



Why Most Marketing Agencies Suck and How to Find a Good One



Social Wave's Kan Huang discusses how many a marketing agency falls short, and what a business owner can consider in their quest for marketing help.



Kan Huang

James: James Schramko here. Welcome back to SuperFastBusiness.com. Today, this is episode 876. I'm chatting to [Kan Huang](#) from [socialwave.com.au](#). Welcome, Kan.

Kan: Thanks for having me again, James.

James: We're talking about why most marketing agencies suck. And importantly, how you find a good one. Now, you do have a hat in this ring. Let's just talk about Social Wave. Why are you in a position to talk about this particular topic, Kan?

Kan: Well, we get a lot of clients actually come to us and they've had, like, a poor experience with a lot of agencies. And there's usually some common themes now that we've been doing this for a few years, and I thought I'd share that, because I'm sure in the audience and for listeners out there, they probably don't know whether or not they've actually got a good or a bad agency. So I thought I'd just unearth that and bust the myths.

A whole spectrum of agencies

James: So I mean, I hear this too, obviously, I coach people, and it's extremely common, when you get to a certain size, you need to hand off stuff to someone else, you can't do everything yourself. Agencies are an interesting one, because some of them specialize in certain things. Other ones sort of try and handle certain, you know, smaller businesses and try and do everything for them all in one.

So I guess you could, as a consumer, good to go agency shopping and see who's a good fit, who can get you the result. The big ones generally cost a lot. And you may be dealing with interns. The little ones, maybe not experienced enough, or don't go to the conferences or have the right contacts. So it'd be really interesting to hear your take on what sort of agencies are out there, and what options we have as a small business operator.

Kan: Yeah, I mean, just like you said, you know, you have an entire spectrum of different types of agencies. You've got the kind of the one-person shows who, you know, they're the only ones locally based, and they've got an entire team either offshore doing the execution, whereas you've kind of got the other end of the market where they're kind of the well-known agencies out there, you know, big brands, big reputations, really just fundamentally have all local staff.

And pretty much, you know, those ones, you tend to, what we found are, not always, not painting everyone with the same brush, but junior marketers, you tend to get pushed down that sausage factory, and they tend to hand you off to someone who takes care of either the backend, or even at other times, have the account management as someone quite junior who liaises with you, fundamentally with all of your strategy, and also all of the work that they're doing for you.

And so, agencies like ourselves, we kind of sit somewhere in the middle there, where we've kind of got a hybrid model where we've got some offshore team members who take care of some of the more predictable work and easy to delegate. But for the high-level strategy and thinking that's involved, you know, that's really where we like to keep it local. We're, you know, kind of a bit more hands-on and making sure that we actually have a finger on the pulse with our clients and their businesses.

James: So I'm going to call you Goldilocks now. I like that. It's similar to my business, actually. I've got a hybrid of me, Western owner, we've got the team in the Philippines. So we've got a nice balance, we're able to get stuff done, and still be well-priced.

How do you know you've got a good one?

So let's also talk about how we know if we're getting a good result or not. Maybe we've already got an agency, and we're going to listen to this episode and think, Okay, what sort of scorecard would I have to be able to assess if I'm getting looked after or not? How do you even know if you could do better or if you'd go much worse?

Kan: Yeah, there's different facets to all of this. I think, fundamentally, if I were to take on a new agency, the first thing I would be asking is whether or not they've actually worked on a business like yours. So you know, that sort of reliability, because I think when it comes to marketing, it is complex, but not for the same reasons that people think. And that is that, I guess every industry, every vertical, every type of business has a different way that they need to market themselves.



You know, if it works for a certain type of business or an industry, it doesn't necessarily mean it'll work for your business. So it's really important to assess an agency based on their track record, who they've actually delivered results for, and how they've done that. Because if an agency is good at what they do, they generally can actually explain very clearly whether or not they can actually help you.

The ones that are out there saying, Oh, look, I've got to maybe potentially to get back to you or we need to find out a little bit more, that's kind of a red flag, and you probably want to have a look and dig a little deeper to understand that. But I think the other aspect of things is, if you're working with an existing agency, I think the important thing to understand is, you know, we talked about it in a [previous episode](#) around the metrics, are you measuring the right things? Because agencies can be very good at pulling the wool over the eyes of the clients, because marketing can be a bit of a black box.

And so, you know, as an example, I had a client who came over, who asked us to take a look at, say, their SEO, and their previous agency out there was actually just talking about ranking for keywords that really don't drive results or deliver revenue. So they just really kind of focused on and nitpicked particular keywords that they were having good results on, and they were just discarding the ones that they weren't. And so they weren't given the full picture.

Other agencies out there, I've got a client who was asking questions around, like, what's their strategy or how they do things. And the agency said to him, said, That's our secret sauce, you don't need to know about that. And so usually, when you get that kind of magician curtain, and they don't want to unveil it, that's usually another red flag. So yeah, obviously a few things that you need to actually take a look at.

But fundamentally, it's like, also, can you trust these guys? Meaning, you know, do you have actually a good feeling about working with these guys? Are you confident in what they do? Have they positioned themselves with expertise? And, you know, ask questions around whether or not they've actually, like I said, worked with businesses that are similar, or even if you know people who have worked with that agency, ask them what their experience is like, as well.

James: Gotcha. So would you ever speak to some clients of the agency and just sort of get a feel for how they've been going with them?

Kan: Definitely, I think it's a great idea. I think any agency that's confident and backs themselves, they would be more than happy for you to have a chat to their clients. And so it doesn't hurt to actually ask these questions.

I mean, obviously, some agencies will give you the whole NDA thing where they can't disclose who their clients are. But there's also a lot of agencies out there who are quite transparent. And they do like case studies, and they've got permission from the clients.

So if you do see agencies with case studies on their websites, then chances are, if you ask them, you can have a chat to those clients, they'll be more inclined to do that.

The things that are worth benchmarking

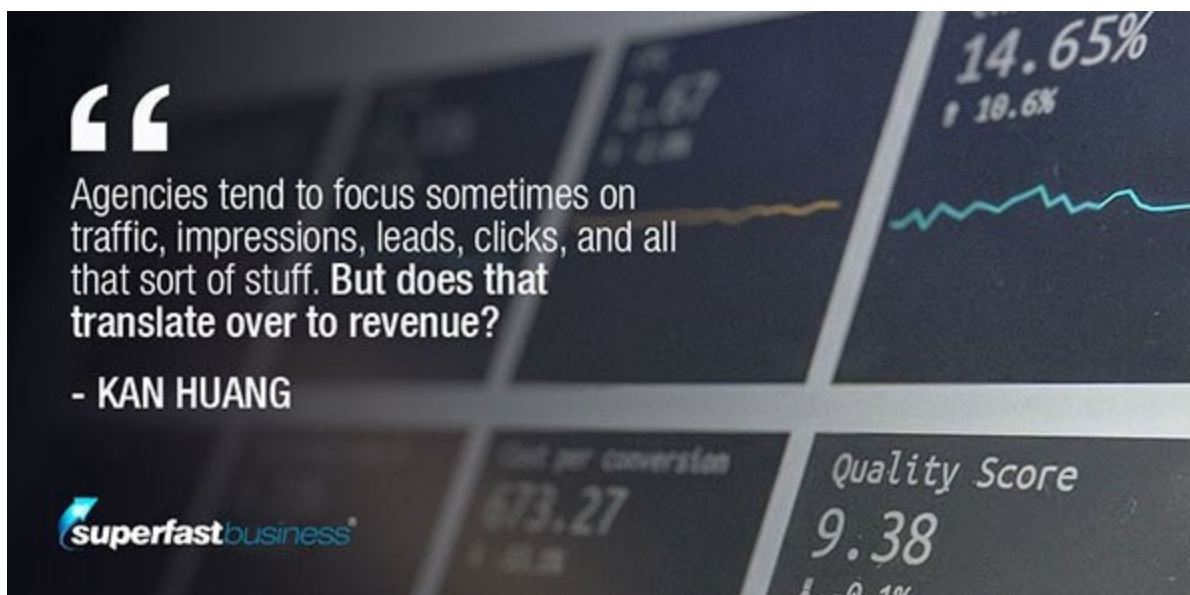
James: Yeah. Okay. So another thing, let's talk about what sort of things we could track. Are there metrics that you think would be the right metrics to track? Obviously, we're being pretty broad here when it comes to agency. I don't know if you had a particular agency in mind, when you say marketing agency, what that means. Because I know, for example, you have a hand in a few different sort of disciplines.

I'd be interested to know how you describe your agency and what sort of things you work on, versus if we're talking about a specialist agency. Because I imagine if you were doing a copywriting service, or a video service, or an SEO service, or a paid traffic service, or a design service, you may have different benchmarks that would be important for someone to be able to track.

Kan: There are, and I think it's important to understand which is the right strategy for you. So if you go to an SEO agency, they'll obviously, you know, if they can help you, they're going to sell you SEO, if you go to an ads agency, and they only specialize in ads, they're probably going to sell you ads if they believe they can help you.

And so it's important for you to basically gauge whether or not the strategy is right for you. It's kind of like, I use the analogy of like, going to the doctors and saying, Prescribe me with Valium. And the doctor is going to be like, Well, you don't need Valium. Why? Why do you feel like you need it? And so they'll go through a series of questions, they'll diagnose and understand what it is that your symptoms are before they can actually prescribe you with the right solution.

And so it's really important to go to a marketing agency out there. And there's ones like you mentioned that are really specialized. And there's others that are kind of more broad-ranged like ours. I mean, we obviously have the meat and potatoes of our stuff, primarily in video marketing and in content. And that's where we specialize in things because we believe that the market that we serve, which is service-based businesses, their content performs best there.



And so understanding if the agency, again, has experience working with your particular business, generally will help you be able to gauge whether or not that business is right. Now, on the metric side, again, it really, like you said, depends on the actual strategy itself. And so, like I said, agencies tend to focus sometimes on traffic, impressions, leads, clicks, and all that sort of stuff. But does that translate over to revenue?

And so the metric ultimately, you want to be asking, I think the only metric that's important is what sort of growth in revenue has your marketing activity actually driven for their clients themselves? And how did they do it?

James: Is growth and revenue, like, the only thing that someone would hire an agency for, though? Because I'm just thinking some people might be hiring an agency to improve their overall brand perception, or to win prizes, or maybe to get more followers. It sounds crazy, but I think that's actually a metric for some people, you know, to get more followers or more shares or whatever. How would you deal with those sort of customers?

Kan: Well, I mean, we're talking probably, you know, around understanding the objectives of the business, right? And so, some businesses, in our case, pretty much all businesses, bar very few or a handful, they're all focused on driving revenue. Now, for the businesses out there that want to primarily focus on, let's say, awareness brand, following, some of these sort of metrics, then it fundamentally goes back to what's your objective and what do you want to achieve and whether or not that agency has been able to drive that.

And so, you know, not all agencies are suitable for what you need. And so really, you kind of have to start with the end in mind and work backwards. You say, Look, if I need more followership, I need more traffic, I need more subscribers, maybe it's an agency that specializes in driving more traffic with that sort of stuff.

If you are looking for an agency that's looking to more generate demand, in our case, which is us, we're more of a demand-generation agency, it's like, how can we actually help your clients or your target audience become paying customers in the future? And so, again, going back to understanding whether or not that agency has specialization with being able to deliver those results, and then off the back of that, getting them to show examples and case studies where they've been able to do that with a similar business.

These are the clues to look for

James: Cool. So what would we be looking for in terms of when we start that process of dealing with them from the moment that we decide they're the agency, and then we start our onboarding process, what would be the clues we want to see?

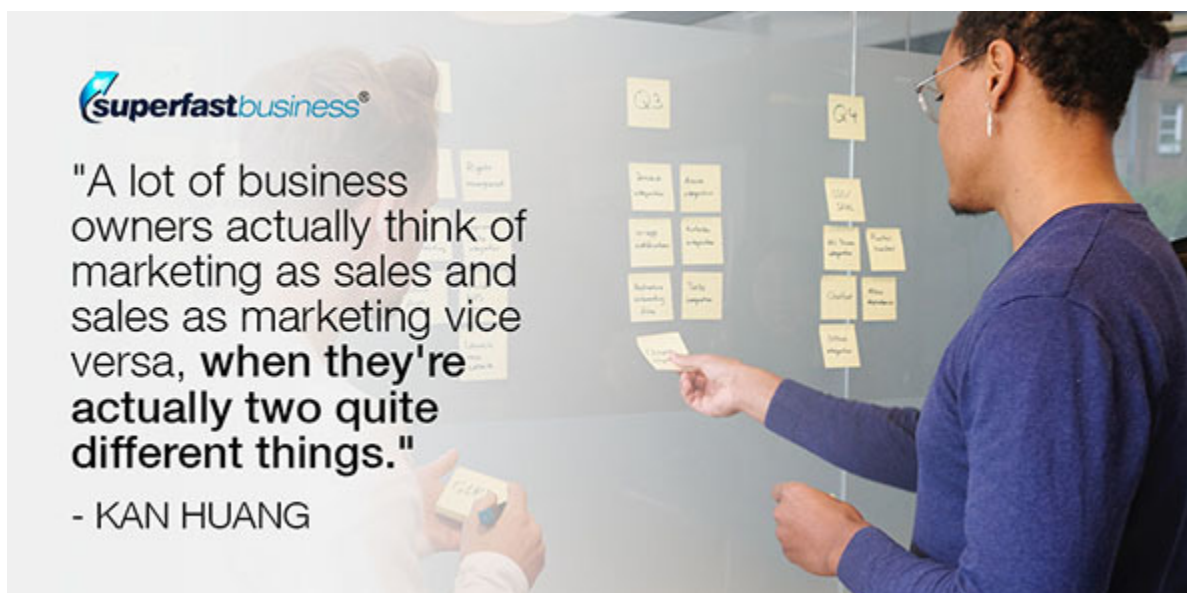
Kan: Clues? I'm going to have to think about that. It's a good question.

James: Well, I'm thinking, like, you know, how do they integrate with your business? Do they want to deal with a point person or you, the owner? Do they have their system they want to enroll you in? Or do they log into your system? How often will they be reporting? What's the methodology for course correction, if things aren't going the way that were expected, etc.?

Kan: I think definitely scope of work is a really important aspect of that. A big problem, I guess, in agencies, and being an agency owner myself is scope creep, which is that when agencies get to a certain size, they're very reluctant to do anything beyond what you've agreed on.

So if you're saying, Look, I will only do, say, three videos every week and respond to your inbox once a week, that is all they'll fundamentally do. And so if you're a business owner who understands that maybe you need a little bit more of a white-glove approach, you need a bit more of a hands-on approach, then perhaps that sort of agency is not for you.

Now, every agency has its own methodologies with, I guess, this process. For us, I can't speak for other agencies, but for us, we pretty much spend a lot of time, I guess, even before the client signs the dotted line, the client needs to be confident in what we do, we need to answer all questions and any gaps in knowledge they need to understand as to what's involved in this process.



So there's a big education component. So you know, great agencies tend to educate their clients, get them to understand it, because again, we know a lot of clients actually see marketing as this bit of a black box, or they have a misconception about what marketing actually is, and what that strategy is. And I think a lot of business owners actually think of marketing as sales and sales as marketing vice versa, when they're actually two quite different things.

And so, getting an agency who can actually teach you what their methodology and their strategy is, and they're the ones who actually take care of the strategy or the deployment of the strategy themselves. And then, of course, through that onboarding process, getting them to ensure that they give you a really clear idea about where your responsibilities lie, like what you need to be doing, what they need to be doing, how you're going to be communicating.

So whether it's, you know, do you contact each other on Slack, is it via emails only, like you mentioned, how frequent is this communication? What are the expectations then? So it's just that alignment marrying up between what you expect, as part of this engagement, and then what the agency expects, and making sure that you guys are on the same page?

The agreement you can typically expect

James: So when you mentioned sign on the dotted line, I'm really interested in, what sort of agreement or arrangement would someone typically expect to have with an agency? Is it a formal contract? Is it for a long time? Is it a rolling month-to-month basis? Is it a test work? Is it just to get an audit done to see if there's a good fit? I imagine there's a few options there.

Kan: There are. We initially actually started with a minimum six-month engagement for our clients. But then over time, we realized that most people don't want to make that commitment without knowing exactly what they're getting on the inside, because marketing is one of those interesting areas where you can't necessarily guarantee the results. But you can say the likelihood of being able to deliver these results based on past experience means that we are confident that we can do that.

And so we do things month to month. There are agencies out there that do things week to week, or just on an ad hoc basis, they don't even get you to sign an engagement or agreement letter. So we kind of felt somewhere in the middle, where there's some level of accountability on both sides, we have a section in our agreement that basically is like a side-by-side table where it says on one side, here's our responsibility to you, and what we promise to do. And then on the other side is, vice versa, you are the client, this is your responsibility to us.

And that could include anything from giving us feedback when we don't do things well, right through to ensuring that if we ask for your feedback, and we need approval to be able to execute on the strategies that we agreed on, that you get back to us in a timely manner. And so an agency that understands that sort of, I guess, dance that's required between the client and also the agency, will have a lot of experience with communicating that across with you.

And so, we get them to sign a very simple, you know, I think it's like a three- or four-page agreement, but I've seen also agencies out there that either don't get you to sign, they just accept the email as acceptance that they want to go ahead. But others have a very simple one-pager as well. So it does vary.

James: And you do them on a docu sign type thing these days?

Kan: We use PandaDoc.

James: Great. So you mentioned that clients have to do certain things as well. Certainly, I've experienced this as an agency in the past where people don't do the things they're supposed to do. They don't give you the things that you need to get the job done. How do you deal with that?

Kan: Well, I think a lot of it goes back to pre-framing. And as much as we don't like to just point at the contract and just say, Hey, I told you so. But it is something that we've had to accept as part of that arrangement, which is to say, Hey, when we get to that stage, we do expect that you do need to actually do X, Y, Z. And they're generally very simple tasks, they're not complicated.

A lot of it is that we do most of the heavy lifting, so that by the time it gets to you, you either say yes, no, or make these changes, it's a very kind of binary situation, I suppose. And so, that's what we ask of our clients, you know, that our clients get back to us in a timely manner, so that we can actually do our jobs.

Unfortunately, there are some agencies out there that I know of who go out there and don't necessarily get approval from the clients, and they go out and publish this sort of stuff. And if you're working in an environment, just like, I mean, we're dealing with a lot of financial services, there's a big compliance requirement.

And if you give out incorrect information, or you're being seen to give out things like financial advice, or any kind of ill-informed advice, that can land your client in hot water, and ultimately, even the agency themselves. And so it's really important that in order for us to facilitate the growth and your strategy, and that sort of stuff, that clients are actually coming to the party, and also being able to do their part, which is mostly approving and making sure that they're happy with the content before it goes out.

James: One of my clients was a lawyer, and they did injury law, and there's very tight restrictions around that. So if you do engage an agency, and you have legal restrictions, especially around finance, or law, or medical, you need to let your agency know that as soon as possible. Or if you have a different language, this is another one that comes up, we used to constantly get people wanting to hire us for SEO in a foreign language. And it just would go off the rails if we would try that, because we didn't have the ability to, not only, even if we could create the content or translate it, we had nowhere to put it. So it was very difficult.

Alright, so let's just sort of wrap this up then. We're talking about why a lot of agencies aren't that great, and how to find a good one. So let's just have two columns here, Kan. I'm going to sort of challenge you - the list of things that you should be sort of looking for from a bad agency, the warning signs, let's see if we can do a list of that.

And then we'll talk about how we go about finding a good agency. And I'm also going to ask you what you do at Social Wave, just in case there is a fit for you for someone listening to this podcast.

Beware these known red flags

Kan: Sure. So I think for a bad agency, fundamentally the red flags that you're looking for is number one, who's going to be taking care of your account? Is it someone who's going to be junior, or is it going to be the director of the agency? So that's number one.

Number two is whether or not they've had experience in your field. If they're, like, an e-commerce specialization agency, and you're like a law firm, like your client was, you know, how can they actually be able to apply the strategy they've done in the past for your business?

Number three is, I think, a lack of social proof or track record. So whether or not they've had case studies or examples of results they've been able to deliver.

James: Okay.

Kan: Number four is whether or not they will even actually tell you what their methodology is. So what's the strategy they deploy? How do they do it? There's a lot of agencies out there that potentially do things that are a bit more gray hat, black hat, that don't actually do things either by the book or can land your business in hot water again. And so it's the transparency of agencies, the ones that are willing to actually share and divulge, because I believe that the great agencies out there are going, Look, we're happy to share, I guess, our secret sauce, so to speak.

But when it comes to execution, whether or not you can execute it, it's a whole different thing. So they're not afraid to actually give that out there. So that's five. Did I get that? Is that number five? Yep.

So number six, we're counting. I don't know, I've got no idea.

James: I know my team is going to put it all together in a nice bullet point summary on this episode 876. So if you're listening to this, and you want to read Kan's checklist, maybe print it off, this will be what you should check if you're going to take on an agency. I love it, especially who you're dealing with, and if they've had experience before. We want to add things like, can you speak to some of their clients? And what happens if things don't go well? These are all things that you'd want on that checklist.

Kan: And the other one was just in terms of how often you're going to be able to speak to someone. So is it going to be just once a month? Are they just really gated and you can't actually get access to anyone? Or is it regular, like, are they opening up where you can actually jump into their Slack workspace? Or maybe they get you on WhatsApp or some sort of messaging system. Or is it just emails only, and they're quite responsive as well? What's that turnaround time? How can they guarantee how fast they'll get back to you?

And then if things go wrong, who do they speak to if you need to escalate that higher? Who's your key contact as well? And I think also, it's really important for those of you who are already working with an agency is to assess whether or not, I know a lot of agencies out there spend a lot of time, they onboard you, they make you feel warm and fuzzy, and they put a lot of work into making you feel comfortable to keep you sticky, and then what happens is after, say, month three or four onwards, you just hear from them once a month.

And if you're not proactive, that's when the wheels generally actually fall off, because they don't actually focus on you as much. And they spend way too much time out there trying to actually get more business in. And so as a result, churn and burn is actually a really big thing. And that's probably the last point, I would say, is just to say, like, what's your client retention been like? How long have your clients been around with you for?

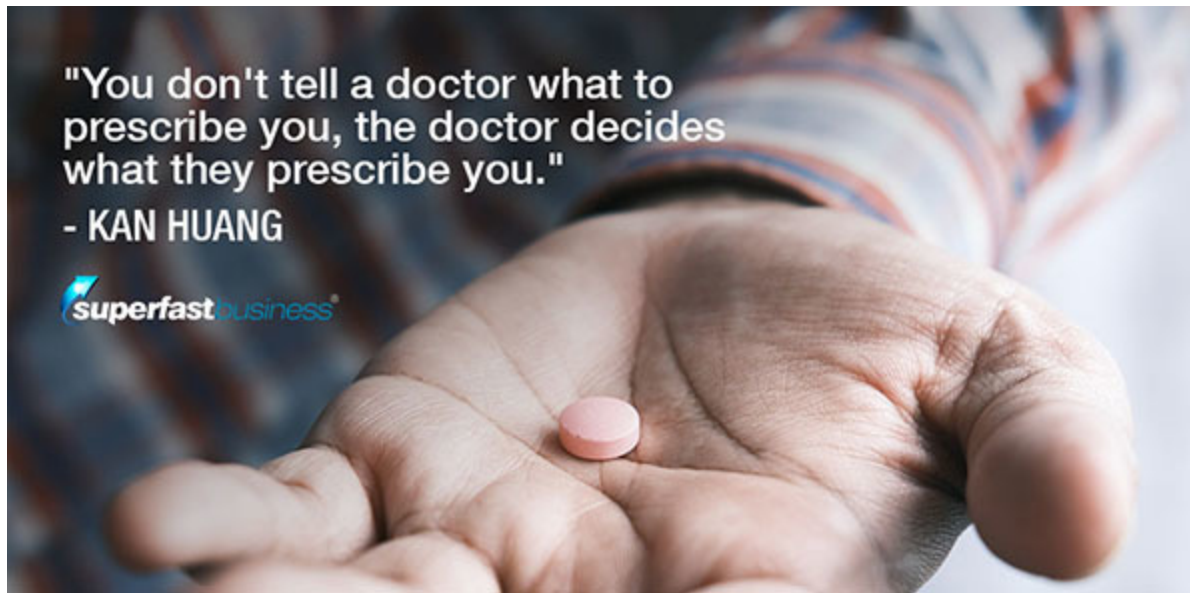
For the ones that have left, what's the reasons that they've left? You know, maybe there's a mutual, amicable split, and they've just kind of hit the ceiling, and they're happy with everything where it's at? Or maybe, they don't divulge this information. But maybe it's possibly they didn't do a great job, and these clients weren't happy, and they moved on as well. So that's really important to find out.

What you get with Social Wave

James: Yeah, cool. All right. So let's talk about Social Wave, just briefly, because obviously, you're a good agency. I hope you are.

Kan: I hope so.

James: I know people don't leave you, which is obviously a massive indicator. The people who I have been dealing with who also deal with you are very happy as well. So that's great. Let's talk about what you do as a good agency, as the summary checklist there as we wrap up this episode 876.



Kan: Well, what's really important actually, is if you're going to engage in an agency, you want them to actually tell you what you need, not what you want. So just going back to that doctor's analogy, which is, you don't tell a doctor what to prescribe you, the doctor decides what they prescribe you.

And so where we often have a case is the client comes to us and says, I need this strategy. And fundamentally, I ask them, I said, Why do you need it? Tell me a bit about it. How did you come to that conclusion? And so great agencies out there, generally, will be able to actually tell you what you really need, as opposed to what you want. We put a real focus on that. We do things in a very diagnostic approach. And we start with why and we work backwards from there and understand the objectives.

Another, obviously, aspect of that is understand that the agencies generally have an area of specialization, whether it's industry or type of business. So for us, like I said, we specialize in service-based businesses, you know, guys like coaches, consultants, accountants, lawyers, what have you. And so those types of businesses and with the track record that we've got, we can actually demonstrate that we have been able to deliver results for our clients as well.

So I think that's point number two, is to just understand not just specialization in terms of what sort of, I guess, strategies that they do, whether it's ads, SEO, video, but also whether or not they have specialization within an industry or a type of business as well.

Another aspect, I guess, that makes us different, that we think we're great, is also we're quite, I guess, holistic about the whole thing. So we're not, just like I said, just focused on SEO, just focused on videos, just focused on podcasts or what have you. We spend a lot of time actually understanding, how does the entire marketing machine work, the sum of all parts when it comes together, what effect that has?

And then I think, lastly, for us, is just our ability to be really integrated into a business. So we aren't just that classic, I guess, once a month you hear from us, we have regular dialogue with our clients, we have messages, Slack groups, WhatsApp, emails, what have you. We almost see ourselves as a bolt-on part of the business into your marketing team.

And so, you know, a lot of the conversations and a lot of clients now who I speak to, they just see me as an extension of their marketing team. So when they do have encounters with a marketing topic or an issue that they have that may not necessarily be within the scope of what we're doing, I'm more than happy to actually provide that advice and that guidance to help get them on the right track. Because I believe that ultimately, if a client does really well, they're making great money, or in some cases where they're getting a great followership, whatever their metric objective is, is that if they're succeeding, then we're succeeding, and if they grow, then we grow.

And so that should be the ultimate goal of all agencies, because that keeps clients sticky, keeps them with us as well. But in return, they also get to achieve what it is that they want to achieve by engaging us as an agency.

The businesses Kan gets the best results for

James: And I know that you've got some really big companies who engage you, and you're kind of like an outsourced marketing department, but you've also got some smaller companies. Who's a good fit customer for you? If I was asking you that question, you know, Kan, who does Social Wave do work for? And would it be suitable for a business like mine? Like, what sort of profile do you get the best results for?

Kan: Most of our clients are actually small business owners. Most of them generally cannot afford either an in-house marketing person full-time, or they've realized that they've gone through the process of hiring someone in house, and they probably could only do one or two things really, really well, and they're looking for an agency that can do a bit more than that.

We sometimes call it unicorns, because for what you pay for us, you generally can cover a very broad spectrum of skill sets and strategies and also thinking, then. So most of our clients are business owners who either don't have the time but have some budget to be able to spend towards marketing and can be done in a very automated and hands-off kind of way.

And also, the big one is that hiring someone like us means that you also get the strategy with it. So someone who can actually come up with the right strategy for your business, and then be able to also deploy that for you as well, in a very hands-off approach.

James: Yeah, I love that. I really think it's one of the hardest roles to actually hire for, this CMO-type thing or marketing department. It's expensive, you need talent, they often shift around, or you get someone too junior, or someone very good is going to go off and have their own agency, like you. You would be unhirable as an employee these days, but you've got this fantastic team.

I love what you're doing. I'm chatting with Kan Huang from socialwave.com.au. This is episode 876. Kan, I'd love to get you back and talk about the strategy part. I want to know how we can stand out against our competitors, in a future episode, if you'd be willing to come back and share.

Kan: Absolutely, would love to.

James: If we want to reach out to you, where do you recommend we get in touch?

Kan: Just like the website like you mentioned, socialwave.com.au. All our contact details are there. If anyone actually wants to book in a consultation, we actually do do a free strategy session. So we just get to go through and understand your business. Like I said, play doctor a little bit, do a bit of a diagnostic, and then see what we can prescribe you and hopefully work together.

James: Awesome. Thank you.



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