

In-house SEO vs. SEO Outsourcing: What is Best for Your Company?

 cleverism.com/in-house-seo-outsourcing-what-is-best-for-company/

3/7/2015

SEO is a challenge for even industry professionals. Traffic, rankings, and conversions are not static metrics. Each day, the performance of each of these metrics may change for a variety of reasons, some readily apparent, others obfuscated by externalities. Maintaining or improving these metrics requires constant vigilance, testing, and experimentation. Moreover, SEO is an investment, and like all internal investments, managers should plan and assess SEO not only in terms of potential return, but also in terms of the resources needed to maximize the return. These include time, skilled personnel, technology, and budget, as well as the integration of relevant internal resources.

Today, SEO is no longer the latest business trending topic. It is not only a cornerstone of IT strategy, but marketing and sales strategies as well. Furthermore, it is not a matter of whether or not to invest in SEO; it is a matter of how SEO investments are managed within the firm to optimize strategic sales and marketing objectives. Naturally, the question arises as to whether firms should outsource their SEO efforts or develop them in-house.



In this article, we will cover 1) the **benefits of managing SEO in-house**, 2) the **resources needed to manage SEO effectively in-house**, 3) **common challenges of managing SEO in-house**, 4) the **benefits of outsourcing the SEO function**, 5) the **resources needed to effectively outsource the SEO function**, 6) **common challenges of outsourcing SEO**, and 7) the **benefits and challenges of in-sourcing the SEO function**.

BENEFITS OF MANAGING SEO IN-HOUSE

There are many benefits to managing [SEO](#) in-house. Firms can exert more control over the planning and implementation execution of SEO strategies and objectives; this is especially true in terms of cross-departmental and cross-functional integration. Firms often can react quicker when faced with an SEO challenge, and that response may be more comprehensive and effective if it comes from an internal source, rather than from an external one.

It is often less expensive to develop internal SEO teams than to engage the services of outside agencies. Much of the SEO work to be performed will come from a range of existing personnel at most firms, especially those found in marketing departments. It may not be necessary to hire a standalone SEO professional or SEO staff; rather, many firms provide existing staff with SEO training and integrate SEO work into their existing

responsibilities.

Finally, keeping the SEO function may lead to great innovation in SEO processes and overall marketing and [IT](#) planning. In-house staff members have access to a level of firm-specific that no outside agency can hope to achieve. They understand the firm, its politics, people, problems, and technology in an intimate and comprehensive way that may yield insights that would otherwise be impossible.

NECESSARY RESOURCES FOR MANAGING IN-HOUSE SEO

Before choosing to manage SEO in-house, managers must assess their capacity and resources. The resources a firm needs to manage SEO effectively include:

Human Resources

[Preferably](#), an SEO team will include a project [manager](#) to plan, oversee and assess SEO goals and strategies; a data analyst who can pore through the rooms of analytics to deliver the insights that will propel the SEO plan; and content creators (writers, designers, videographers, animators, etc.) who can develop relevant, popular and fresh content properly aligned with a firm's brand standards. It will also include a link builder or two who will execute link building and [backlinking strategies](#); and, finally, one or more web developers who can monitor and continually align the coding of webpages with SEO best practices and with the SEO plan itself.

In large organizations, web services departments may house each of this personnel for SEO and other web-related goals. However, in small to mid-sized businesses, these personnel are often found in multiple departments and can be drawn together at management's discretion as a cross-departmental working group to plan and execute SEO strategies and tactics.

Ideally, if SEO is approached as a firm-wide priority *and* responsibility, then the SEO team can incorporate employees working in other areas into the SEO planning and tactics. For instance, quietly encouraging employees to identify themselves publicly on professional social networks and personal blogs can help with visibility, as can their separate personal branding efforts. This can also be done by offering incentives or gamification. Whether their efforts result in a link, increased traffic or press coverage, your employees can be a great asset.

Unfortunately, the converse can be true as well. A written online code of conduct should be distributed to every employee. This should be broad enough as to not stifle employee creativity and be adaptable to the ever-changing social landscape, but specific and direct enough about prohibited activity. This will be key in efforts not just to protect the firm's reputation, but also to ensure that employees are channeling the right kind of online attention back to the firm.

Technological resources

In addition to the technical resources needed for a fully functioning website – a domain name, web editor, [server](#), or [web hosting service](#), the firm will need a few other items. The firm will need web analytics software, such as WebTrends, Omniture, or Google Analytics to pore through data and see what is working/not working. Further services such as Google or Bing Webmaster Tools can further support SEO services by providing more robust analysis of keyword level results respective to the search engine in question (rather than general website data). There are numerous [additional tools available](#), many free, which provide insights into competitive research, such as SEMrush, back linking efforts, such as Majestic SEO, and traffic analysis, such as Adobe Catalyst. Many of the insights these tools deliver [can supplant](#) low-, and even-medium quality SEO agencies/consultants.

Additional tools are also available to each function of the SEO team, such as design and editing tools for content creators and project management software for project managers.

Financial resources

The firm will also need a budget. Digital may be cheaper than traditional advertising alternatives, but it is not free. Further, a firm's SEO goals may include or incorporate search engine advertising, which, depending on the category and keywords necessary to compete, can be costly. The project manager should create a realistic budget estimate before the project proceeds for submission to management.

Time

Finally, the firm will need the time to plan and execute its SEO strategies and objectives *over time*. This must begin with management's understanding that the most common metrics of SEO success – traffic, ranking, and conversions, are not static measures, but dynamic ones. Effective strategies may take time to take hold. Competitors may quickly alter the industry's search landscape. Traffic may be subject to seasonality or less predictable cycles. The relationships between measures of the website's relevance and popularity may be difficult to discern. A new bit of direct marketing copy may decrease conversions. A gray hat strategy may fail and lead to punitive measures from Google, Bing, and/or Yahoo.

In other words, the number of variables affecting any single measure of SEO success ensures that SEO is a *continuous* process. When feasible, the SEO function, if not a standalone department/unit, should be housed in an ongoing working group, responsible for both effecting change, monitoring, and both analyzing, and adjusting for, variations.

CHALLENGES OF MANAGING SEO IN-HOUSE

Managing SEO in-house is not a straightforward proposition in all organizations. Firms may lack personnel with the knowledge and skills to carry out SEO work. Alternatively, they may have the personnel to do the work, but lack the time to allocate them for it. On the other hand, they may have both the personnel and the time to commit to a working group, but lack the finances to do so. It is incumbent on the forward-thinking manager to not only present this as an option to executives, but indeed the future of online marketing and sales activities.

Further, convincing managers of the time it takes to integrate and implement SEO can be difficult. SEO is not as flashy as advertising or even public relations though its results are. With technological illiterate managers, the notion of repeatedly tweaking a website to increase sales may seem a tall order.

Beyond obtaining approval to plan and execute, SEO strategy is the challenge of doing the work. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. SEO is ever-evolving and requires continuing education, testing, and experimentation. Inadequate resources, unsupportive managers, and unhealthy working group dynamics can compound difficulties executing the SEO strategy, especially when members of the working group have other responsibilities.

BENEFITS OF SEO OUTSOURCING

For some firms, it makes sense to outsource SEO. In doing so, firms can integrate the expertise of trained professionals who deal with SEO challenges across industries all the time. Outside professionals are unencumbered with personal biases about the firm; they bring an objective focus on what is working and what is not to the table. They are (or should be) more knowledgeable about best practices, and often have industry contacts that keep them up-to-date more extensively than in-house personnel with only self-directed SEO education. They can also help sift through the many available web metrics to hone in on which drive results for the firm.

Further, SEO [outsourcing](#) can reduce in-house personnel and training costs, and they can free up IT's time for digital marketing or other web-related work. If projects are short in scope, and/or of brief duration, SEO outsourcing can be less expensive than performing the same projects in-house.

In cases of agencies, rather than freelance SEO consultants, client firms can benefit from team expertise and dedicated time from multiple agency employees.

NECESSARY RESOURCES FOR SEO OUTSOURCING

The first, and perhaps most important aspect of SEO outsourcing, is vendor selection. Firms [should know](#) how SEO agencies assess the success of their SEO campaigns; determine which keywords and phrases on which to focus; build links; and create content to integrate into their campaigns. [Social media](#) should definitely be a part of this conversation.

Moreover, they should understand how the agency intends to integrate their efforts into the firm's overall marketing/branding strategy. It is important to understand these items upfront, as well as share the firm's strategic marketing and sales goals, to ensure that both client firm and agency understand expectations. Further assessment should involve the breadth of services offered, especially ongoing client support, and pricing. References checks are essential; managers should also review the agency's client websites. No work should start without a contract lacking a cost breakdown, a payment schedule, and terms and agreements.

When the work starts, it is critical that someone (or, preferably, multiple persons) on staff understands SEO enough to provide a proper assessment of the firm's efforts. Web developers, for example, could, in real-time, check on-site code changes and/or analytics programs and analyze the effectiveness of agency firm changes. Oversight methods should be planned and implemented; no firm should rely solely on client reports.

RISKS OF SEO OUTSOURCING

Vendor selection is critical, but can be problematic. First, there is no industry-wide certification in SEO. What certifications there are, are updated as standards change, so some certifications have a limited shelf-life. Others may not truly capture the dynamic nature of the field. Further, data on an agency's past campaigns may be limited as they may contain privileged data from other clients. Therefore, gauging the quality of SEO agencies/consultants employed can be difficult. [Local SEO firms](#) may prove a good resource. A local firm *should* be performing in local search results; how well they do perform should give you some indication of their ability.

SEO agencies can also be expensive, depending on the agency and the range of services offered. Sometimes, executives and managers realize, after internal analyses, that an internal working group is less expensive, and potentially more effective than an external agency. Moreover, in-house personnel have hands-on experience with their company that may yield innovations and insights not easily translatable to the outside consultant.

SEO guidelines are constantly evolving. Any agency/consultant who promises they can guarantee results is either lying or does not understand the industry, and should be avoided. Further, firms should determine how, and how often, the agency is keeping up-to-date with changes in the industry. When a firm keeps SEO in-house, they can ensure staff keep pace with those changes; they cannot do so with vendors, and must assume because it is in the vendor's best interest to do so, that the vendor will.

A further challenge is ensuring that SEO efforts are maintained in-house when the agency's work is completed.

THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF IN-SOURCING SEO

A third option – *in-sourcing* – has the potential to offer the best of both possible worlds. In-sourcing offers the expertise of trained professionals and the chance to have in-house professionals learn from them as SEO practices are developed and integrated into the firm. The in-sourced personnel may become more fully invested in the work of client agencies over the course of their daily work inside those client agencies; this is in contrast to outsourced personnel who may spend relatively little time with clients.

In an ideal world, this reduces staff training expenses, reduces agency expenses, and helps the firm achieve a better working knowledge of SEO – not to mention helps achieve the firm's SEO goals. Further, it helps limit employee headcount, and the expenses accrued by adding extra staff.

Vendor selection takes on even more significance, as the in-sourced personnel will now be working within the organization, presenting a potential security threat. Firms considering in-sourcing SEO (or indeed any business

function) should use every measure available to them to pre-screen potential candidates.

In-sourcing can [take longer to](#) achieve results than outsourcing SEO. The in-sourced personnel must understand not only the SEO firm's challenges, but also the corporate culture of the firm to operate efficiently; this may take time. Further, staff resources will need to be allocated to help the in-sourced personnel adjust, which should be assessed.

In-sourcing should be used as an option when the firm is looking to build long-term internal capacity, as in-sourcing for repeated short-term products can be expensive. As with outsourcing SEO, a firm must be ready to allocate the resources necessary to continue achieving the firm's SEO goals.

[share](#) [tweet](#) [pocket](#) ••• [Add to favorites](#)