Mistakes Companies Make When Hiring SEOs, and How To Fix Them

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Quick bit about me

- Founder and CEO of Credo where we've helped 4,500+ businesses meet pre-vetted hand-picked marketing agencies (2015-present).

- 70% of projects through Credo have an SEO element (some also need PPC/Facebook/content/etc).

- Former marketing leader inside Zillow Group at HotPads.com and Trulia Rentals (2013-2015).

- Former agency SEO and team lead at Distilled NYC (2011-2013).

- Outdoorsman, husband, dad, dog owner.

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Let's talk about hiring SEOs

- For all the talk about actually doing SEO well, there's very little talk about hiring well.

- A bad hire will sink even the best laid strategies, if you can even get to the right strategy with a bad hire.

- There is much more to it than budget. Experience, strategy, type of service provided, and culture should all have an equal part in hiring outside (and internal!) providers.

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Hiring strategy is as important as SEO strategy

- You need to hire both for competence and culture fit with your company. Once you know they can do the work (competence), you also need to make sure they work in the way you need them to (culture) because that aligns with your company.

- Without this cultural alignment, work will not be accomplished as smoothly and both sides will become frustrated. The engagement likely will not end successfully.

- Be sure to look for providers who **already work in the ways you do and need them to** (working hours, reporting structures and schedules), not those who *say* they *can* work in that way.

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Today's agenda

- Determining the type of provider you need

- How to find a qualified SEO provider

- Questions to ask potential SEO providers

- How to negotiate scope and pricing with SEO providers

*Note – I'll be using the term "SEO provider" or "SEO providers" throughout this talk.

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Mistake #1: hiring the wrong type of pro

Many companies hiring for SEO don't consider carefully enough the type of provider they need, and if they even need an outsourced provider.

There are 2 main considerations:

1) Should we outsource or hire inhouse?
2) If outsource, what is our main need and therefore what type of provider should we hire?

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In-house or outsource

Determing to hire in-house or outsource depends on many factors, including internal knowledge, budget available, and ability to support a team.

Most companies need a combination of in-house and outsourced talent in order to properly execute on SEO.

No internal knowledge? Good to have a marketing leader with at least strategic knowledge where SEO fits in.

Have someone with that? Then outsourcing straight away is usually the right option.

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Determining the type of provider you need

There are three main types of SEO providers. Before you start searching, you need to understand the types of providers and what each is best for.

The three types are:
1. Freelancer – solo, usually paid by the hour, sometimes senior though often not, best for services (akin to an inhouse junior hire)
2. Consultant – solo, usually projects or retainers, usually work on strategy and do very little services.
3. Agency – 2+ people (big in SEO is 50), best for services when you don't have an in-house team or need a lot more support. Sometimes do strategy too.

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Rubric for deciding
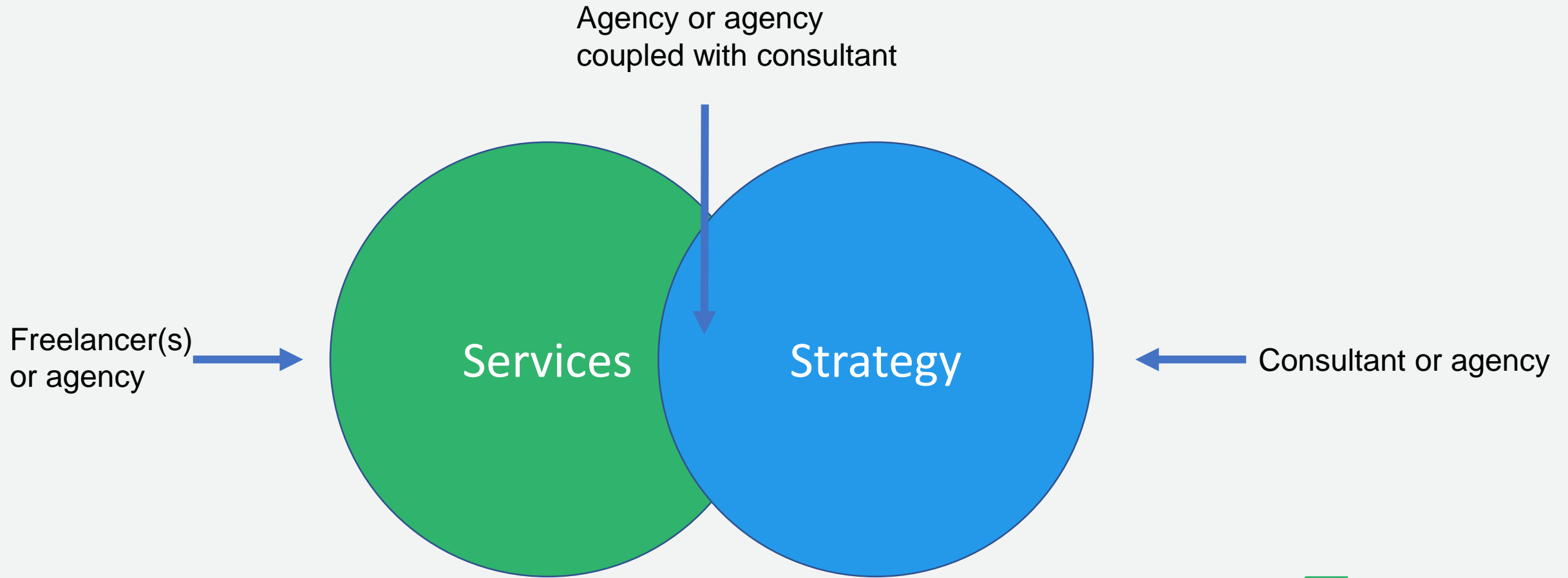
Pros and cons of each type

Each type of provider has its own pros and cons.

For each:
1. Freelancer – often cheaper and will work by the hour, hard working and hungry to please, often lacks processes and professionalism, requires someone to oversee them and run strategy.
2. Consultant – more expensive than freelancers (and often than agencies), often doesn't do services, usually more senior and professional.
3. Agency – has overhead (account managers, etc), often offers a wider array of services than just 1 or 2 things, can get it all done rather than relying on your internal teams much.

Note that every type of provider still needs a point person at your company to report to and collaborate with if needed.

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Mistake 2: searching the wrong way

Once you've decided to find an outsourced provider, how you conduct the search is important to finding the right provider.

Too many:
1) Ask blindly on social media, getting recommendations from people who haven't hired before or hired for a completely different type of business
2) Hire the very first provider they speak with, before comparing them to others. **Always comparison shop**.

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How to find an SEO provider

Now that you understand the type(s) of provider you need and how people do it badly, you can start doing your research in a better way.

The most common ways to create an initial list of SEO providers are:

1) Ask friends with similar businesses who they use;
2) Google (and look at their website for relevant work)
3) Directories or a service like Credo

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What to look for

Now that you have a list of potential providers, it's time to look for a few things before reaching out to them:

1) Do they have relevant experience on their site via case studies or dedicated landing pages?
2) Do they talk about their process for engaging with clients?
3) Are they transparent about where they're located and who's behind the company?
4) Do they show their team (or at least their leadership) and does that jive with your company?

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Booking conversations

Now you can book calls with the ones who look qualified.

The first call should be to feel each other out. Do you connect and does it make sense to keep talking? Keep it short (15-20 minutes) so you don't waste too much time with people who aren't a good fit.

The second call should be to dive a lot deeper together into your problems (business, not SEO) and then work into how SEO can solve those problems for you and how they're the right provider to help you solve those problems. Look for experience.

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Having conversations with potential pros

There are a few guidelines I always recommend about having conversations with potential providers:

1) Speak with multiple (3-5). More than that and you get into analysis paralysis.
2) Keep the first conversations short to probe for culture fit and required experience. Don't waste your time or theirs.
3) Get multiple proposals (2-3) to understand options and tradeoffs.

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Mistake 3: Not asking the right questions

Too many companies looking for an SEO provider overindex (no SEO pun unintended) on the following:

1) Big brand logos. Seeing that they're trusted is good, but a logo doesn't tell you what they did for that brand or if it matters for your project.
2) Budget. While budget is important, underinvesting will kill results. You get what you pay for (but it is possible to overpay)
3) Minimum engagement length. If you're that skeptical, you should examine if you're ready to invest in it.
4) Not asking about scope and results, and trade-offs.

Ask the right questions about SEO

Some of the questions to ask to determine their SEO capabilities are:

1) What are some of the strategies and tactics you have seen working well recently for a business *like mine*?
2) Can you give me some examples of working with a site like mine (then go check in SEMrush etc)?
3) How long does SEO usually take to start working after someone begins working with you, and what level of effort is required from our side (in-house)?
4) How would you describe your approach to SEO (white/grey/black) and how risky do you think we can/should/need to be to win?

You're looking for two things – expertise and process.

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Ask the right questions about culture

Some of the questions to ask to determine culture fit are:

1) How often do you report on the work you are doing, and how will I know if your efforts are being successful?
2) Do you have a minimum project engagement length?
3) If approached, would you work with my direct competitors as clients?
4) Who will I be speaking with on a regular basis?
5) Can you explain to me how your pricing works, and what happens if we need to dial budget and scope up and down?

You're looking for alignment.

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Negotiating scope and pricing

Once you've found a few vendors you're interested in hiring, it's important to know what you can negotiate and how to do it.

1) Their proposal should have a statement of work so you understand what you will get (and when!) for your spend with them. This gives you transparency into pricing and where you can cut.
2) You **can** ask them to just reduce the price, but the good ones won't. Instead, negotiate on the scope which should then bring down the price. Ask them to help you understand the tradeoffs.
3) Length of contract can almost always be negotiated. Don't sign a 12 month agreement to start – negotiate for 3mo and then rolling ongoing assuming it goes well. Be prepared for a higher monthly to start if you have to do this, but better to pay 10% more each month than be saddled into a 12 month arrangement with an agency you hate.

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Tl;DR

When hiring, you need to:

1) Hire the right type of pro to augment your internal knowledge/experience and type of work you need done.
2) Conduct your search in an effective way so you get on the phone with the right pros, not just any pro who will speak with you.
3) Ask the right questions around both SEO approach and experience **and** culture. Both matter equally to a successful project.

Happy to answer any questions

I've helped 100s of companies spend millions of dollars with SEO agencies over the last 5 years, and many have seen great results.

I've also personally worked with/on sites like Zillow, the NYT, IHG, Travelex, and many more.

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