



How to Choose a Marketing Partner in North America

A plain-English guide for US & Canadian small businesses choosing between DIY, a freelancer, or an agency — costs, contracts, and who owns your data.

The North American marketing market is huge and fragmented. You can hire a national agency, a one-person shop in your own city, or a freelancer you found on a marketplace this morning — and the price for what looks like the ‘same’ work can swing from a few hundred dollars a month to five figures. That choice matters more than most owners realize, because the wrong fit usually costs you twice: once in fees, and again in the months you lose before you notice it isn’t working.

This guide walks through how to decide whether you even need outside help yet, how to tell a serious partner from a slick pitch, what realistic budgets look like in US dollars, and the contract and data questions that quietly cause the most regret — especially who actually owns your ad accounts, your website, and your customer data when the relationship ends.

1. Decide whether you need a partner at all

Before you spend a dollar, get honest about the gap. Are you short on *time*, short on *skill*, or short on a *plan*? A freelancer fills a time or skill gap; a consultant or agency fills a plan gap. Many small businesses jump straight to hiring an agency when what they actually need is one good month of strategy and someone to run the day-to-day. Write down what you want to be different in 90 days — more qualified leads, a working email list, a website that converts — in plain numbers. If you can’t name the outcome, no partner can deliver it, and you’ll end up paying a retainer for ‘activity’ instead of results.

2. Match the type of help to the job

North America gives you four broad options: do it yourself, a freelancer or contractor, an independent consultant, or a full agency. A freelancer is great for a single channel done well — one person writing your emails or running your Google Ads. A consultant builds the strategy and hands it off. An agency carries a whole team but charges for that overhead. Bigger isn’t better; a national agency may park your account with a junior while a local shop or specialist freelancer gives it real attention. Ask exactly *who* does the work day to day, not who’s in the sales meeting, and ask to see results for businesses your size — not enterprise logos that have nothing to do with you.

3. Verify they’re real and check the paperwork

Confirm you’re dealing with an actual registered business: a US agency should have an EIN and state registration you can look up on the Secretary of State’s website; a Canadian one should have a business number (BN) registered with the CRA. For independent contractors in the US, you’ll collect a **W-9** and issue a **1099-NEC** if you pay them \$600 or more in a year — so make sure they’re set up to be paid that way and aren’t really a misclassified employee. Get references you can actually call, and watch how they handle a contract: a real partner will happily put scope, deliverables, and an exit in writing.

4. Nail down ownership, data, and the exit before you sign

This is where North American owners get burned most often. **Insist that you own your own accounts** — your Google Ads, Google Analytics, Meta Business Manager, domain, and website should be in *your* name with the agency granted access, never the other way around. If they build your campaigns inside their account or on a proprietary platform you can’t export, you’re a hostage. If a partner touches customer data, ask how they handle it under **CCPA/CPRA** (California) and **PIPEDA** (Canada): where it’s stored, who can see it, and how it’s deleted on request. Finally, avoid long lock-ins — favor month-to-month or short terms

with a clean 30-day exit, and confirm in writing that all accounts, data, and creative files come back to you when you leave.

Rough US\$ ranges for small businesses — Canadian costs are broadly similar in CA\$. Actual fees vary by market and scope.

Option	Typical US\$ cost	Best when
Do it yourself	\$0 plus your time and ad spend	You're very early, budget is tight, and you have time to learn one channel well
Freelancer / contractor	\$25–\$150/hr, or roughly \$500–\$2,500/mo per channel	You need one specific thing done well — ads, email, or content — and can direct the work
Independent consultant	\$1,500–\$5,000 for a strategy engagement, or a monthly advisory retainer	You have a plan gap and need direction you can then execute or hand to a freelancer
Full agency	Roughly \$2,500–\$10,000+/mo retainer	You want a whole team across multiple channels and have the budget to support the overhead

Common questions

How much does a marketing agency cost in the US?

For small businesses, full-service agency retainers typically run from about \$2,500 to \$10,000 or more per month, depending on scope, the number of channels, and ad spend managed. Smaller project work or single-channel management can be less. Canadian pricing is broadly similar in Canadian dollars. Always confirm whether ad spend is separate from the management fee — it usually is.

Freelancer or agency — which is right for my business?

Pick a freelancer when you need one channel done well and can give direction — they're more affordable and you talk to the person doing the work. Pick an agency when you need a coordinated team across several channels and have the budget for the overhead. A consultant sits in between, building strategy you then execute. Many small businesses start with a freelancer or consultant and only graduate to an agency once they've outgrown that.

What are the red flags when hiring a marketing partner?

Be wary of guaranteed rankings or results, vague reporting, pressure to sign a long contract fast, and anyone who wants to build your campaigns inside their own ad accounts. Other warning signs: no verifiable business registration, no references for businesses your size, refusing to put scope and an exit in writing, and locking your work into a proprietary platform you can't export.

Do they need to be a registered business?

Yes — deal with a verifiable entity. A US agency should have an EIN and a state registration you can look up on the Secretary of State's site; a Canadian one should have a CRA business number. For individual contractors in the US you'll collect a W-9 and issue a 1099-NEC if you pay them \$600 or more in a year. If someone can't provide basic business details, treat that as a red flag.

Who owns my ad accounts, analytics, and data when we part ways?

You should — if you set it up correctly. Insist that your Google Ads, Google Analytics, Meta Business Manager, domain, and website live in accounts you own, with the partner granted access rather than the other way around. That way, when the relationship ends, you keep your history, audiences, and data. Also ask how they

handle customer data under CCPA/CPRA in California and PIPEDA in Canada — where it's stored and how it's deleted on request.

How do I avoid getting locked into a long contract?

Favor month-to-month or short initial terms with a clean 30-day notice period, and get the exit terms in writing before you sign. Avoid partners who require 12-month lock-ins or build your work on proprietary platforms you can't take with you. Confirm up front that all accounts, data, and creative files are returned to you when you leave — a confident partner earns your renewal rather than trapping you in a contract.

Read the full interactive guide, with a free tool, at cmbeyer.com — or ask Bea to build a package for your business.