

Finding that 25th Hour

Free time. Wouldn't that be nice?

For most marketing professionals, time is always running out. Projects often have tight deadlines, resulting in late nights and rush charges, and in the worst cases failed expectations. How can you create the time you need to do your project right the first time?

The secret to finding the free time you crave is simple—preparation. A smooth, well-managed project requires a lot of preparation—from defining the messaging, scope and budget, to supplying project contributors with the information and tools they need to get the job done. Whether it's improving customer communications through an e-newsletter or increasing sales with a partner Flash movie, you should carefully scope out all aspects of your project in advance—with your team and your marketing partner—to guarantee the most successful outcome.

Consider the following 10 steps before you launch your next marketing project. Although you probably already know, we just want to remind you about how valuable they are. Following them really will help you stay on track and on budget, no matter how tight the deadline. You might even find a few extra hours to celebrate your success:

1. **Challenge—Identify your marketing challenge before you get people started.** Consider whether your challenge can be solved by a marketing initiative, or if it's part of a larger problem. For example, a company suffering from negative market awareness because of engineering or manufacturing issues needs to address those problems first.
2. **Solution—Determine the potential solutions in marketing terms.** This is where an agency might be able to contribute new ideas. Establish schedules, budgets and scope at this the beginning, even if you can only identify a range. The more guidance you can offer your team, the less time—and money—you'll waste on unnecessary work.
3. **Time Line—When do you really need it? What's driving your schedule?** Know your critical path up front, and identify any events, schedules or individuals who might have an impact on your timeline. Map out a work-back schedule for projects that have a hard stop, such as a product launch or trade show, and anticipate deliverables and dependencies that need to work in concert for you to meet your target date.
4. **Approvals—Get approval from your manager, or even more senior management, before you start.** Get management input to make sure that they support your program and deliverables. Engage all required participants—content owners, finance resources, sales personnel—at the appropriate time, and get their buy-in up front.
5. **Budget—Get management approval on budget or a budget range.** Without a budget, your team could waste time and money working on a project that is out of scope or not even feasible. If you decide to engage an agency, establishing budget parameters upfront helps you narrow your choice and understand how and if their ideas and pricing will fit into your project.
6. **Messaging and Positioning—Agree on your audience, messaging and call to action before you begin, to avoid conflict and unnecessary rewrites.** (In some cases, you may want to ask your agency to help with “messaging and positioning, but be sure to include this work in your budget projections.)
7. **Content Reviewers—Identify your reviewers.** Make sure they know they are responsible for reviews and approval and will be available when you need them. Consolidating comments from your review team will save time and money.
8. **Source Materials—Give your copywriters and designers all available source materials before they begin their work.** Receiving information late in the game delays time-to-completion and frustrates everyone involved. Some source materials that are helpful up front include examples of writing or design, existing product collateral or presentations, and names and contact information of subject matter experts.
9. **Engaging an Agency—Use your agency for what they do best.** While agency personnel are members of your extended team, they probably don't need to attend every meeting related to the project. Identify the need for project management support up-front to ensure that agency resources are available. Determine in advance the agency responsibilities and your own internal team's responsibilities. Use lower-cost internal resources whenever possible to perform less project-critical tasks.
10. **Final Means Final—Changing your mind can be expensive.** Skipping approvals or allowing changes after final approval can put your budget and schedule at risk. Get approval at each step of the process to keep your project on track and on budget. Manage all team member expectations, and decide ahead of time who is responsible for final approval.