

Unlocking international growth:

Your comprehensive guide to choosing and managing a digital marketing agency



Expanding your business internationally is an exciting but often complex endeavour.

To achieve this ambitious goal, you need a trusted partner – a digital marketing agency that can guide you through the intricate process of global growth. In this comprehensive guide, we'll explore how to select the right agency for you, what to expect from their services, and how to maximise your partnership for ultimate success.



What type of agency will help you achieve international growth?

Before exploring the specifics of agency selection, it's crucial to understand why choosing the right one matters. There's a world of difference between a UK-focused agency with some bolt-on international capabilities and an agency whose business model and area of expertise is focused entirely on international growth. International expansion comes with unique challenges that demand specialised expertise. Here's why a specialist international agency is your best bet:

Cultural and linguistic nuances

Different cultures have distinct ways of understanding and searching for products or services. While a UK-focused agency might simply translate your English keywords, an international agency delves deeper, grasping local audience intent and cultural distinctions to optimise your campaigns effectively. This ensures you don't overlook valuable keyword opportunities.

Diverse search landscapes

Each market boasts its own search landscape. An international agency is well-versed in targeting the right platforms and optimising your presence across different markets.

An international mindset

A specialised international agency brings a global perspective to your campaigns, understanding cultural, linguistic, and digital nuances in your target markets. Without this perspective, you risk defaulting to a UK or US-centric mentality, potentially missing out on significant international opportunities or incurring costly mistakes.

One central agency or local agencies in each market?

Having decided that an internationally-focused agency is right for your business, the next decision is what type of agency (or agencies) to choose. Broadly, there are two agency models to consider:

1. An international agency located in the UK, with a central office which manages a team of experts based in-market around the world. Typically, as a client, you deal directly with the UK HQ, and they manage international resources on your behalf.
2. Individual agencies based in each of your target markets. For example, a French agency for France, a German agency for Germany, and so on.

The first model – an international agency based in the UK, with a central office that manages a team of experts around the world – offers advantages over dealing with multiple different agencies or network offices based in each of your target markets, including:

Language and cultural differences

Most overseas agencies that are offering their services to UK companies will communicate in English, but conveying the nuances of your company's strategy and objectives may be more challenging in a market where there are linguistic and cultural differences to consider.

Consistency

By using a collection of agencies based around the world, you introduce scope for more campaign and brand variation. While localising for each market is the key to success, you don't want to lose sight of brand consistency or risk different markets going off in completely different strategic directions. By using one agency based in the UK, with a network of overseas experts, you are more likely to generate campaigns that retain brand and strategic consistency, while being tailored appropriately to each market.

Reduced overhead

By using a centralised agency in the UK, you're only paying for one account team of client partners, account executives, and project managers. If you use multiple agencies in different markets, you will probably rack up account management fees for each separate agency. Using a centralised team eliminates account management duplication and saves you money.

Time differences

Depending on where your overseas agencies are based, there may be a time difference. Obviously, the greater the distance from the UK, the bigger the time difference. If you need to get hold of your team urgently, this might create headaches.

Face to face meetings

Post-pandemic, we're all used to working remotely and using video conferencing tools like Zoom and Teams. But it's still useful to be able to meet your team face to face occasionally and work collaboratively together. It's easier to meet in person when you're based in the same country.

Using a digital marketing agency based in the UK which specialises in international growth and has access to an extensive network of in-market talent in diverse countries offers the best of both worlds. This model combines the control and economies of scale of centralised marketing with the market knowledge and responsiveness of a localised approach.



Selecting an international digital marketing agency

When drawing up your shortlist of digital marketing agencies to help you grow internationally, here are twelve key attributes to look out for:

1. A strong focus on international

Look for agencies that specialise in international growth rather than just offering it as an additional service. These agencies are designed from the ground up to cater to global expansion.

2. Local In-Market Expertise

Access to local insights is paramount for international success. Ensure the agency can tap into authentic on-the-ground knowledge in your target markets.

3. Thought leadership

Seek agencies that demonstrate industry thought leadership through blogs, whitepapers, industry event participation, and social media engagement.

4. Longevity

Agencies with a long track record and accumulated experience are more likely to guide your international marketing campaign effectively.

5. Complementary services

Beyond the core services of SEO and paid media, consider agencies that offer cross-cultural UX, CRO, content localisation, and content marketing in different languages.

6. Understanding localisation

Choose agencies that grasp the subtle but important difference between translation and localisation. Proper content localisation goes beyond words, considering cultural and non-textual elements too.

7. No machine translations

Avoid agencies that rely on machine translations, as they can lead to mistakes and poor user experiences – potentially causing reputational damage in your target markets.

8. Credible client list

Investigate an agency's client list to gauge their trustworthiness and relevance to your industry. Check that they have relevant sector experience and have worked with businesses similar to yours.

9. Ethical practices

Trustworthy agencies adhere to 'white hat' SEO techniques and avoid spammy practices, such as buying links or attempting to game algorithms.

10. Realistic promises

Be wary of agencies that promise overnight success or guaranteed rankings, especially in relation to SEO which is an ongoing process, or content marketing which can take time to deliver results.

11. Comprehensive reporting and analytics

Look for an agency that provides transparent and comprehensive reporting. Access to detailed analytics and regular updates will help you track progress, make informed decisions, and optimise your global expansion efforts effectively.

12. Company culture

Seek agencies with a clear vision, mission, and values that align with your business. Most companies see their digital agency as an extension of their own team. Since you will be communicating with them regularly, you want a team you get along with.

Navigating the agency selection process

Here are eight steps to guide you in your quest to find the ideal agency:

1. Make a shortlist

Compile a list of potential agencies through online research, industry referrals, and recommendations from peers. Look for agencies with a proven track record in international digital marketing.

2. Check their portfolio

Review the agency's portfolio to see if they have experience in your industry and a history of successful international campaigns. Pay attention to case studies, client testimonials, and awards.

3. Analyse services

Ensure the agency offers a comprehensive range of services, including SEO, paid search, content marketing, UX, CRO, and analytics. Pay attention to their multilingual and localisation capabilities.

4. Ask about global experience

Check their experience with international campaigns, including managing different languages, cultures, and market nuances. A global perspective is crucial.

5. Ask questions

Engage in discussions with potential agencies to gauge their communication skills. Ask questions about their reporting process, response times, and how they handle client feedback.

6. Check for technical competence

Ensure the agency uses up-to-date technology and tools for digital marketing, analytics, and reporting. This will help measure and optimise your campaigns effectively.

7. Team expertise

Evaluate the agency's team expertise, including their experience, certifications and awards, and the availability of international experts who understand different markets.

7. Request a proposal

Ask for a detailed proposal that outlines their strategy, timelines, key performance indicators (KPIs), and pricing for different scenarios. Transparency is vital in building trust.

8. Seek references

Ask for references from the agency's past or current clients who have pursued international growth. Contact these references to gain insights into their experiences with the agency.



What does an international digital marketing agency do?

An international digital marketing agency optimises your website for global reach and cross-cultural user experience. It also handles content creation and content localisation, as well as paid advertising on various platforms to drive traffic, conversions, and brand awareness across international markets. Typical services include:

✔ **Market and audience research**

Providing in-depth market analysis, competitor research, cultural and linguistic insights, audience segmentation, and strategic planning to formulate data-driven, culturally-relevant strategies that resonate with audiences worldwide.

✔ **Market entry strategies**

Developing plans to enter new international markets effectively (as well as helping you to grow in existing markets).

✔ **International domain strategy**

Advising on whether you need separate websites for each country and helping you to choose the right domain structure (e.g., ccTLDs, subfolders) based on your business needs.

✔ **Language targeting**

Ensuring search engines understand your supported languages using hreflang or language meta tags, avoiding problematic cookies and scripts.

✔ **Content localisation**

Conducting local keyword research, adapting all aspects of your website for cultural nuances, from copy to prices, and optimising elements like title tags and meta descriptions.

✔ **Multilingual content marketing**

Crafting high-quality content, including blog posts, articles, videos, and infographics, to engage your target audience.

✔ **International paid advertising**

Managing campaigns on platforms like Google Ads, Facebook Ads, Instagram Ads, and their international equivalents to achieve specific goals like driving traffic, conversions, or brand awareness.

✔ **Cross-cultural UX**

Enhancing user experience to accommodate cultural differences, ensuring your website resonates with diverse audiences.

✔ **Conversion Rate Optimisation (CRO)**

Enhancing the user experience to improve conversion rates in your target markets.

✔ **International link building**

Building relevant links from local websites to boost search visibility, analysing competitors for link opportunities, and creating high-quality content to attract links while removing unwanted ones.

✔ **Analytics and reporting**

Continuously monitoring international campaigns with detailed reporting and optimisation recommendations.

Beyond these services, a good agency keeps you updated on digital news and competitor insights across international markets, helping you maintain a competitive edge.

12 tips on getting the most out of your digital marketing agency

Once you have selected the perfect international agency, here are some insider tips to ensure a productive partnership:

1. Define your needs and expectations from the start

From the outset, clarity is paramount. Understand your business, marketing, and channel goals. Reflect on your expansion plans and how an agency fits into your strategy. Additionally, spend time defining your Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – how will you measure your relationship, and what metrics will gauge progress? Baseline data is crucial for this evaluation.

2. Align the scope of work with your business goals

The agency's scope of work must resonate with your business objectives. It should clearly define what needs to be achieved and connect with overarching goals. Whether it's a deliverable-based or goal-based statement, detail is key to success.

3. Immerse the agency in your business culture

Facilitate the agency's deep dive into your business. Introduce them to key personnel, share brand guidelines, content calendars, and market insights. Let them experience your product or service firsthand. Provide a backstage pass to your company's inner workings. Involving the agency in key initiatives from the outset enables an understanding of your goals.

4. Foster cross-agency awareness

In a multi-agency setup, it's important that agencies work cohesively together. Regular coordination among agencies ensures alignment and minimises conflicts. A quarterly conference call or meeting can suffice to share plans and promote collaboration.

5. Provide constructive feedback

Transparency is essential. Offer feedback promptly, whether it's about deviations from your expectations or commendations for outstanding work. Honesty and constructive criticism build a stronger partnership.

6. Streamline internal processes

Large organisations often have multiple stakeholders across departments. Businesses can minimise delays by streamlining briefings, approvals, and decision-making process as much as possible. Protracted delays slow or even kill momentum, which is often an important ingredient for success. Ensure sufficient internal resources for collaboration.

7. Measure meaningful metrics

Set KPIs from the outset to define success. Your agency should meticulously track and report on these metrics, customising dashboards for your needs, and providing qualitative insights and commentary as well as data.

8. Cultivate a partnership

It is a cliché, but the best client/agency relationships usually take place when clients view their agency as a partner, not just a vendor. Trust their expertise and collaborate with mutual respect. Building personal relationships will positively impact your work together.



9. Share industry insights

You are the expert in your industry. Share your industry knowledge, reports, and competitor insights with your agency. These insights can be invaluable for shaping effective strategies.

10. Communicate preferences

Establish clear communication preferences with your agency. Whether it's email, phone, or in-person meetings, your agency should adapt to your style to streamline communication.

11. Trust your agency's expertise

Healthy scepticism is good but remember why you chose your agency in the first place. They bring valuable expertise and experience to the table. Trust their recommendations and insights.

12. Practice patience

Digital marketing outcomes vary in timing. While some techniques yield quick results, others, like organic SEO, take time to mature. A successful partnership with your agency requires patience and a long-term perspective.

The road ahead: Your journey to international success

As you set your sights on global success, choosing the right international digital marketing agency is a pivotal step. A strategic partnership with the right agency can lead to exceptional global growth, while the wrong choice can lead to costly mistakes.

Oban helps businesses grow internationally

Since 2002, Oban International has a proven track record of helping businesses achieve international success through digital marketing. We have a unique network of Local In-Market Expert – known as LIMEs – made up of over 450 experts in over 80 countries, who provide the digital, linguistic, and cultural insights that guide our clients' campaigns. To find how we can accelerate your international growth, get in touch today.

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