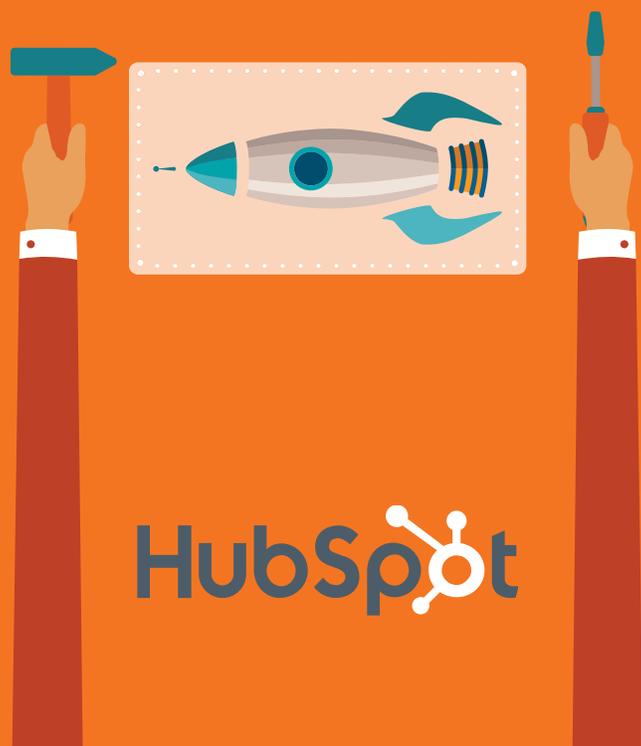


# THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO **FASTER** AGENCY GROWTH



HubSpot

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# FOREWORD

## Is your agency ready for more?

Running an agency is a funny old business, isn't it?

One week you're lying awake worrying about cash flow, the next you're desperately trying to round up long-forgotten freelancers because you're swamped with client work and you've noone to do it.

The desire for consistent growth is the one thing all agencies have in common. In this ebook, we'll share five of the most powerful actions to catapult any agency to the next stage:

- ① **Create powerful positioning to stand out from the crowd**
- ② **Become your own best client**
- ③ **Build the right team, in the right way**
- ④ **Streamline processes to speed up growth**
- ⑤ **Accelerate growth with strategic partnerships**

Some call it growth hacking.

We see it as a **holistic, committed and consistent approach to sustained agency growth.**



# 1

## CREATE A POWERFUL BRAND POSITIONING TO STAND OUT FROM THE CROWD.

### Why you need it

Do you remember when you first started your agency? You probably had a clear idea of what you would do and how you would do it. Even if you didn't, we'd bet that you knew what your agency wouldn't be like, right? This kind of vision and clarity of thinking is so easy in the early days.

But as time goes by it can be hard to retain that beginner's view. You get distracted by what others want you to do and be, by opportunities that arise along the way, and even by what your competitors are doing. And as your agency becomes less about you and more about the mix of approaches and talents that your team brings, the water can get even more muddied.

Even if you're an agency that regularly does a great job of helping clients identify what they do well, it can be difficult to see your agency as your clients do and develop a strong yet realistic agency brand.

Here's why it's worth the effort.

A strong brand positioning lets you clearly and confidently state what you do, how you do it differently and what that means for clients. It also:

-  Distinguishes you from the competition
-  Forces you to find your niche, keeping you focused on the right type of work
-  Provides a great platform for messaging, brand and content
-  Helps guide business decisions ("Does this suit us? Is this what we do?")
-  Makes it easier to recruit the best people

# Are you sold yet? Let's look at how to do it, and do it well.



## Start with the client

Ultimately you want to build a brand that clients will love. So start by thinking about the clients you love (and want more of):

- ▶ **What are their needs?**
- ▶ **What do they want from their work?**
- ▶ **What frustrates them or holds them back in their work?**
- ▶ **What's the best thing an agency could give them?**

Answering these questions accurately will help you craft your positioning for a well-defined persona, and force you to stay focused on your customer, rather than indulging in a spot of corporate chest-beating.

## Understand your market

While it can be nice (and sometimes smart) to ignore the competition, this is one instance where you need to take a long, hard look at what they're up to. Not because you're going to copy them, but because you're about to find your own story.

- ▶ **How do your competitors claim to do things differently?**
- ▶ **Is everyone saying the same thing?**
- ▶ **Is there a speciality that is narrow enough, in your sweet spot, is in demand, but isn't taken by another agency?**

Claim it as your own. Examples include: digital marketing for professional services firms, experts in health insurance retention, or games and technology PR.

## Get the right people in the room

Positioning - like most creative models - is definitely a group activity. But choose your group with care. First invite the people who best understand your customer and your industry, regardless of their position or department. And then invite the stakeholders who will need to buy in to the positioning itself. **Keep it as tight as possible: no more than eight participants makes for a focused workshop.**

Get your participants to pre-think. Assigning them some pre-workshop research is a great way of making sure everyone comes to the room prepared to make some hard decisions.



When you meet, try combining a few different facilitation methods (as opposed to a free-for-all brainstorm) for best results. **Decades of research have shown that mass brainstorms don't work and can in fact inhibit creative problem solving.**

Instead, let the team know all the outcomes you're going to achieve in the workshop, and in what order. Then, combine some small-group activities with large-group activities. For example, a small-group response to a question, followed by whole-room collaboration to amalgamate and refine the best contributions into one answer.

Strong and varied facilitation like this should generate healthily divergent opinions and fresh ideas that are focused on the customer, while avoiding the usual creativity killers of groupthink, preconceptions, and agency politics.

## Be single-minded

Positioning workshops are exciting. You'll be amazed at the awesome ideas you will generate. The most powerful positioning statements, though, are single-minded. Be prepared to make some tough calls to keep it that way:



Is your positioning unique?



Can it remain unique or is it easily replicable?



Is it compelling to your customer?



Does it play to your strengths?



Can you deliver on the promise today?



Will it endure over time?

And remember what you're here to do: **State what you do, how you do it, and find out what sets you apart - and nothing else.** But get a record of all those exciting but off-task ideas that pop up, so it doesn't keep you off-track.

## Finish with the client

You started with your client - you need to keep them in mind at the end too. This means that your positioning needs to be sanity-checked through the lens of your customer. Yes, you won an award this year. So what? **If it doesn't answer your clients' deepest needs, it doesn't belong in your positioning.** To be completely sure you've nailed it, test it out on some of your best clients and incorporate their feedback before you go live.

# 2

## BUILD THE RIGHT TEAM, IN THE RIGHT WAY

### Why you need it

If there's one thing that hasn't changed since you were a one-(wo)man-band, it's this: You need the right people to grow and do your best work.

**It's not just about hiring the right people though.** It's equally important to ensure everyone is in the right roles, and to make sure your team is clear on who does what and how they fit together. Get this wrong and you'll have things falling through gaps, people stepping on toes, or a whole team frozen because they're terrified of doing either.



# Here's how to design your agency structure in a way that sets you up for collaboration, innovation and ownership.

## Designing a structure that best suits your agency

Is your agency structure delivering you high performance or headaches? If it's the latter, don't worry, you're not alone.

Here are some signs that your business could be in structural melt-down:

- 1 High-performing players are feeling demoralised or defeated
- 2 Staff are confused about their authority or areas of responsibility
- 3 You've had a stream of failed new hires
- 4 Your teams are not collaborating well
- 5 Decisions are being made too slowly, and opportunities are being missed

Let's be honest - if your agency is experiencing any one of these issues, you're probably not sleeping right now.



**Agencies today need to be quick, collaborative and at the very forefront of their game to be competitive.**

Not having the correct levels of accountability, authority and clarity around how everyone fits together can be a major roadblock.

But how do you review your structure and find the right one for you?

## 1 Structure your team around your business goals

Perhaps you're trying to build new service offerings into an existing team. Or maybe you're trying to grow your team to service the growing demand from your brilliant inbound marketing efforts.



## 2 Review the types of organisational structure available



There are many different types of organisational structures, and a world of pros and cons to each. But pros and cons don't exist in a vacuum - they need context. So in order to assess the suitability of one structure above another, you need to evaluate them against your own goals.

## 3 Choose a structure that will empower staff to make decisions

Traditionally, decision-making is centralised in an organisation and often sits (and slows) with senior managers. In the kind of agile content and digital agencies we're seeing prosper today, specialists tend to sit in the middle levels of the organisation.



Give them the power (and responsibility) to make good decisions for the client, and you'll not only see strong, speedy decision-making, you'll be creating a true sense of ownership and pride in your leaders of the future.

## 4 Decide how specialised you need each role to be



For smaller agencies that are trying to grow quickly, a more generalist approach allows for more flexibility as your people can tackle a broader array of tasks. This increases your productivity and the value of each hire.

However, for larger and more established agencies, refining some specialist areas will make it easier to establish your agency as a leader in certain areas. Don't be afraid to create new roles for stellar specialists that come your way - particularly if their skill set is in high demand.

## 5 Identify areas and potential people for upskilling

Employees love an opportunity to learn new things. And once you have the right structure, it is easy to see who could potentially pick up a new job-related skill. Before you jump into training mode though, check off a few things.

Does this person have a natural aptitude for similar tasks? Do they pick things up quickly and apply them intuitively? Are they interested in the field you want them to grow in?



Once you've decided who should do what, get them involved in finding the best training or mentoring program for them, and create a plan with a timeline for completion and commercialisation of their new skill. Remember - always try new services and skills out on your own marketing to refine it before you take it to market.

## 6 Establish performance metrics and compensation to keep your teams firing



Once your structure is defined, and everyone knows their place and the long-term goals of the agency, why not break long-term goals down into quarterly performance targets for each individual and team, and reward those who meet them?

Remember to benchmark these short-term measures against long-term agency goals, so your people keep a sense of contributing to the bigger picture too. This creates a performance-focused culture that regularly and consistently rewards your top team members, leading to great agency performance as well as retention and growth of your top people.

## 7 Stay flexible

While it's vital that everyone knows their role and understands how they fit into the bigger picture, don't be afraid to assign special roles and responsibilities for certain clients and projects. This kind of flexible, agile approach allows you to build perfectly-appointed project teams with just the right mix of skills and experience.



## Recruiting top talent

Structuring your team around your goals for growth helps you clearly see the skill gaps in your organisation. So once you've done everything you can to optimise your current situation, you may need to recruit to plug the holes.

Hiring the best people with the right skills is still one of the best ways to ensure your agency fuels its growth effectively. And while the traditional advertise-and-respond recruitment methods are still going strong, there are a host of other tactics you can employ to make sure you're attracting interest from the very best in their field.



LinkedIn Recruiter has experienced massive growth over the last couple of years, and boasts an impressive array of features, from algorithm-based candidate suggestions to the ability to monitor and nurture candidates.



Creating and sharing inspiring, relevant content does so much more than attract clients. It can project a strong message of the type of agency you are: from your culture and beliefs to your position in the market.



While you might get lucky quickly, recruiting the best people can be a lengthy process: sometimes taking anything up to 6 months for senior hires. Plan your recruitment well in advance so you don't miss the boat.



Word-of-mouth still plays an important role, and can be especially effective in finding candidates with a strong cultural fit. Employee referral incentives and social media can be great ways of spreading the word through your network.



Competitions, challenges and hackathons can be useful for unearthing the brightest minds: sometimes from the most unexpected of corners.



Depending on your agency goals, you might like to consider outsourcing specific areas of work such as design work.



Think beyond your local area: remote working is a very viable option for some roles, especially if your company is located in a competitive hiring market.

# 3 BECOME YOUR OWN BEST CLIENT

## Why you need it

In the agency environment, client work is like gas - it always expands to fill the space, so there is just never enough time to work on your own marketing.

The best way to overcome this challenge is to become your own best client. This means assigning yourself a marketing budget, allocating time and resources, setting measurable goals, and adhering to the same level of diligence you would for any paying client.

Today's agencies are finding that **smart, insight-driven inbound marketing can deliver a consistent and ongoing stream of new business.** Here's how to make it happen - and keep the momentum going.



## Assign roles and a Direct Responsible Individual (DRI)

We all know that a project without an owner is a project on the fast-track to nowhere. So the first and most important step towards achieving perpetual growth is assigning an appropriately skilled project manager.

Make sure it's one of your agency's stronger personalities who is good at engaging the team with the goal, and who can effectively manage deadlines and team resources to deliver.

## Fire up your team with your purpose, vision and mission

Are you super-clear on why you're in this game? What about your team? Agency life is not for the faint-hearted. Long hours, client curveballs and the consistent pressure of deadlines and deliverables can easily throw you off-piste.

But if you want your team to fully support your vision for the business, they need to know where it's heading and how you want to get there. **A clear vision gives you a picture of the future** - a palpable picture of what you'd like your world to be like after your agency has worked its magic. And your mission tells everyone how you're going to get there.

**Haven't nailed this piece yet?  
Here is some inspiration to set  
you off in the right direction.**





### **Purpose**

Articulates why your organisation exists, and the higher purpose or cause that you serve. For example, Nintendo: To put smiles on the faces of everyone we touch.

*How to get started:* Ask yourself “How does our agency make a difference to the lives it touches?”



### **Mission**

What you do to accomplish your purpose: it can also include how you do what you do. For example, Nudie Juice: Create good...with whatever we make, wherever we go.

*How to get started:* Ask yourself “What do we actually do to deliver our purpose?”



### **Vision**

The future that you aspire to.

For example, IKEA: A better everyday life for the many people.

*How to get started:* Ask yourself “When we’ve succeeded, how does life look?”

### **Want more?**

Check out these inspiring examples of [mission and vision statements](#).

## Define your goals - and we mean, put a number on it.

When marketing your agency, it can be hard to know where to begin. A good way to start is to think about what your business needs most, right now. To choose the right goal, look at the customers on your books and in your funnel. Where is the biggest and most realistic opportunity for a win? What kind of win would have the biggest impact on your business in the short and longer term? For example:

Do you have a client with a big budget, but you only have a small part of it? What would be the short and long-term impact of getting a bigger piece of their business?

Are you getting high numbers of website visitors but nobody is giving you their details? How many more lead conversions could you get if you built some simple landing pages or stronger calls-to-action?

Once you've decided what kind of activity will have the biggest impact on your agency, it's time to set realistic and measurable goals. If in doubt, **use the SMART framework:**

**Specific:** Establish real metrics with real deadlines. For example 'We want to increase website traffic by 25% over the next 3 months'; or 'We will increase leads from our landing pages by 15% over the next six weeks'; or 'We will grow our social media followers by 50% over the next 3 months'.

**Measurable:** Make sure that you can track your goal. For example: if your goal is to raise awareness, measure this in terms of organic search ranking, website visits, and increases in social followers and shares.



**Attainable:** You know what your team is capable of, so be honest with yourself. Don't forget any hurdles you may have to overcome - not just in your marketing, but also in your resourcing once clients start knocking on your door. Do you have the right skills in your team to achieve your goal? Do you have enough resources to deliver? Are your deadlines realistic or wishful thinking? A bit of realism will go a long way to keeping your team motivated and engaged.

**Relevant:** Work towards a goal that is actually relevant and valuable to your business. For instance, doubling your website visits over six months might be an awesome target, but only if you're trying to raise awareness. On the other hand, spending two months on a lead nurturing workflow isn't worth your time if you're not generating a steady pipeline of leads in the first place.

**Time-bound:** Give yourself a deadline. For example, write and promote two ebooks over a three month period.

### Still looking for more info?

Why not check out our template for [setting SMART marketing goals](#) from our marketing library.

### Pick the right tactics

Understanding your goals will lead you directly to the next step: deciding on the marketing tactics that will help you achieve them. The [inbound methodology](#) gives you a great idea of which tactics deliver best against which objective.



**Push the envelope.** Your own agency marketing is the best place to test out new strategies, techniques and ideas for client delivery later on. With nothing to lose and everything to gain, make sure you're seeking out the newest tools, technologies and techniques to test and measure.

## Plan for all sections of the funnel

While it's a good idea to start with projects that have a short-term gain, make sure you keep the entire sales funnel in mind. **Anticipate what you'll need to work on next**, so there are no holes in your strategy further down the line.

## Invest in technology



Investing in a good marketing automation tool helps you track leads through the funnel and communicate with relevance and authenticity, as well as measuring the effectiveness of different marketing initiatives. Trying out a platform yourselves is also a great way to get to grips with it before rolling it out to clients.



A Customer Relationship Management Software (CRM) can help you to effectively manage your sales opportunities too - a must for any growing business.



An online project management tool, integrated with a capacity management tool, can keep your people utilised at optimum levels, and keep your agency delivering on your deadlines painlessly. Some project management technologies integrate seamlessly with timesheet software as well - a helpful feature for any busy account manager.

### Want to know more?

Check out Hubspot's [free and easy-to-use CRM](#). It eliminates manual work so your team can stay focused on selling.



## Report and repeat

Tying all your reporting back to your goals will give you a clear purpose and will prevent you from going into data-analysis overwhelm.

If your goal is to increase awareness, track increases in website visitors, numbers of followers on social and new subscribers to your newsletter. Already seeing some growth in all these areas? Well done. Repeat the same process to keep the momentum going and your audience engaged, checking where you could fine-tune bits as you go.

**Remember to ensure your team has access to all results and reports, so they can use the data to continually seek improvement and focus more on what worked.**

## 4

# STREAMLINE PROCESSES TO SPEED UP GROWTH

## Why you need it

On the surface of it, processes are not the most exciting of topics. However, growth is. So once we understand that **having processes in place is an essential part of agency growth**, they start to look a little different.

Reinventing the wheel on every project is one of the most costly, time-consuming, profit-reducing and quality-killing sins an agency can commit. And yet it's common. Having a process for repeatable tasks in your agency provides a prototype for a project or phase of work. It's a defined set of tasks your people can follow consistently, giving everyone confidence that nothing will be overlooked, and ultimately saving you time and money.

Here's how to tell if your processes need some love:



You're experiencing double-handling on your accounts



You have capacity issues where staff are regularly double-booked



Your team are not consistently QA-ing work before it goes to the client



Staff are repeatedly creating project plans and timelines from scratch

Sound familiar?

Don't worry. You don't need to spend the next six months in process land. A little bit of love every week can help you to capitalise on your intellectual property and make the most of your skills within a framework that everyone follows, understands, and builds upon.

# How to do it well

Here's an example to help you: a very simplified version of a client on-boarding process.



**Step One:** Document the top-level steps you go through when onboarding your client. For example:

- 1 Kick-off meeting
- 2 Strategic response
- 3 Action plan, KPIs and timeline
- 4 Execution



**Step Two:** Detail the actions that need to happen within the top-level steps. For example:

## Kick-off meeting

- 1
  - a. Centralise files, set up client project management and timesheeting systems, invite team members
  - b. Meet to clarify objectives
  - c. Understand - and document - your client's current situation and benchmarks

## Strategic response

- 2
  - a. Centralise brief and client insights, brief appropriate team members
  - b. Research company, competition and industry
  - c. Build strategy
  - d. Present strategy, gain feedback and finalise

## Action plan, KPIs and timeline

- 3
  - a. Agree KPIs
  - b. Produce action plan with budgets
  - c. Create top-line timelines
  - d. Get client approval

## Execution

- 4
  - a. Create internal briefs
  - b. Assign team to tasks
  - c. Set-up project management and time-tracking systems
  - d. Book meetings for ongoing client collaboration, review and planning



**Step Three:** Draw it up

Each agency has their own preferred way of drawing up processes: from using software-driven project templates to infographics that show you the process flow in a beautifully visual way. However you do it, the key is to make it as **visible, simple and actionable** as possible to your people. Above all, make sure your team gets into the habit of following the process early, so it just becomes second nature over time.

And then? You move on to the next one.

**Processes are best tackled one at a time to avoid confusion and process overload.**

## 5

# ACCELERATE YOUR AGENCY'S GROWTH WITH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

## Why you need them

Yep, we know. Strategic partnerships are two words (along with 'agency review') guaranteed to make any agency owner's blood run cold. The one thing that binds most agency owners is a fierce protection of their client relationships: relationships that feel threatened by the mere mention of strategic partnerships.

**But not all partnerships are created equal.** And it doesn't have to mean handing over the keys to the kingdom to an outsider. From plugging skill gaps to building a broader referral network, learning from and collaborating with likeminded, super-smart people can deliver huge benefits to both you and your client.

All you need to do is to **find the right strategic partnerships for you.**



# How to do it well



## Plan for the future

Come back to your company's vision: What is your core business purpose? Look at your clients' world: What do they need? What are they likely to need in the next five years? Is your business model going to need to change?

Identify your core strategic assets: These could be IP, platforms, experience, people, associations.

Now look at your gaps. Identify which are going to be part of your core offering - you'll need to resource these in house - and which can be outsourced: These are the areas where you need to build your strategic partnerships.



## Find the best fit

Look for partners as you would clients: Find the best in the business and build a wish list - or ask people you trust for a referral. Next, test them out on small, discrete jobs before letting them loose on your client.



## Lay down the ground rules

Sometimes partnering with another provider can feel a bit like an open relationship: exciting on the surface, but full of potholes in reality. To survive, be clear about who owns the client, establish watertight Service Level Agreements (defining the kind and the level of service required from each of you) and keep the lines of communication honest and open. Specifics to include are agreements around markups, white labelling, use of case studies, client referrals and handling conflicts of interest.



## Get to know the people

Consider the people behind the brand: Do you trust them? Do you like them? Do they share similar values? Would they be willing to share and lend mutual support?



## Share your experience

Work closely with your partners so that you both gain transfer of knowledge, as well as getting the job done.



## Help each other grow

Meet regularly to discuss business opportunities: this should be a two-way street, with referrals regularly being passed between the two of you.

# THAT'S IT FOLKS!

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Hopefully this ebook will have provided some tips and insights into supercharging your agency's growth.  
We hope you enjoyed it.

Remember - if you're ready to take your agency to the next level, there are 5 key areas that you need to focus on:



Become your own best client



Build the right team, in the right way



Streamline processes to speed up growth



Accelerate growth with strategic partnerships



Create a powerful positioning to stand out from the crowd

All you have to do now is get on board,  
strap yourself in and get ready for the ride of your life.

Enjoyed this ebook? Why not spread the love?



# AGENCY LIFE IS HARD



Difficult to generate  
new business



Can't prove ROI



Project work making  
cash flow and growth  
unpredictable

## Become a better agency

Hubspot's partner program helps you market, sell and deliver the remarkable results your clients expect.

[Get your free agency consultation today.](#)