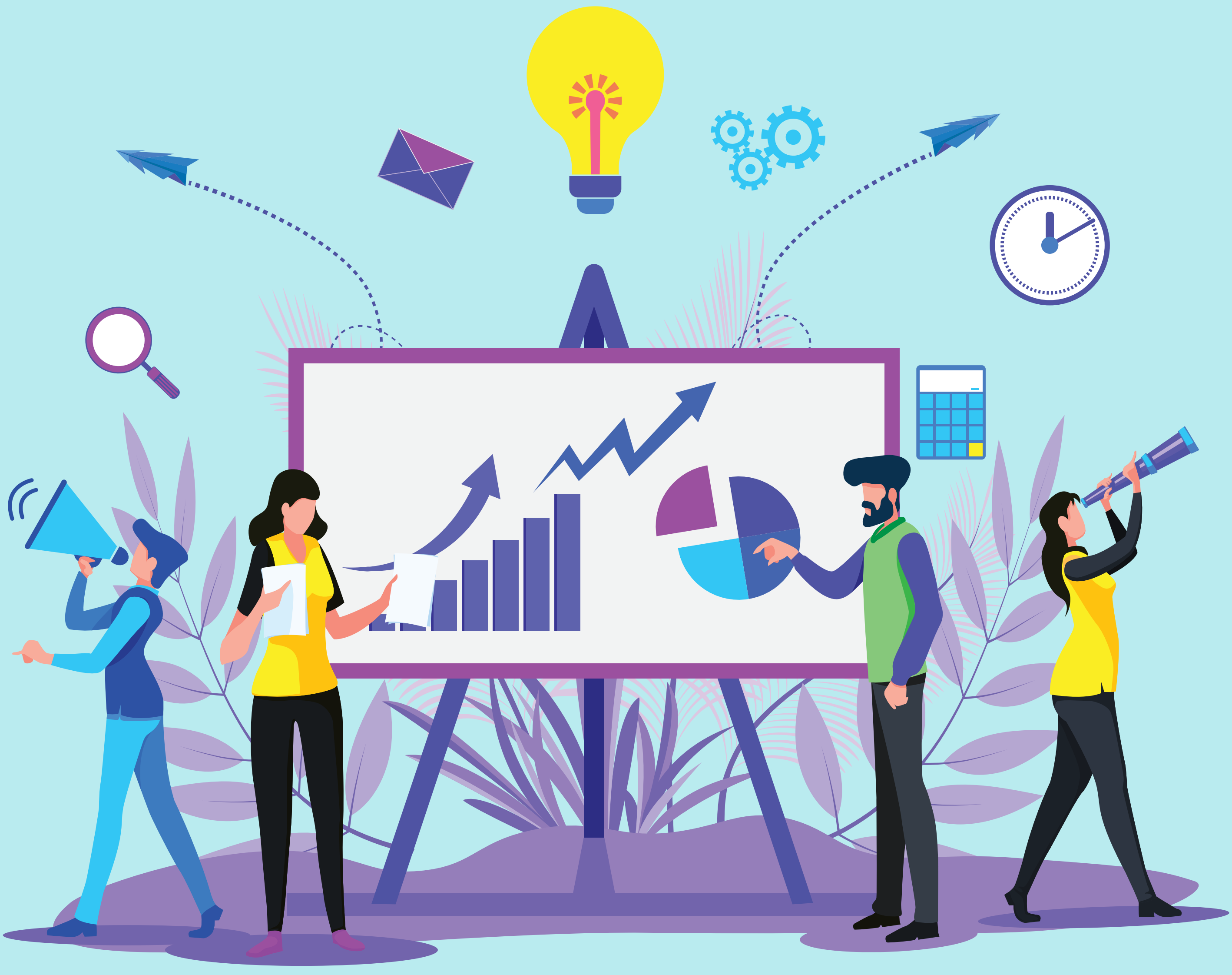
IS YOUR DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY WORKING?



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INTRODUCTION

Determining whether your digital marketing is working can be difficult – and this is true whether the brand is working with a third-party supplier for digital marketing or if it's an in-house team. Partly this is because digital marketing is a constantly changing process and, as such, is difficult to fully understand unless you're working within the industry or have made a special effort to keep on top of the latest changes.

In this respect, it's no different to any other specialist skill that your brand might employ – but often it is not treated in the same way as other specialisms, which can lead to it becoming siloed from your business as a whole and can lead to issues when trying to measure its impact on that business.

Let's begin…

WHAT DOES SUCCESS MEAN FOR YOU?

Part of the problem with determining whether or not a digital marketing strategy is working is that often brands don't know what success looks like. We know what improvement looks like – whether rightly or wrongly – we like to see metrics increase, we like to see KPIs met and exceeded, but we don't have a solid idea where we're going.

This doesn't have to be an 'end goal' – you don't need to be picturing where your brand will be when everything has been achieved – but it does need to be an achievable position. Is it to achieve £10M in sales per year, is it to be in a position to pitch to a certain level of client, or to buy your first TV advert and see your brand feature between halves of your favourite show or sporting event?

Without concrete objectives, it's impossible to know whether success is even possible let alone whether your digital marketing is working toward that success.

OBJECTIVES

Objectives are the way that we determine what success looks like, so they're a huge part of determining whether your digital strategy is working. Without objectives, it's difficult to be satisfied with progress and humans will fall foul of recency bias and see small setbacks as major issues even if they come as part of long-term success.

While not an exhaustive list, some of the objectives that brands can set and then measure themselves against are as follows:

Economic

Economic objectives include those objectives with a financial element. This can include:

- Ensuring shareholders receive specific returns or are assured of the safety of their investment
- That employees are secure in their positions and are fairly compensated
- New markets are entered into and the brand is established in them
- That sales are increased and new customers won

These need to have specific figures attached – an overarching ambition is not an objective, instead there needs to be solid numbers that success can be measured against.

Human

Human objectives are about employees and consumers, while some of this will require qualitative data collection rather than quantitative, these objectives are no less important.

- Are you providing opportunities for employees to progress and learn new skills?
- Are employees happy and a part of decision making
- Are consumers receiving a service that they are happy with and are complaints dealt with quickly and effectively?

This kind of objective not only helps consumers and employees, it can have a measurable effect on growth. Happy employees and consumers can become brand ambassadors that will help to reach new audiences and increase profits.

Organic
This is about the brand – what you hope it achieves, whether that's:

- Stability or expansion
- Adding a new product or service
- Overtaking a competitor
- Securing long term survival

While these are only a few examples, you can see that these are again general ideas to which there need to be attached definitive numbers.

Social
This would generally fall under the umbrella of things like CSR (corporate social responsibility) – they are objectives for your brand within the community.

- Give a percentage of profits to charity
- Provide employees with an allowance of time to donate to charitable organisations
- Become carbon neutral

DEFINING KPIS

Once you have your objectives in place, it is necessary to set KPIs – that means knowing how digital plays a part in the performance of your business as a whole in order to set SMART goals which can be set specifically for digital.

What are SMART goals?

While I'm sure that many people reading this will be familiar with the concept, for those that aren't, SMART breaks down as follows:

- Specific – goals should be unambiguous and there should be clear descriptions of what would be considered successful completion of the goal. For example, this could be to improve revenue from specific digital channels by X%.
- Measurable – there should be criteria that can be measured which will allow tracking of progress toward a goal. Continuing the above example, that would mean providing monthly revenue targets for the digital channel.
- Achievable – while it's okay to have faith in your digital vendor or team, goals should be possible based on existing evidence. If digital channels have grown by 3% on average for the last five years, then a 5% target may be achievable, while a 20% goal is not.
- Realistic – similar to achievable, a realistic goal may be a stretch, but cannot be impossible or irrelevant to your digital teams. You cannot, for example (without some investment) target a digital team with in-store goals.
- Timely – there has to be an end point. While there is nothing stopping you from setting short, mid and long-term goals, there needs to be a clear timeline attached to them to allow a determination of success.

WHAT KPIS SHOULD I SET FOR MY DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY?

In short, it depends. There are objectives which will be impacted by digital – and not only the economic. From a social perspective, you could set targets on awareness of your brand's CSR activities – and survey consumer awareness before during and after the period set, there could be a goal to improve online visibility beyond that of a close competitor (bearing in mind SMART) as part of the organic objectives.

The simple answer is that you need to be involved in a serious discussion with relevant stakeholders and vendors to determine which KPIs best reflect your SMART goals, and they should be agreed upon by all parties prior to their implementation. So while it's impossible to give a blanket answer that will suit every case, it is important that – in order to accurately measure success – you are able to settle upon a concrete set of objectives, goals and KPIs that will allow you to make a judgement.

MEASURING DIGITAL MARKETING SUCCESS

Back in the pre-digital era of the 80s – before Click Consult, before Google, before the internet, marketing professors Thomas Bonoma and Bruce Clark stated that:

> *“[Perhaps] no other concept in marketing’s short history has proven as stubbornly resistant to conceptualisation, definition, or application as that of marketing performance[.]”*

While both marketing and the internet have aged somewhat in the meantime, the statement remains largely true. While digital advertising has permitted marketers a far better access to ROI data than Bonoma and Clark would have dreamed of in 1988, there is – especially as Google continues to blur their keyword data – a sense that another voice of marketing past, John Wannamaker, may still have a point when he said ‘[half] the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don’t know which half.’

The truth is that marketing produces both tangible and intangible effects, or as a more recent marketing paper by Jagdish N. Sheth et al put it:

> *“[History] impacts marketing effectiveness – expenditures tend to be accounted for annually, whereas the influence of those expenditures is cumulative, thus a change in sales volume in one year could be the residual echo from previous years activity rather than current activity.”*

So, what can brands do to ascertain the impact of their marketing – especially when, contrary to the findings of every academic study, marketing budgets still tend to be the first cut during times of economic uncertainty and recession?

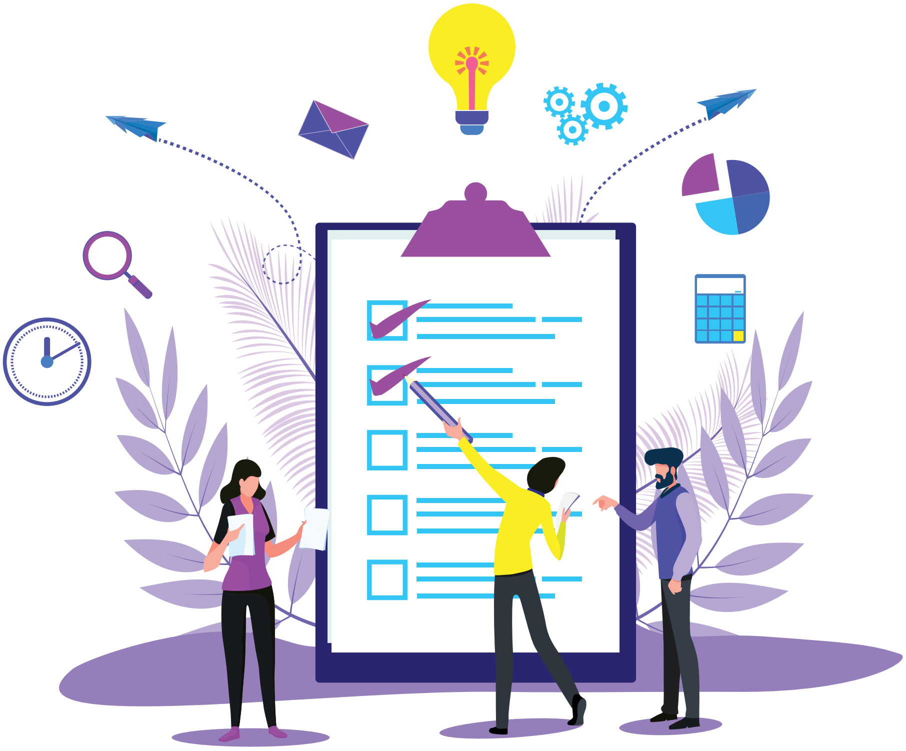
In his 2003 text ‘Marketing and the Bottom Line’, Professor Tim Ambler noted that there are five stages of how a company handles the subject of marketing effectiveness:

1. The company is unaware of the issue of not measuring marketing effectiveness
2. Assessment is introduced but only in financial terms
3. Using financial measures alone are recognised as inadequate and a multitude of nonfinancial measures are introduced
4. The company develops market focus and the assessment measures used are streamlined to give a single coherent view of the market
5. A scientific method of assessment is adopted using a database of past and current metrics, derivatives and diagnostics to produce a shortlist of sensitive and predictive metrics

There will doubtless be one or two steps that will be familiar to marketers, however – and companies tend to vacillate between steps 2 and 3 with few seeming to progress further, and this is what leads to the undervaluing of digital marketing techniques like SEO and the over-reliance on fads like partnerships with the Insta-famous. It's also why paid media has been a consistent earner for Google regardless of their reliance on black box technology – there are immediate, measurable, financial impacts of paid search. One of the best descriptions of the situation we still find ourselves in comes from a paper by Brooks and Symkin, who wrote (a decade ago):

> *To quote Clark (2000, p21), "Clearly managers are capable of assessing multiple dimensions regarding performance. The question, then, is whether they are assessing the right dimensions for their business."*

Marketing academics do not always help. By couching their views in complex technical terms they can easily put off practitioners from considering new measurement options – consider this description for example, "a principal components multinomial logit regression model for estimating the Markov brand-switching matrix" (Rust et al., 2004b, p123) – one that would perhaps be immediately consigned to the rapidly growing 'too difficult' pile that exists on every marketing managers desk.



The same paper, however, also offers six points as a potential solution to the difficulty of measuring marketing effectiveness – specifically for SMEs, for which it can be especially difficult:

1. Work within whatever historic information the company has (financial, anecdotal, …) but authenticate elements with customer/partner surveys and competitor reviews where possible.
2. Consider as many aspects of the full marketing process as are reasonably practical within the confines of the SME's current situation. As a minimum this might need to be restricted to Segmentation, Targeting and Position and the marketing mix alone, especially when the company culture does not consider anything other than promotion to be 'marketing' (Siu and Kirby 1998). Broader elements of the marketing process can be considered in future iterations after the SME has 'learnt' to capture relevant information and understand the motives and implications of such.
3. Create a jargon-free method of communication that the practitioner and company can use to rationally discuss/decide on marketing matters.
4. Use visual indicators to deliver a marketing effectiveness measure (or maybe just a marketing mix effectiveness indicator) that the company can understand and accord with. This indicator will most likely be an aggregate of a number of marketing measurement metrics, the constituents of which may not need to be exposed to the company management.
5. Create an agreed activity plan for the marketing areas that will improve future effectiveness along with easily understood measurement criteria to measure that improvement.
6. Try to create a company culture that readily captures and retains base data that is useful to future marketing effectiveness measurement.

This is the approach that we've been attempting to bring in at Click Consult internally over the last few years, so we'll go through these and see if we can offer some guidance on how to accomplish this for your digital marketing.

1 Work within whatever historic information the company has (financial, anecdotal, …) but authenticate elements with customer/partner surveys and competitor reviews where possible.

One thing digital does well is historical data – provided you've had an Analytics tracker attached to your site – be it Adobe, Google or any other, you will have plenty of data you can use. The important and overlooked aspect of this is the impact that historical competitor reviews and customer surveys can have on determining the effectiveness of marketing.

So, while we can (and do) advise on the importance of analytics and collecting data through analytics, I'm also going to suggest making client/customer surveys a part of what is often referred to as the 'onboarding' process – but which is essentially post purchase, or post contract. Ask why they chose you for their purchase or service provision and follow up on that at renewal stage – or a version of it for each additional purchase. While it may not be quantitative data, this kind of assessment is important qualitative information that can be used to assess the performance of your marketing over time.

2 Consider as many aspects of the full marketing process as are reasonably practical within the confines of the SME's current situation.

While it is always tempting to see digital marketing's value as immediate uplift in sales, profit or visibility, it should also be assessed whether your ability to reach your target demographic has improved, whether there has been movement in qualitative measures such as perceived quality, brand awareness and share of voice (on social media, or external articles, for example). It can be reasonably easy to measure the performance of a content marketing campaign, for example, using utm tracking and traffic from specific campaigns, but what is the uplift in general citations of the brand beyond your campaigns?

3 Create a jargon-free method of communication that the practitioner and company can use to rationally discuss/decide on marketing matters.

This can be harder than it sounds – we develop jargon as a language of shortcuts. While jargon has become almost synonymous with what Orwell referred to as duckspeak – a thoughtless kind of waffling – at its core, jargon is a vocabulary which allows professionals within a field to communicate complex ideas in shorthand. The main issue with jargon is that it spills over into conversations outside of the field and it's this that causes issues with communication.

For that reason, it's important to address (and address early) the creation of a common vocabulary which can be understood by all stakeholders and to use that common vocabulary whenever issues of measurement, planning and strategy are presented for use outside of the marketing department. You can have the best measurement methodology in your field, but if it can't be understood by decisionmakers, it's useless.

4 Use visual indicators to deliver a marketing effectiveness measure (or maybe just a marketing mix effectiveness indicator) that the company can understand and accord with.

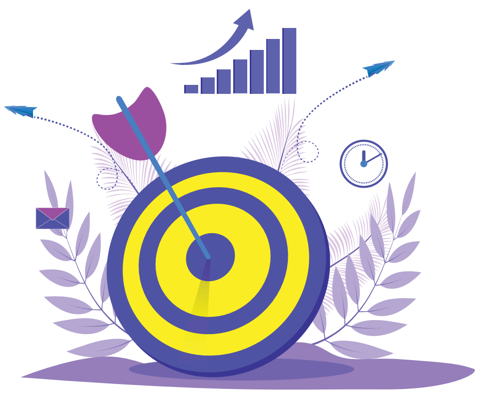
Similar to point three, this is about ensuring that there is agreement in place as to what effectiveness looks like (taking into account that it should not just be 'more revenue') and to stick to a practice of establishing these in advance of measurement – even if this is an amalgamation of more detailed measurements. The important thing is not comprehensiveness, but comprehension.

5 Create an agreed activity plan for the marketing areas that will improve future effectiveness along with easily understood measurement criteria to measure that improvement.

Again, this ties in with the previous two points – and is the reason we have spent so long over the last couple of years building custom Data Studio dashboards for client reporting. By agreeing not just campaigns and activities, but more holistic measures of success and more comprehensive reporting. This is in line with a statement that I heard somewhere but couldn't attribute (apologies) which is that top level results – the stuff important to everyone – should be visible at a glance, while those with a deeper knowledge should have the ability to analyse the report at their own level of understanding.

6 Try to create a company culture that readily captures and retains base data that is useful to future marketing effectiveness measurement.

This maybe the most important for ongoing development of measurement – and requires 'buy-in' from other departments – from sales in asking the 'where did you hear about us' question, from account managers who will need to oversee existing client surveys (or your web development and email team who will need to build a method of surveying consumers), but also from marketers who need to move beyond monthly or quarterly reports to ongoing data collection and a greater attention to historic performance and the impact of historic activity on present performance – however, it also needs the support at c-suite level for the additional resources that that will take and the gains that can be achieved from proper measurement.

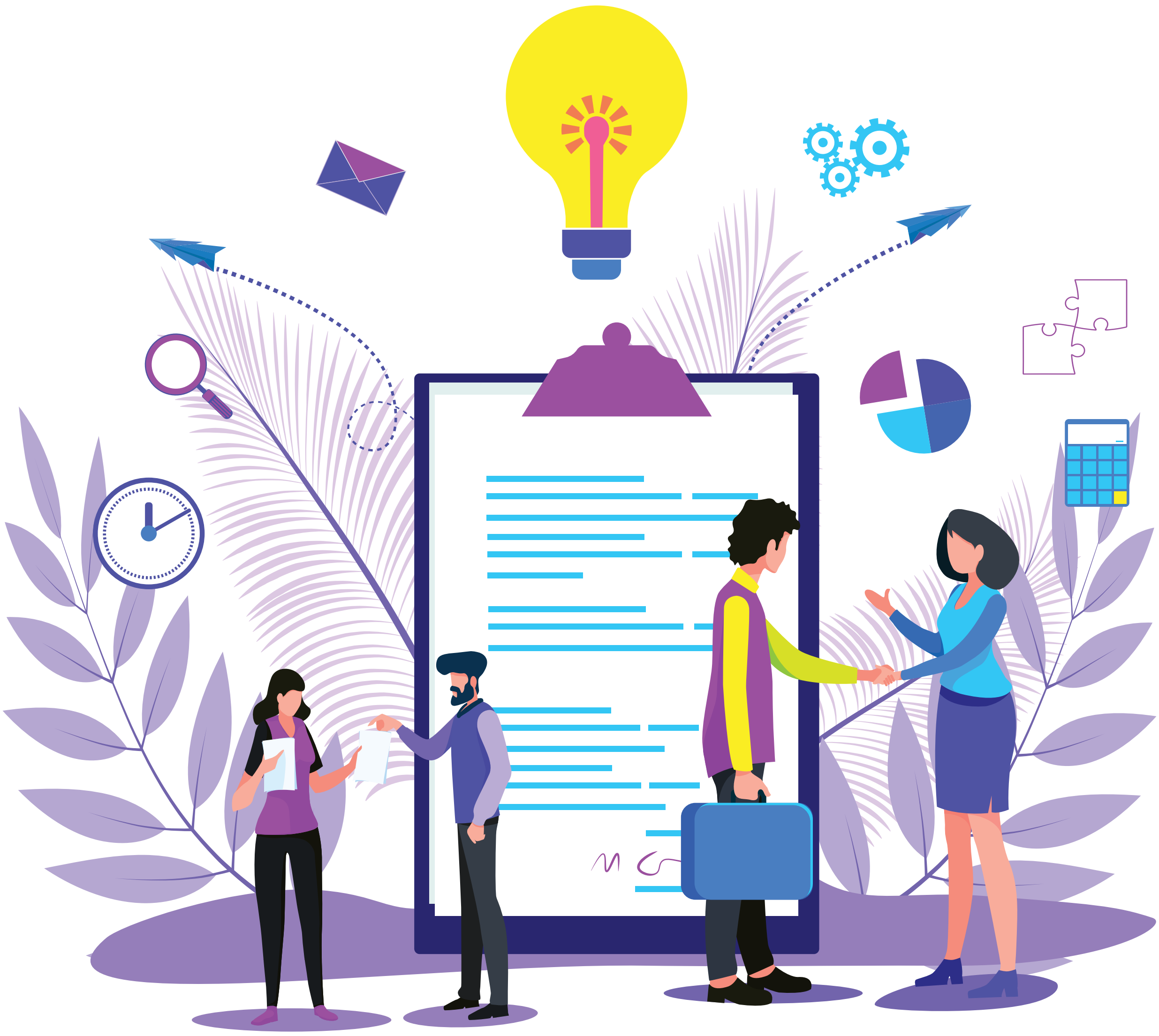


REPORTING

Once you have your KPIs and you have implemented a system that is capable of measurement, the next stage is going to be developing a reporting method which is capable of pulling in the data from the measurements and clearly communicate their relationship to those KPIs. At Click Consult we do this in a number of ways, from spreadsheets to Power BI and Data Studio.

The important thing to remember about reporting is that it should be able to convey performance vs. KPIs clearly – even to people who may not necessarily understand either the process or the KPI. The reader should be able to glance at the summary page of a report and see immediately how each part of the digital performance is performing against its specific objectives.

You can find our guide to setting up a Google Data Studio report in our resource section here.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Tackling the question of whether your strategy is working is faced by three main problems – what we need to measure, how we measure it and how we communicate those measurements to stakeholders. However, with sufficient preparation at the start of a digital project – whether it's paid media, organic search or social media – there should be little question by the end as to whether the strategy decided upon was a success.

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ABOUT US

Click Consult is a multi award-winning search & digital marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC). Part of global consumer brand business Ceuta Group, we have a team of 70-plus specialists and a portfolio of more than 60 clients worldwide.

Our complementary services include content marketing, social media and analytics. We can also offer training and consultation to support your teams or existing strategy.

Click was named both SEO Agency of the Year and Organic Search (SEO) Team of the Year 2020; ranks within Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'. We're also a Google Premier Partner, and a Microsoft Advertising Select Agency Partner.

HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?

CONTACT US

Follow us on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn, or to find out what Click Consult can do for you, call:

0845 205 0292

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PREMIER Google Partner
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CERTIFIED PARTNER

OUR AWARDS

UK Agency Awards 2020 WINNER www.ukagencyawards.co	SEO Agency of the Year 2020
The Drum Search Awards Winner 2020	Organic Search (SEO) Team of the Year 2020
WINNER UK Digital Growth Awards 2019	SEO Agency of the Year 2019
Northern Digital Awards Winner 2018	Search Agency of the Year 2018

OUR TECHNOLOGIES

monitor TRAX   rank TRAX   feed TRAX   link TRAX   pro TRAX   page TRAX