

Agency, freelancers or in-house?

It depends on how often the work comes up and how much is riding on it.

Super-Conscious

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One question I hear from business owners all the time: should we hire a studio, use freelancers or build a team in-house? The answer depends on how often the work comes up and how much is riding on it.

Freelancers: for one-off tasks

Freelancers make the most sense when you have a one-off task. You know it needs doing, you don't know when it'll come up again, and you need someone to handle it.

Bring in a freelancer, agree an hourly rate or a set fee, and let them knock it out. It's straightforward. If the task comes up again, you can work with them again.

Share of the US workforce that freelanced in 2023

UPWORK, 2023

38%

64 million people. Nearly half of them provided knowledge services such as marketing, programming and consulting.

In-house: when the work keeps coming

Now say that task keeps coming up, over and over, on a steady schedule. That's when it might make sense to build an in-house team.

With that much consistent volume, having someone on staff becomes more economical than paying an hourly rate. But the demand has to be steady enough to justify it. In-house people should be helping with the company's ongoing, day-to-day work.

ANA members with an in-house agency

ANA, 2023

82%

The ANA's members are large advertisers, so this is a trend at scale, not a rule for a \$1 million business.

UP FROM 78% IN 2018

A studio: for the big moments

A studio is the right call for the big, high-stakes moments that don't come up often: a rebrand, a new campaign, a new website.

For those, you want people with deep expertise, people who've done it many times. Sometimes you just need an expert's second opinion. That's when you bring in a studio.

What goes wrong when you mix all three

The problem isn't using all three. It's having no clear owner. When nobody owns marketing, it turns into a mess. Nobody knows exactly what they're doing, and everyone assumes someone else is handling it.

At a certain stage, you need one point of contact. Most often that's a marketing director or brand director. Their whole job is to sit in the company meetings, understand what's happening across the business and turn that into tasks.

Once you have real marketing needs, like meaningful ad spend, lots of emails or a steady stream of ads, I'd hire that person first. A director of marketing or a marketing coordinator should come before you scale up an in-house team.

Time it takes to hire a first marketer at an early-stage company

FIRST ROUND REVIEW, 2019

3–6 months

So start looking before the work piles up.

The setup at \$1 million versus \$10 million

First, it depends on how your business wins customers. Many B2B companies are sales-led: a sales team goes out and brings in most of the work. Others rely on inbound, and that's where marketing really comes in.

Here's our rule of thumb for an inbound business:

- At \$1 million in revenue: work with a studio that has expertise at your stage. At the same time, work toward hiring a director of marketing, the person who'll own marketing.
- At \$10 million in revenue: if you have a lot of consistent inbound marketing, start building a small in-house team. At that scale, it's more cost-efficient. Studios can be expensive, so bring them in for the specific, complex work where they add the most. Routine work belongs in-house, and a freelancer can fill that role at first, too.

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