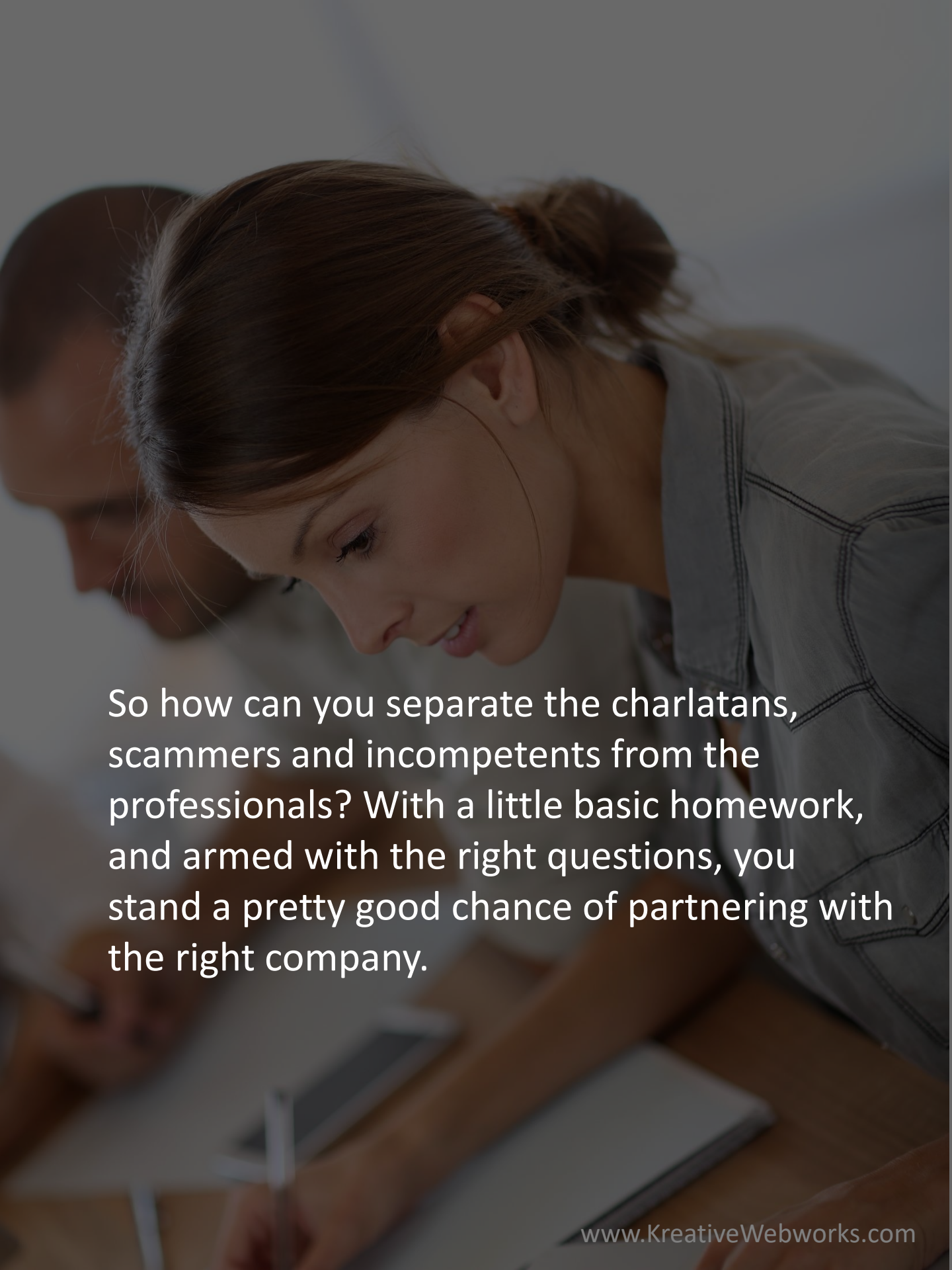


the
SCHOOL MASTERS
Guide

to Selecting the **Best Marketing Team**



A woman with brown hair tied back is looking down at a tablet computer. A man is partially visible behind her, also looking at the tablet. They appear to be in a meeting or collaborative work environment. The image is dimly lit and has a dark overlay.

So how can you separate the charlatans, scammers and incompetents from the professionals? With a little basic homework, and armed with the right questions, you stand a pretty good chance of partnering with the right company.

The Basics

A high-angle photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt, blue jeans, and red shoes, sitting on a green lawn. She is focused on a silver laptop resting on her lap, with her hands on the keyboard. The background is a dense field of green grass.

Reputation

Treat yourself to a free background check by Googling their company name and the name of any of the principals in the company. It's normal to see a couple of semi-negative reviews, but extreme negative reviews or a lack of consistent positive reviews is a warning. No one produces that much bad will without cause. If you don't see any reviews at all, or if they don't even show up in the search results, I wouldn't be impressed.

Track Record:

Digital Marketing is a very demanding business requiring a high degree of knowledge that is constantly changing. An agency that has been around for awhile is probably able to adapt and is probably doing something right. Do they leave behind a trail of satisfied customers, or are there no references, or even worse... negative reviews? Do they have a history of working with schools? Virtual schools, charter schools, private schools, or colleges and universities?

Try Googling them by company name or by the names of some of the principals. If there are no independent third-party reviews, head for the door. If they are willing to give you references, all the better.

Responsiveness:

How fast did they respond to your initial inquiry? Although this is not proof positive of their ongoing attentiveness, it is at least an indicator that they are monitoring communication. Do they consistently return your calls during the initial contact period? Do they have a written statement as to their communication policy? If they don't get back to you consistently while they are lobbying for your business, then don't expect them to pick up the pace after they win your business.

Recommendations:

A good Digital Marketing agency should leave a trail of satisfied clients in their wake. Ideally, they should offer you direct contact information, so you can get the unfiltered scoop on their performance. Recommendations from learning institutions is a huge plus, but not a necessity.

Of course, not all of their previous clients might want to be bothered, but they should have at least built the type of rapport with some of their past clients that they would be happy to field referral calls. Sure, they could be a new company without a track record, and they may indeed be capable and ethical, but you will have to make that call.

Certifications:

Although these are certainly not a requirement, marketing and software certifications take quite a bit of effort and are a good indicator of their competence in specific areas. Do they have Google certifications? Are they SEMPO trained or HubSpot certified? These are all good indicators.

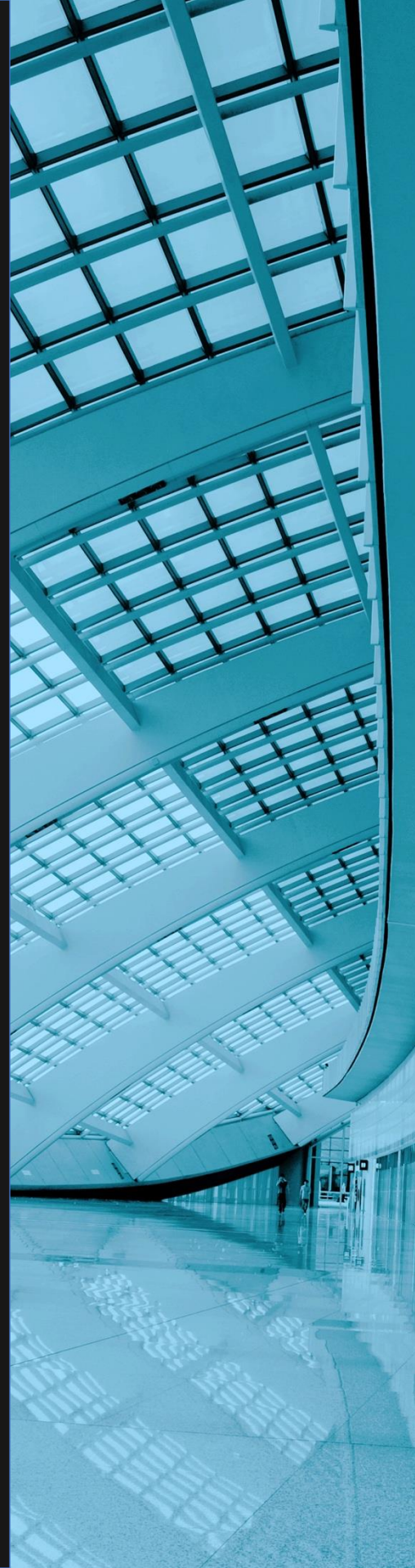


Company Structure:

Will you be assigned a dedicated project manager during each phase of your project, or will you talk to whomever just happens to pick up the phone? If the agency is too small, you may encounter delays. If it is too big, you may get lost in the bureaucracy.

Industry Experience:

Have they worked with schools before? Although it's not a necessity, seeing samples of their work and references from other schools they've worked with will allow you to get a feel for what they can do for your school and provide an extra level of reassurance.



Full Service:

It's by no means a necessity to work with a full-service operation, but the advantages can be numerous. Starting at the planning phase, having a single company who understands how the pieces fit together will allow them to coordinate the overall strategy, negate duplicate efforts, avoid finger pointing and will just make it easier for you to manage.

Ownership:

If you pay for it, it's yours. It's your website, it's your social media, and it's your created assets. If the agency demands ownership, run fast and run far. When you meet your contractual obligations, you should own all the work product that is ownable. If it's not "ownable" in the classic sense (like social media and Google Analytics), then you should have sole access to your digital assets should you ever part ways.



Pushback:

If they tell you that some of your expectations are unrealistic, accept that they aren't just telling you what you want to hear. Be prepared to face the fact that you just may not be able to accomplish what you want at your given budget, or...at all. Offering alternate goals and strategies is perfectly legitimate assuming your ROI is commensurate with your investment.



Website Development

Listening & Questioning:

The virtues of choosing a partner who actually listens is obvious, but the best firms are the ones who ask YOU questions. If they dig deeper into what you are trying to accomplish so they can build a site that is appropriate for your style and goals, that's typically a sign of a professional organization. Interpretation skills are also important. If you are using industry terminology incorrectly, or different from how they use it, you might wind up with a delayed product that doesn't play out like it did in your head.





Offering Suggestions and Ideas

If you aren't a web developer, it's unlikely that you have kept up with advances in technology or aesthetic trends in web design. They are the professionals and should be able to talk you out of bad ideas...and substantiate why. On a side note, be leery about proprietary software that may lock you in to them in the future. If another development team can't take over, it could get expensive.



Mobile First:

Having a mobile friendly or mobile responsive website used to be enough. But not any more. Google now prioritizes search results that are "mobile first." Mobile first means designing an online user experience for mobile before designing it for desktop.

In the past, websites were designed first for desktop friendly use with mobile design as an afterthought. Mobile first design is now essential for user satisfaction and is a search ranking factor.

Social Media

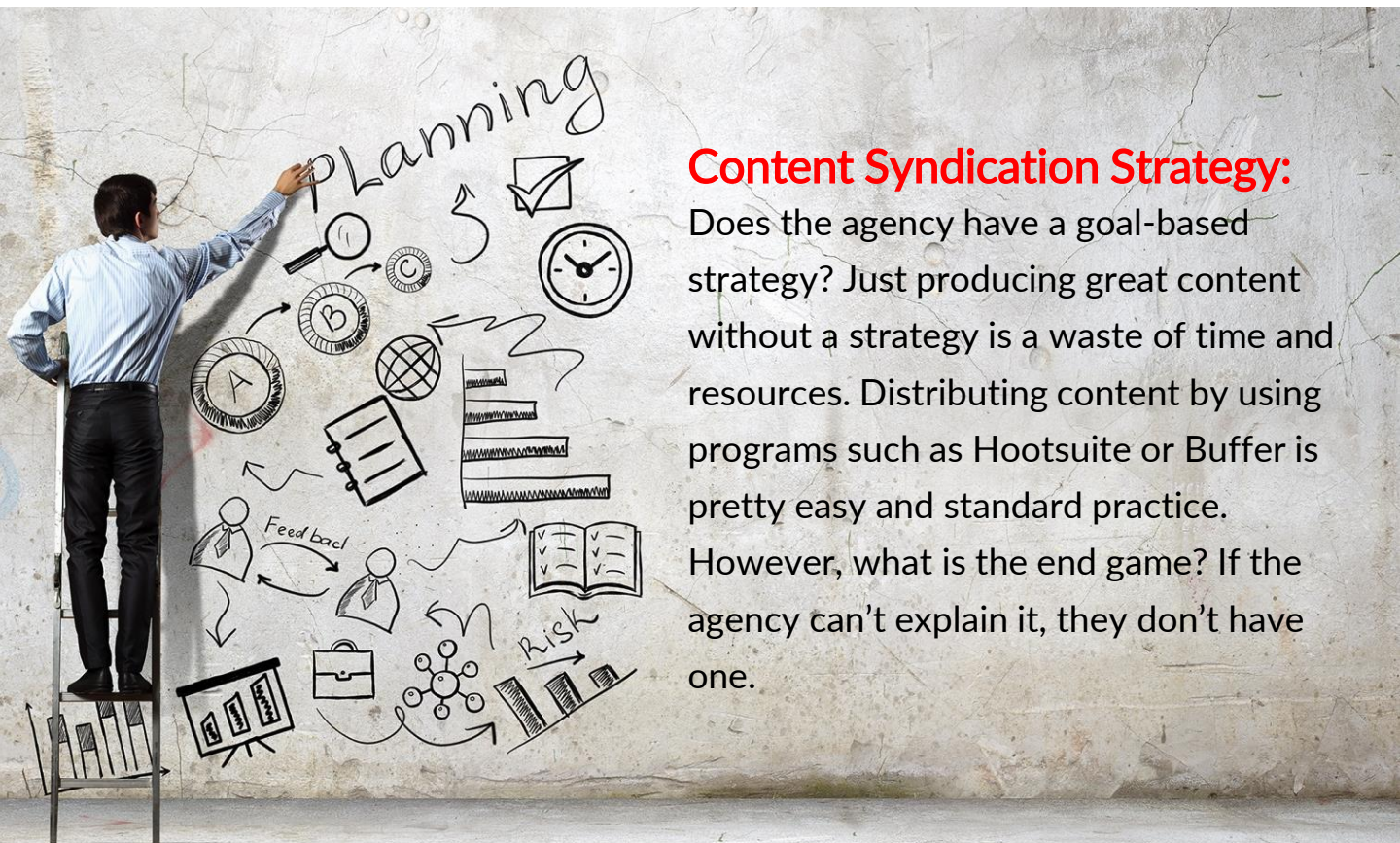


Social Media Platforms:

Every social media platform has its own unique user base and demographics, and it is unlikely that you will benefit equally from being on all social platforms. Whereas Business-to-Business (B2B) brands may fare well on LinkedIn, Business-to-Consumer (B2C) companies are probably wasting their effort. Schools are B2C, so Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest are great platforms as of this writing. If your social media marketing agency suggests that you just blankly cover each platform, they don't have a strategy.

Content Creation

Content is at the epicenter of all social media. How an agency plans and executes content is a strong indicator of their strategic competence. Do they have an actual strategy, procedure and schedule to produce and syndicate content? Do they have copywriters, or will you and your staff be producing content under their guidance? Remember, consistent, good quality content comes with a price. The internet, and by extension, internet marketing is all about content. We advocate a shared content creation strategy, where the school produces content that is very specific to the school, and we produce content that more broadly addresses education.



Content Syndication Strategy:

Does the agency have a goal-based strategy? Just producing great content without a strategy is a waste of time and resources. Distributing content by using programs such as Hootsuite or Buffer is pretty easy and standard practice. However, what is the end game? If the agency can't explain it, they don't have one.

Technologies:

How do they manage and report results? Do they manually post to each platform individually (nothing wrong with that) or do they use software like HootSuite, Buffer, Sniply or HubSpot?

Integration with other Initiatives:

Posting on social media consistently is a good branding initiative. Posting with purpose is better. Is your media company attempting to funnel visitors to a blog post on your website or a landing page with a call-to-action? Do they combine social media content with paid social media advertising? There are many different strategies, but if your social media company doesn't have one, they might as well be posting pictures of cats on Facebook.



Do they eat their own dog food?

Do they have a robust social media presence themselves? They may not be big on Facebook (B2C) but they may emphasize LinkedIn and Twitter where their clients frequent.



Search Engine Optimization

Guarantees:

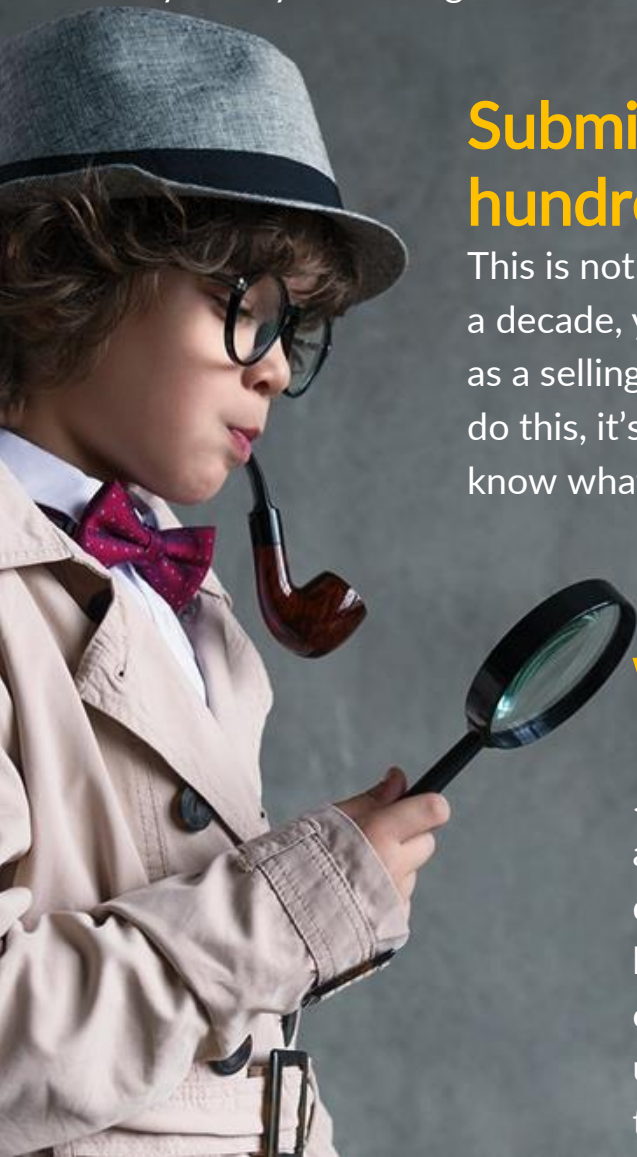
On the surface a guarantee sounds reassuring. But look deeper... what exactly are they guaranteeing? A guaranteed first page ranking for your school's name or a noncompetitive niche keyword that is rarely searched on is no bargain. In fact, keyword placement is no longer considered a good measure of success. Since Google's own guidelines specify that no one can guarantee any specific placement, be wary of anyone who guarantees anything but their own best effort.

Submitting your site to hundreds of search engines:

This is not a technique that has been relevant for over a decade, yet some SEO companies continue to use it as a selling point. If your potential provider claims to do this, it's either a sales ploy or they really don't know what they're doing.

Who found Who?

"Hi, this is Sharon, your local Google specialist," says the recorded robo-call. If they are so good at plying their own trade, why didn't you find them instead? Why would you hire an "Inbound Marketing" firm that uses outdated disruptive marketing techniques like unsolicited cold calls and spamming techniques?

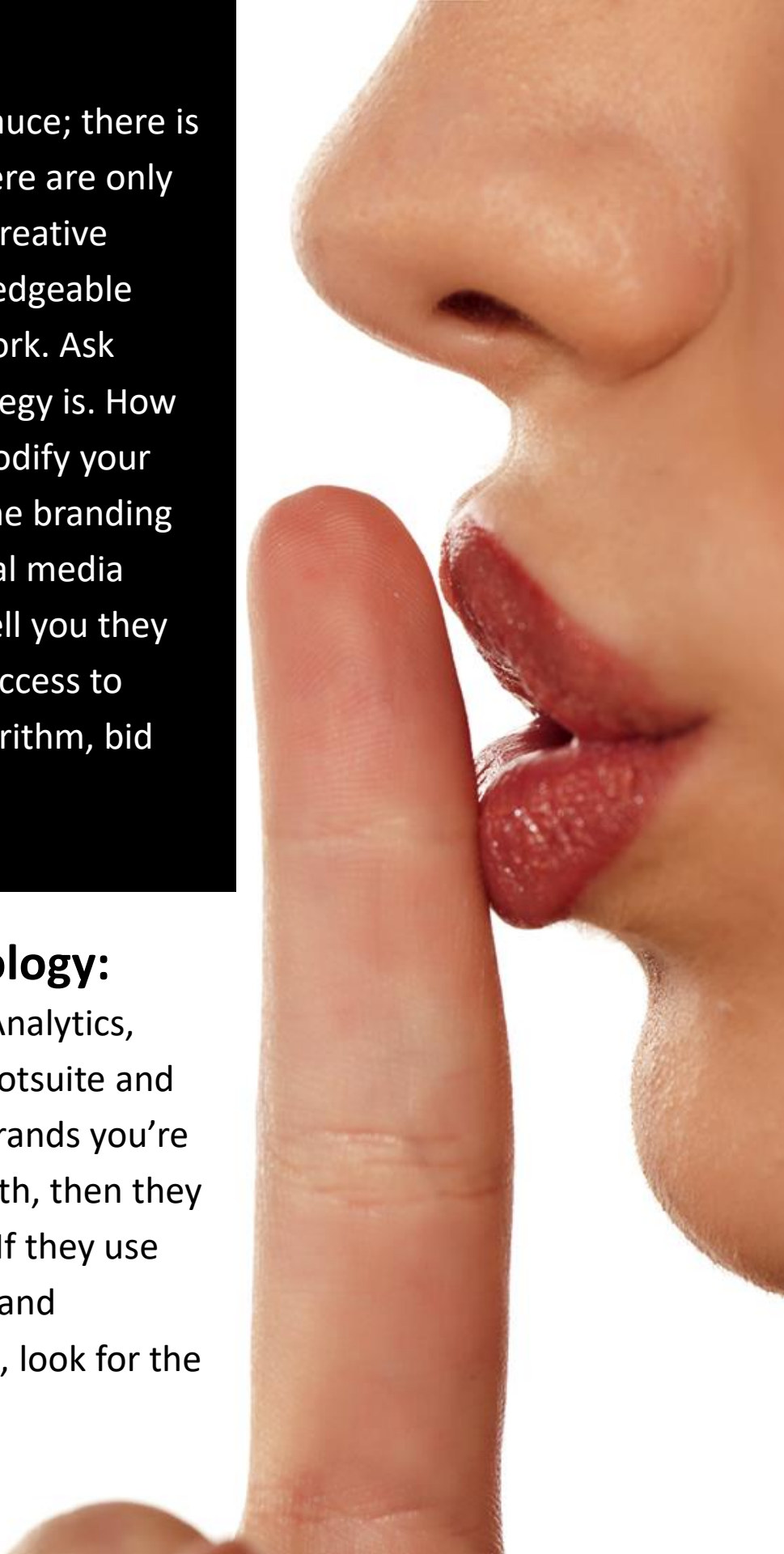


Trade Secrets:

There is no secret sauce; there is no magic bullet. There are only sound techniques, creative talented and knowledgeable people, and hard work. Ask them what the strategy is. How are they going to modify your site or coordinate the branding of your various social media platforms? If they tell you they have some special access to Google's secret algorithm, bid them a fond adieu.

Tools & Technology:

If you hear Google Analytics, HubSpot, Buffer, Hootsuite and some other name brands you're probably familiar with, then they pass the smell test. If they use Spam-O-matic2000 and ContentSpinnerElite, look for the door.



Does Your Website Make the Grade?

Are the other schools on the playground eating your lunch?
We can tell you why and what you can do about it with our
FREE **WebScan™** Website analysis.

WebScan™ for Schools



Yes, it's free for schools.