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How to get clients for your marketing agency: referrals plus 1 channel

By Ross Brown, FlexOps

The way I'd get clients for a marketing agency is through 2 channels working together. The first is referrals and partnerships, set up and run as a proper programme, which reaches the people who already know of you. The second is 1 content-based channel that you can commit to day in, day out, which reaches the people who don't know of you yet. I think trying to do content, outbound and referrals all at once usually means none of them gets done properly.

Read this online at flexops.co/resources/how-to-get-clients-for-your-marketing-agency

When an agency needs this

What I hear from owners here is "I'm not getting the right leads" or "I don't have enough leads in my pipeline." They're probably spending more time than ever on sales and marketing, and it's not really working.

Chances are they're either trying to target the wrong type of people, or they're trying to do too many things, and they don't have a strategy in place for how they're going to grow the business. That sounds almost too obvious, but it's generally what it is.

So before you pick anything, I'd make sure you know 2 things. Who should your clients be, and why? And what do they really need help with, and why? Once you have those, you can look at how you're going to have conversations with those people.

The aim is a reliable way to generate qualified leads. I'm not that interested in the volume of leads, and what I'm after is calls with the right people at the right time, as often as you can.

Channel 1: set referrals up as a programme

Most owners see referrals as a random source of leads. A friend sends someone your way, you close it, and then there's nothing for 3 months. I'd call that luck, and I don't think you can plan a business around it. What I set up with clients is using referrals as a key channel, and using them in a certain way.

There are 3 parts to the referral programme.

Build your go-to list

Be clear on who you're targeting and why. Then list the people who wouldn't be surprised to hear from you: friends and family, peers you've worked with, people running similar or adjacent businesses, former and existing clients, partners, consultants and fractional people in your network, and the people behind the tools you use. It's the same list you'd pull up if you lost a client tomorrow, so I'd start with names and nothing else.

Settle on a commercial incentive

I'd think of it as an acquisition cost. If you were spending on ads, content or events, you'd be paying something. The incentive I see working most is cash. That can be a lump sum, but if you're doing it properly I think it should build up over time, so that when someone has referred you a really good client, they're probably taking thousands from it by the end of the year. A few options are the first month of revenue from the new client (if they stay for a minimum period), a percentage of revenue for 12 months, or a percentage for as long as they stay if the retainer grows. You should be able to explain it in 1 sentence.

Give them what they need to refer you

Don't only say "send me leads". Give them clear criteria for who your ideal client is and who it isn't, a short summary of your agency, who you help and why, and enough context to make a warm introduction. Then I'd go a step further and suggest people in their network who'd be a great fit.

After that, follow up. In my experience the programme needs 10 to 15 active partners before it generates leads consistently.

For each partner, I'd keep track of your relationship with them, the incentive you agreed, whether you've sent them the information, when you last reminded them, and the introductions and revenue that came from it.

Where referral programmes usually go wrong

- **Not properly incentivising people.** A vague "I'll sort you out" doesn't work.
- **Overcomplicating the commercials.** If it takes more than a sentence to explain, nobody remembers it.
- **Not asking enough people.** Most owners reach out to 5 and stop.
- **Not being clear on who you want to work with.** If partners don't know your ideal client, they'll send you anyone.
- **Not making it easy enough.** I wouldn't expect partners to work out how to pitch you.

Channel 2: pick 1 marketing channel

The second channel is usually some form of content. For a lot of agencies that will be something like LinkedIn, where you create a lot of content to show your expertise, and you use the channel to drive inbound leads, to support outbound activity, or usually a combination of both.

This side is much more time-intensive, and I think picking the channel comes down to 3 things.

1. You enjoy it, or you have an interest in it.
2. You're very good at it.
3. The people you want to work with spend time there.

For me, that was writing. I've always enjoyed it and I was confident at it. I was uncomfortable with video when I started, and I'm not a networker in person, so YouTube or 30 to 40 events a year were never going to be my channel. The agency owners I want to work with spend a lot of time on LinkedIn, so that's where I went.

A client of mine runs a LinkedIn ads agency. He's a good writer, and the B2B SaaS owners he works with spend a lot of their time on LinkedIn, so that's where his qualified leads come from.

Whatever the channel, the workflow is the same.

Stage	What it means
Connect	Reach the people you want to work with.
Nurture	Educate them, and help them understand who you are and why you do what you do.
Convert	Make a compelling offer. That might be something really valuable for free at the start, or a paid audit or review, depending on your model.

There's an optional third channel, depending on what the agency does. If you run paid media, for example, it probably makes sense to have some paid ads as part of how you win work.

How long it takes

I'd pick things you're going to commit to on a daily basis. A lot of people start on LinkedIn without a system around it. They start posting, it gets cumbersome and tiring, and they're not getting anything back, and the same can happen on any channel.

The hard part is following through month after month and year after year. It might take 5 to 10 years to win some of your dream clients, so I don't think daily hacks or shortcuts are going to get you there.

Where owners get this wrong

This goes wrong when owners panic and start trying other things. It could be podcasting, going to events or sending cold outbound, whatever it is. They start trying to do too much to get leads today, when I'd be thinking about the leads you'll have in 3, 6 and 12 months from now, and how high quality those leads will be.

Measure both channels

I'd treat each channel the same way you'd measure any other source of pipeline. Each month, note the referral introductions you received, the calls that came from referrals, the conversations from your second channel, the calls that came from it, and the clients you won.

Questions owners ask about this

How do I get clients for my marketing agency?

I'd start with the people who already know you, set up as a proper referral programme, and add 1 marketing channel you can keep up every day. Before either, be clear on who your clients should be and what they need help with.

Can you scale referrals?

I don't agree that you can't scale referrals, but I also don't believe you should assume you'll always have them. That's why I'd run a second channel alongside.

What should I pay for a referral?

Cash is what I see working most. The options are the first month's revenue, a percentage of revenue for 12 months, or a percentage for as long as the client stays, and I'd lean towards something that builds up over the year for a really good client. Whichever you choose, keep it simple enough to explain in 1 sentence.

Which marketing channel should an agency use?

The one you enjoy, that you're good at, and where your ideal clients spend their time. For a lot of B2B agencies that ends up being some form of content, but it depends on you.

How many referral partners do I need?

In my experience it takes 10 to 15 active partners to generate consistent leads, which is a lot more than most owners ask.

If you'd like a hand with it

I help agency owners set this up so that they have consistent conversations with the right prospects. If you'd like to talk it through, drop me a note or, by all means, book a call. If you're not sure whether pipeline is the first thing to fix, the Agency Health Check will give you a steer.