

Special Management Series

Steps To Starting Your Own Digital Marketing Agency

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A Perspective 101 Series



Steps To Starting Your Own Digital Marketing Agency



Starting your own agency can be confusing, can't it?

There just aren't any good resources out there to show you how to do it. You're stuck between a the rock of outdated advice, and the hard place of short posts without any depth. And, it's damn frustrating.

You want an actionable, in-depth, piece of content from someone in the know. Is that too hard to ask?

Nope. Not anymore.

In this presentation, you're going to learn 21 steps *every* start up digital marketing agency needs to take, at some point, to get on the road from zero to six figures.

Now, there is no cookie cutter way to start an agency, and this article doesn't try to give you that. Instead this is all the steps you must take, but they need to be done in **your** way. They need that bit of magic only you possess to turn them from words on a page and into tangible income.

But if you're ready to turn your agency dream into a financial reality, read on:

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The Basics...

These first **few steps** are your foundation and platform.

Everything you need on how to *start* a digital agency on, and secure your success further down the line.

This is the advice you need, but rarely ever take. But, even doing just the easy parts of this can save you **a lot** of work down the line.

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#1: Get Positive...

- Okay, I'm going to get the wishy washy, feel good, stuff out of the way to begin with. And while it might feel a little like fluffy content, let me tell you why it's not:

The road to a 6 figure agency is long and hard.

- There's no overnight success. No short cuts. No hitting and hoping. Just hard work, late nights, blood, sweat and tears.
- But you have to keep a positive attitude throughout it all. If you're starting an agency, you have a vision of what it is that you want to achieve. And, you have to keep that positive mental image of it for as long as possible.
- As one of my mentors once told me, "Why get frustrated with no's? They're just stepping stones to your next yes".²
- Who knows, your biggest hit could be just one more rejection letter away?

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#2: Set Clear Goals

- In order to be the resounding success that we both know you can be, you're going to need clear goals to work towards. Because, as the advertising legend Paul Arden once said, *"Without a goal, it's hard to score1"*.
- The fact you're here, and looking to starting an agency, suggests one of your goals is money, and that sweet six-figure agency status. **But your goals can be anything else that excites you or drives you forward.**
- In all honesty, you should be taking what Google executives call Moonshots. Where you don't look at goals in terms of attainable, you look at them as aspirational. Where you set yourself something above, and beyond, what you think you can achieve.
- But on a more actionable level, it pays to set your business goals using **SMART**. Because, as boring and unoriginal as it sounds, it works at all levels. If you've never set a **SMART** Goal, here's how it should look:
- **Specific:** Be clear about what you want to do. Replace vague terms like, "be the best in the industry" with *"Generate \$100,000 in sales from retail companies"*.

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- **Measurable:** This is answering the question, *“How will I know when I’ve achieved it?”*.
- **Aspirational:** This is normally *Achievable*, but as [research from Locke and Latham](#) found, having aspirational goals here is far more beneficial. Try adding 20-25% onto what you think you can achieve, and you’ll find you’re hitting goals faster than ever.
- **Realistic:** By the same token, know what’s in your reach. Landing \$1,000,000 worth of work probably won’t happen in your first year. But, over five years, why the heck not?
- **Time Bound:** Set a clear, specific, time frame to achieve your goal in. This can be short, medium or long term, depending on the goal you’re setting.
- So, if you were going to start an agency today, your **SMART** Goals might look like:
 - Get \$200,000 worth of SEO contracts from retail clients in six months
 - Have a team of 10 workers on \$30,000 a year each by March

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- Build to 10 clients at an average of \$10,000 a month in one year's time
- While you might not know your exact goals **right now** it's important to take the time to figure this out.

They'll give you a lot more focus and direction, and help you maintain that positive attitude, even at the toughest times.

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#3: Find Your Focus

- Goals allow you to focus your time and effort. But, this level of focus is about **who** you're going to focus those time and efforts **with**.
 - This step is where you get to know your audience, who they are and what makes them tick.
- **A great brand** – as you'll read about next – delivers a specific set of ideas to a specific type of person.¹ And, it's your job to decide who you're trying to appeal to.
- Now when you're at the beginning of the road, it's tempting to try and appeal to everybody. Because you want money in your bank account and clients under your belt. **Feeling that way is totally normal, so don't worry about it. Just don't give into it.**

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Try and answer these questions to give yourself a little more focus and clarity on what it is that you're trying to build, and who for:

- **What is your niche?** Who is it that you want to work with, and why? Is it small independent businesses, Fortune 500 companies, fashion brands? Knowing this will help you narrow down where you go looking for contracts.
- **Who do you want to appeal to?** Are you here for the geeks, the wizards, the whizz-kids, the hardened professionals or the new kids on the block? This will help you find the people you'll associate with, and how you'll begin to build a loveable brand.
- **What makes you unique?** There are thousands of agencies out there, so what is it that makes you different? What do you (or will you) value, care about or do differently to others?
- **Analyzing who you are, and what you bring to the table** – whether that makes you a digital content agency, advertising or otherwise – is a key step in building a profitable brand. As SumAll CEO, Dane Atkinson said to Business Insider, *'learn to say no'*. Say no to things that don't fit your focus, or your goals, and you'll be a success in much less time.

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#4: Build Relationships

- In the words of Tim Ferriss, “your network is your net-worth¹”. And, it’s a statement that will never go away or lose value, because it’s completely true. The relationships you forge and grow **before** you ever need them, are the most important.
- Keith Ferrazzi once wrote a whole book about networking and **this principle called, Never Eat Alone**. In it he talks about the need to build valuable relationships before you ever need them. Even, if the day you need them never comes.
- If you really want to start a marketing business, you’re going to need to **reach out to people and offer help, and value²**.

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- Maybe you see a company who is ranking poorly for a search term they shouldn't be. Or, you see someone talking about being penalised on social media. And, perhaps someone has asked a Quora question you just know the answer to. **They can all be ways of offering help, providing value, and getting a foot in the door.**
- These conversations are **how you build leads**. How you get yourself an appointment to pitch to the marketing department. And, how you grow yourself to become a successful business.
- **Think of all the industries you want to work in, where your audience spend their time, and look for people you'd like to work with, and create a list or a spreadsheet of them all.** Then reach out to them.
- **Don't try to sell to them straight away, just look for ways you can offer value or connect with them.**

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#5: Create A Clear Brand Identity

- There are lots of reasons you need to have a clear brand identity. In fact, most of them are well known clichés like, **“People buy from people they like”**.

But there’s one often overlooked, but incredibly important, reason that ties them altogether.

- As Lois Geller once put it in an article for Forbes, **“A brand is a promise”**.
- **It’s a promise to deliver a service that people can trust.** One that they like. One that associates with them. One that they know will deliver them results each and every time. There will be people that don’t like your brand as well, but screw them.

That’s the sign of a good brand.

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#5: Create A Clear Brand Identity

When you're branding you need to decide:

- **What your promise is:** What do you and your audience value? What does your brand stand for? Pick your fight and run with it.
- **What your voice is:** This is by far the most important one for me, especially for a digital agency. Who does your tone of voice appeal to? The way you'd speak to a young technology startup is different to how you'd speak to an established retail chain. Establish who it is you're talking to, and how you want to speak to them. There are two great articles on tone of voice [here](#), and [here](#).

Once you have that, you have a **foundation to start building** your logo, slogan, domain name and everything else that makes a brand tangible.

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#6: Don't Imitate, Innovate

- The greatest risk in the world is not taking any risks at all. And, if you're going to be a successful agency, you need to get used to taking risks and putting your neck on the line. Don't be afraid to overhaul, change or challenge anything in your niche.
- There's also a lot to be said for running with ideas you're scared of. That pitch, or that idea, that you love...but you're scared your client won't like. It's these ideas that often end up being the most successful and leaving the biggest impact on people.
- Instead of trying to blend in and see what other agencies are doing, and how you can mimic it, look for ways you can innovate. Take what they've done and build on it. Or, turn it completely on its head and give it your own spin.
- There are people out there who will **love** your ideas, and what you're trying to achieve. With the right focus and goals, you'll have no trouble finding them, either.

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Getting It Off The Ground...

- Okay, once you've nailed the basics of starting a digital marketing company, it's time to turn this from wonderful idea into tangible agency.
- These steps all take time, but they're going to form the **backbone of your business**.
- And, there's a couple of money saving tips here, too, to make sure you get off to a good start financially.

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#7: Get Yourself Online

- Okay, I'm not going to teach you to suck eggs here.
You're in internet marketing, and you know you have to have a website to start generating income. But, what you **don't** have to do is break the bank.
- The first thing you think about when you think of your site is how it looks.

Is the design sexy enough?

Are my buttons shiny enough?

Do my images leap off the page?

And, that's because it **feels** like design is important. That's why designers can charge over the odds for even the most simple, template built websites.

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#7: Get Yourself Online

- What's **truly** important – and a realization that will save you a lot of money – is that you value function first.

Heck, some of the most popular million dollar websites, are ugly as hell. But they generate income **because they're simple and easy to use.**

- When you're starting out, then, **focus on getting the essentials locked down** – your own domain and branding – then worry about the design later. Agencies have started on free WordPress themes and gone on to be giant successes, so there's no reason yours can't as well.

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#8: Create A Killer Portfolio

- **Actions have, and always will, speak louder than words.** Which is why having a strong, result driven portfolio is paramount for generating new business.
- **If people see that you've worked with, and delivered results for, a brand that they know and trust, they're more likely to buy from you.** Because if they trusted you enough to work with you, why shouldn't they?
- **Now if you don't have a portfolio yet, don't worry.** That's easily remedied.

You can simply try and do some free work for people (and build some good relationships while you're at it) to get these.

Or, you can compile a list of previous projects your staff have worked on in the past as a placeholder until you've got some agency work under your belt.

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#8: Create A Killer Portfolio

- A portfolio is now considered a **minimum requirement** for an agency to have. So, it's essential you get one in place.

A good portfolio is made up of:

- Headlines and shorts snippets
- Further, in depth, result case studies
- Testimonials from clients
- Future goals and targets for that client
- Showing people that not only you can deliver the results, but you will continue to deliver them to people continuously.

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#9: Decide If You Really Need Extra Capital

- While starting a digital agency feels like it should be expensive. That you're going to need to lots of cash, investors and pre-saved money to get everything off the ground. But, if you're thrifty, you can start an agency quite cheaply.
- Six figure businesses have been known to start for as low as \$62.50. And, a lot of agencies start off as just a single person, and end up as million dollar agencies.

The key is to understand what is essential for you as a start up, and what isn't.

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#9: Decide If You Really Need Extra Capital

For example, you don't need **every** SEO tool under the sun. You could spend \$2000 – \$3000 a month in recurring costs just from these tools. Half of which, you'll never even use. **Instead choose one or two tools that do everything you need them to do.**

There's also the problem that having investors and partners detracts from your **ownership** of the agency. The more people that are putting money in, or are sharing your company, takes away from what you actually own.

You'll find the most successful agencies are the ones who knuckle down, go independent and turn themselves into a success on their own.

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#10: Take The (Cheaper) Road Less Travelled

- Staying with the topic of being thrifty and saving money, let's talk about some of the actions you're going to need to take along the road:
 - **Marketing**
 - **Advertising and Exposure**
 - **Finding Clients**
 - **Providing Customer Service**

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#10: Take The (Cheaper) Road Less Travelled

- *Sometimes, and this is something a lot of it feels like you're looking down the barrel of a big dollar shaped shotgun, doesn't it? Yet, with the right mindset, you can find ways to do all of this cheaply.*
- **Look at using sites** to build a team of Customer Service reps that can work for \$5-7 dollars an hour. Or, look for different hacks and methods to get Facebook Ads down to 1c per click. **You could always ask other online marketing companies how they get their workers, too.**
- And, as the old saying goes, Marketing is like sex (only losers pay for it). **Find ways to build word of mouth, marketing that you can rely on.** Offer unique sales points, add a value that nobody else can, or provide a service that people will scream about. It doesn't have to cost you anything, but it can drive you a **ton** of business in the long run.

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#11: Plan Out When You'll Need Employees

I'll be really honest here:

- There will come a point where you **need** employees. If you're committed to your goals and your business, you will outgrow the ability to do work just on your own. A six-figure one man band might be a good dream, but it's highly unlikely you'll do that and keep any quality of life.
- But the key to making sure your business survives the need for employees is to scale how, and when, you hire them. This will vary from agency to agency, and the type of service you offer, but I find a good way to survive these transitions is to work in these steps:
- **Just You:** Start out as just you, knuckle down, and complete as much work as possible.
- **Freelancers:** When you build up enough, look to outsource work to Freelance SEO's. It could be specific tasks for a project, or full projects for themselves that you take a percentage of.
- **Part-Time Employee:** You either do this as a freelancer, or in-house. Take someone on a permanent contract for x,y or z requirements each week. This way you get used to paying out a salary, while not having too many overheads.
- **One Full Time Employee:** Once you're making enough money, take on a full time employee to alleviate your workload. And, to allow you to bring in **more custom** because you can effectively do double the work.

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#11: Plan Out When You'll Need Employees

- You could, theoretically, stop here and become a successful six figure agency. At least at the lower end of the six figure world. But, if you want to keep growing to get towards those top figures, you'll find there's a point where you need to take on even more employees.

It's possible to plan out when you'll need employees by your earnings, too. Which would look a little something like:

- **Just You:** \$30,000 – \$50,000 a year
- **Freelancers:** \$50,000 – \$80,000 a year
- **Part Time Employees:** \$80,000 – \$100,000 a year
- **Full Time Employees:** \$100,000+

This will change from agency to agency, and the amount of work you feel people can handle, but putting it in these terms let's you have a rough idea of when you'll need to start looking at taking someone on the books, and how much you can allow for it.

But, as with everything in SEO, timing and precision are key here. Don't start with employees from day one; and make sure you don't go too long without taking someone on board.

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#12: Brush Up On Your SEO Skills...

- **You don't need to be an absolute SEO pro to start a digital agency.** In fact, you don't really need to know...anything, about it to start an Agency (cue lots of SEO's getting really angry right now). Because you always have the option to learn on the go, and build your expertise over time.
- **The nature of the beast in our realm is that SEO is always changing, growing and evolving.** And one small update from Google can turn even the most ardent marketer into a blubbering beginner all over again.
- **Make sure you learn the basics and have an understanding of why doing x, y or z will deliver a result.** Then, you can learn the rest of the techniques as you go

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#13: And Find Ways To Explain Them To Your Clients

For all the years, I've learned one incredibly valuable lesson:

- **Your clients don't give a crap about SEO.**
- **They give a crap about results. They give a crap about cash flow. They give a crap about ROI, and traffic and having more customers.** But they don't have the time or the desire to care about what a meta-tag is, how you've increased their trust flow or that you've begun disavowing links.
- **What they do care about is understanding what you're doing, and how it benefits them, in the least mentally draining and accessible way possible. So, find ways to explain what you're doing (or going to do) and what they're going to get out of it.**

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#13: And Find Ways To Explain Them To Your Clients

Instead of saying,

“We updated all of your image alt-tags to fit keywords and search terms”,

tell them

“We’ve made all of your images searchable and easy to find in Google”.

- This makes everything you’re doing understandable, and easy to process. While if you’re using results and methods to pitch for new clients, you’ll have a much higher converting, jargon-free way of getting people to sign up.
- You’ll have to find your own, unique way of doing this that fits your brand, and the client you’ve got. But you can’t go wrong focusing on visuals and benefits.

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#14: Reward your team

I know I should say "thank you" about a thousand times more than I do. A team takes a ton of stress, responsibility, and problems on themselves and do an awesome job.

Here's a few things:

- Thank-you gift cards
- Revenue sharing
- Company lunches
- Christmas parties
- Other ways to build a Team.

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#15: Get Social...

- A key piece of the puzzle for agencies, since the social-age boom in 2008, is to have social media channels in place. But they aren't just there for you to be like, "Oh hey, we know how to use Twitter!". Instead they're there for:
 - **Marketing:** It's free, it's easy and it's word of mouth. You can share anything from offers, to blog posts and any other materials that might drive people your way.
 - **Customer Engagement:** You can deal with (and be seen to be dealing with) complaints. See what people are saying about your service. And, just become a more human brand to anyone who finds you online.

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#15: Get Social...

- **Lead Generation:** It might not be the *most* successful tactic for finding new clients, but they are definitely out there. Having a strong social media presence improves your chances of finding them, too.
- Don't worry about canvassing *all* the social media channels, though. **Focus on just one (or two, if you've hired staff) to focus on.**
- You'll get more traffic, engagement and leads from one really strong profile, than two mediocre ones.

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#16: Optimize Everything You Create

You're in the SEO business, so this should be your bread and butter. But it's worth giving you the reminder.

- Anything you create, whether it's a page on Facebook, a directory listing, a guest blog post, videos or **anything else**, **make sure it's optimized** to be found on search. Find what you want to rank for and make sure you build it into all of your content. Even if it only brings in a couple of views, or leads, or a month, it's better to have it than not have it.

The Back-Of-House Essentials

- The stuff you'd rather put off, but in it's own way holds all of your business together. **They aren't exciting, but they're necessary.**

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#17: Set Your Prices (And Your Worth)

- **Pricing shows how you value yourself to your clients.** And, nothing is more valuable than yours (or your employees) time.
- **If you're starting from the ground up as a one person agency,** it can feel more comfortable to charge \$40-\$60 an hour, or to take on clients for \$300-\$400 a month, because you can still make a **great** living doing it that way. But, to achieve six figures, you need to look at it from a different angle.

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#17: Set Your Prices (And Your Worth)

- Taking a look at the Nifty Marketing example, when he upped his prices to a minimum \$100 per hour, **he noticed he started generating more interest, attracting better clients, making more money and growing faster.** Because he started attracting the *right* people for his agency.
- So, don't worry about pricing people out. **Worry about charging the price you think is right for your service, and the clients you want to attract to your business.**

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#18: Put Your Reporting Tools In Place

- Although clients may not be that interesting in the ins and outs of your practices (at least at a technical level), **you have a duty as an agency to deliver reports of what it is you're doing and the results you're getting.** You'll also want to track all of these things internally, too.
- I'd recommend starting with Microsoft Office Software to begin with, like Excel, because you can add your own branding and keep all of your files saved permanently for backup. Google Docs is a good second option, but you run the risk of things getting messy and disorganized quickly.

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#19: Develop Bookkeeping Skills

- You don't need to be a fully chartered accountant to do this. But, you need to keep tabs on what you make, what you spend and where all of your money is going.
- It helps to use invoicing software to keep track of your invoicing. While a simple spreadsheet of your monthly incomings and outgoings can work wonders to making sure you know where all your money is at all times.
- And, you know, it always pays to not run up a tab on the company credit card either.

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#20: Budget And Forecast

- **This is the final step, but it's one of the most important.** Knowing how your business is going to grow over the next year, both in how you **want** it to grow and how it **looks** like it will grow, are big factors in your success.
- **There will come hard times, and there will be good times.** Knowing when each of them is going to happen is important to managing your time, money and finances. This is also the 'measurable' part of the **SMART** Goals you set right back at the start.

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That's All, Folks...

There you have it, the **complete quick start guide** to going from your back room, to a six figure digital marketing firm, in no time at all.

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This is a series of Training for your Management, Sales & Office TEAM

Good Selling !



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A Perspective 101 Series



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