

SEO Consulting – Outsourcing SEO Knowledge

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A couple of days ago, I received a call from a west coast reader who works as a corporate recruiter. She had been asked to find an in-house SEO for one of her clients, a medium sized corporation. After recommending a number of SEO/SEM related forums and Ed Lewis' [SEO Consultants Directory](#), we started to talk about the cost/benefit of hiring an in-house SEO and outsourcing the work to a consultant. As our conversation moved from point to point, a number of issues surrounding hiring in-house SEO talent emerged.

Today the trend leans towards hiring in-house. A quick glance at employment websites such as Monster.com or Workopolis.ca shows a growing list of positions for SEOs who have two or more years of experience. The demand for experienced search marketers far outstrips the supply of really good practitioners, a situation evidenced by [SEO salaries](#) ranging from 30K at the low end to over 100K at the top.

As a measure of the success of the industry, entry level positions paying 30K and up show how valuable skill-sets held by SEOs are on the open market. Conversely, those figures might also indicate that the businesses hiring in-house SEOs are, by and large, ignorant of what exactly SEO means to their business.

Online businesses do know one thing with absolute certainty. The value of strong search engine placements is obvious. Websites or documents that enjoy prominent placement tend to make more money than sites lacking good rankings do. Sites that rank well on search engines have a much better chance of converting visitors to customers, simply because it is easier for those visitors to find those sites.

The value of hiring an in-house SEO shouldn't be underestimated, even if that value appears to be inflated at this time. It all comes down to trust. The services offered by a good SEO might be simple to outline but are difficult to fully understand. The search marketing industry has, unfortunately, been put in a position of ill repute by a small number of unethical practitioners and a slightly larger number of uninformed mainstream journalists. There is also the growing legion of new practitioners hanging their virtual shingles without the requisite knowledge or background.

Given the perceptual environment, it is hard for business decision makers to know whom to trust, especially after reading about or having bad experiences with the SEO industry. Outsourcing search marketing, while successful for the vast majority, has been disastrous for some. Those are the stories we read about in the mainstream and tech media. Learning to trust someone is much easier when you have the power to suspend his or her pay, as most employers do.

Another good reason to hire in-house is the fact that all knowledge gained during the SEO process and through the evolution of search marketing remains under your roof. Hiring a SEO means buying their hard-earned knowledge for the duration of their employment.

Though businesses might gain a measure of control by adding a SEO to their staff, they are likely losing a number of less tangible resources, along with the equivalent of a full time salary, the biggest losses being

objectivity and, ironically, honesty. Employees are often unable or unwilling to disagree with a new employer or supervisor, even when the realities of the search marketing arena are called into question. It is also a daunting experience to tell your new co-workers that the site they have been working on for months is less than useful for search marketing purposes. Most consultants have no problems telling the truth about issues facing a site they are working on. It is a consultant's job to find fault. The more they find and correct, the better the relationship with their client.

This note shifted the conversation towards the benefits and dangers, of outsourcing over in-house hiring. The benefits continue to outweigh the dangers by a wide margin, assuming the organization contracted is reputable and communicative.

The primary benefit of outsourcing is that it is cost-effective. With most large scale SEO projects, the most intense work is done in the first six weeks. This is the time it takes to fully study a site, take it apart, and put it back together again in the most search friendly way possible. This is also the period most SEOs charge for. Though the expense might seem steep when seen on a service contract, it is often far lower than the cost of hiring and employing a dedicated staff person.

The next benefit of outsourcing to a SEO firm comes from harnessing the collective knowledge of that firm's staff. The majority of search marketing shops have staff members who specialize in different areas of the search marketing environment. Some are great technicians while others write good site copy. Most established SEO firms have staff members who have experienced several different aspects of the field and can call on that experience to inform their advice and decisions.

Added to the benefit of collective knowledge comes the bonus of having a larger brain trust to call upon. The field and practice of SEO is rapidly evolving. Often, a technique that worked one year is not as useful the next. Being able to draw on a group dedicated to learning and fully understanding the environment is essential to staying ahead of the curve, and thus ahead of competitors.

A third benefit comes from the professionalism with which an established SEO shop conducts its business. Needing positive client testimonials and surviving on recommendations, most established SEO shops present their information in highly detailed, plain language reports. One of our internal sayings is that we present our SEO consultation clients with a roadmap they can follow, along with a live-guide to help them along.

The last benefit mentioned in the phone call was that of long-term relationships. Most of our consultation clients retain our firm into the future. While this retention is done by monthly fee, that fee is often much lower than the cost of a full time employee.

Fostering and maintaining a long-term relationship between SEO consultant and client benefits both. For the client, the relationship plants an outside expert they can call on for an objective opinion firmly in their realm. For the SEO consultant, the relationship builds business and helps hone their constantly developing skills.

By the end of the conversation, we had settled on a compromise position for her to take when recruiting an in-house SEO for her client, which has a pre-existing IT department. The client is adamant about wanting to hire in-house. She has, by now, likely placed an ad for a SEO with three or more years of experience. When that person is hired, a professional outsourced SEO consultant will also be contracted to monitor and advise for the first year.

If the internal position works out, the client will have a well-trained staff member capable of performing SEO services for the business site. The business owner will have the knowledge that an objective (and honest) outsider is watching over things and reporting to the site ownership. While it might cost a bit more, the plan offers peace of mind for the owner.

If the internal position does not work out, a relationship with an outside firm will have been established, and a sense of continuity in the site promotion can be maintained without worry about starting back at square one.

This is the first year that in-house hiring of SEOs has been a big trend. Taking a long-view of the situation, businesses thinking about employing a skilled search marketer on staff might want to sit back and crunch their numbers to see if the cost of hiring is dramatically lower than the cost of outsourcing.

By the end of the first year, the business owner will know if hiring in house was worth the expense or not. If, as we suspect, it was not worth the expense, that outside agency will pick up a good contract. If, on the other hand, the business owner finds the expense worth his or her money, they know they have a better-trained staff member.