention. It is now time to assess whether such promises and guarantees will drive the results you are looking to achieve.

As I said earlier, they may or they may not, I would suggest and recommend that promised and guaranteed results are tailored to you and your business, not an off-the-shelf or blank guarantee applicable to any prospective client.

Metrics that matter – measuring success

Campaign results should be measured by performance metrics that both parties have agreed to and are tied directly into campaign goals, targets and timeframes. If we revisited what we discussed in the “expectations” section” we can see this process begins at the point of sale and continues until the conclusion of a project or ending of the partnership. This is a cyclical process of review and discussion.

When reviewing the performance of digital campaigns, how do you know what good, great and exceptional looks like? Great question, it is this “unknown” that can lead to exceptional client satisfaction and client retention and on the flip side, dissatisfied clients looking to end services.

What shouldn’t surprise you is that if you have progressed this far, assuming you did not skip ahead, is that either outcome can occur even when performance and results are identical. If you did skip ahead and are left scratching your head wondering how this can be, I highly recommend reading earlier sections: “Are you Ready?”, “Service costs”, “Accountability”, “Collaboration”.

Hang on, that sounds like I need to read this whole bloody thing?





Behind the numbers

What's one man's trash is another man's treasure and that can apply here. Tied and bound to expectations, campaign performance requirements are also connected to financials such as business model, operating costs and margins.

Put simply, two business, with identical business models, selling the same products or services at the same price may require vastly differently ROI requirements in order to break even, as an example.

Lower performance, better result? What lies behind the numbers?

In this example, it's easy to mistake what good looks like right? The agency may feel getting 10x return on their on the ad spend for client A is phenomenal, while being disappointed that only 5x was achieved for client B. Little did they know that initially client B with a 5x return is ecstatic while client A with 10x is cancelling their service and is disappointed with the agency's performance?

This should be a glaringly obvious example for both agencies and clients that we discussed earlier. The business owner is responsible for the success of their business, this includes the hiring and firing of agencies.

In this example we can see stunning marketing performance and results that did not meet the requirements as a result of other factors within the business, i.e. the health of the business itself (Client A). Meanwhile, client B is over the moon and cannot thank his team enough for the results they have achieved.

It's critical to look behind the numbers and not take them on face value. Digital specialists may not have the level of business or commercial acumen as that of their clients.

I mentioned earlier that identical campaign results can lead to two different outcomes, high client satisfaction or a cancellation of services. I hope I made this point even stronger by providing the example above that results are relative.



You can now see that digital marketing specialists are measured against the unique requirements of each business. This includes, the health and maturity of the business and all that comes between. What can look, feel, smell and sound like a win can be quite the opposite.

Devil in the detail

The devil is in the detail and the detail will appear revealing the drivers, levers and nuances within a business IF the earlier steps are followed. When these are clearly understood by both the agency and client, what occurs next, I liken to a formula one racing car. Both the driver (business owner) on the track and engineering team in the pits (agency), will work like a well-oiled machine.

Lead by data and both with a clear understanding of the buttons, knobs and settings to change to adjust race strategy, tactics and overcome unforeseeable challenges and setbacks. A race will typically last around 90 minutes but the race is won or lost long before race day – planning and preparation anyone?

Performance Reporting

Data and reporting are key to measuring performance and progress, without it I liken it to a ship on the high seas without a crew and coordinates of its destination, ending as a shipwreck along the rocks of some distant coastline.

Campaign reporting and more importantly the metrics that are being tracked and reported are your coordinates, they inform you when you are on or off track. In absence of appropriate performance metrics, it makes sailing the digital seas unnecessarily risky and dangerous.

When this occurs, it can bring with it frustration, potential loss of confidence and trust of an agency. We know how that story typically ends.

Now, with appropriate performance metrics for campaign reporting in place, we can accurately track progress, pivot if required, scale and build and extrapolate performance insights and in turn, opportunities that they may bring.

If you don't understand your reports it's time to bring it back to basics and ask your agency.

What kind of race are you in? Hopefully one of careful preparation, planning, reporting and a pit crew of specialists on your team.

If you are questioning the performance of your agency, I recommend reviewing our earlier sections as guidance and a framework to course-correct and adjust your race day strategy if need be.



10. Are we there yet?

How does one begin to summarise the lessons for the day?

We began by looking at business viability, including the most common reasons why businesses fail. We discovered that one of the most common reasons are failed marketing initiatives.

We learned the importance of having a business plan and the problem you are trying to solve within your business.

We examined and reviewed the drivers of digital marketing services costs and the importance of understanding your short, medium and long term goals. We explored examples through the lens of three models; lead generation, eCommerce and brand building.

We assessed three common options to inject marketing capability into your business. These including digital agencies, in house specialists, freelancers and the advantages and challenges they bring.

We learned the importance of accountability and how to ensure we identify and assign responsibilities and provide clear and specific performance KPI's that are connected to business objectives and goals.

We took steps to understand the importance of collaboration and factors that influence a successfully partnership such as communication, building trust, providing feedback and recognition.

We dissected the importance of expectation setting and ultimately the impact this will have on client satisfaction levels, client acquisition and retention. We looked at



what agencies can do to improve how they set and manage client expectations and challenges along the way.

And finally, we tackled campaign results and performance and how to measure success. We understand the importance of ensuring campaign performance reporting is connected to business goals and the metrics that matter.



Is that a wrap?

If I was to reflect on my time in the digital space over the past decade it would be one of great fondness, excitement, challenge, innovation, growth, disruption, opportunity and passion. It's been a tremendous privilege working with amazing teams and driving transformative change for Australian businesses, large and small.

It reminds us that there can be a thin line that separates success and failure, this article was born within that line and space, a space that I have called home. Within it, my experience, insights and learning.

In my introduction I stated that my intention was to help digital marketing agencies and Australian businesses by providing an unapologetic guide, a cautionary tale and straight forwards ways to achieve digital success. With it, an objective view, reflection and a framework to help all those that this content finds, I certainly hope I have achieved on this objective.

To your success.



Thank you.

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