

Turning Marketing Automation Into a Profit Center

Goodbye HubSpot, Hello SharpSpring...



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About the Author

Gary Williams is the President and CEO of CX3 Group, LLC, a full-service digital marketing agency that helps small and mid-sized businesses optimize their marketing automation and inbound marketing strategies. Previously, he spent nearly 25 years as an executive at Ferguson Enterprises, Inc., a \$19 billion international wholesale distributor of building supplies. Since 2008, Gary has started four successful business firms, including CX3 Group.



It's our anniversary. Two years ago we met SharpSpring. Not all blind dates go well, but this has turned out to be a warm and loving relationship. I'm not shy so I'll just say it: *We are in love with SharpSpring.*

Sometimes you just know when it's right, don't you? From that first glance, you know it's going to be the right fit. From our first demo, we hung on every word SharpSpring said, and their magic trick really sealed the deal. (Be sure to ask about that – it really is a fun way to demonstrate the power of marketing automation, and we at CX3 Group now use it often ourselves.)

Our last relationship was with HubSpot. A giant in the marketing automation and inbound marketing space, they *appeared* to have it all. An agency in a box. The Cadillac of marketing automation.

So, why did we make the switch to SharpSpring?

It was all about the money.





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Whether you're a business investing in your own marketing efforts or, like us, an agency looking to invest in the best tools for your clients, there are only two ways to boost profits – increase sales or reduce expenses.

We quickly realized that HubSpot was a huge expense that required a very specific client profile and size in order to justify the investment.

In addition to a hefty upfront fee for onboarding, HubSpot's monthly fees for us and for each of our clients were a significant line item. Though HubSpot advertises monthly fees that are quite low, we discovered that by the time you've included the basic features that any given client would realistically need, the actual monthly fees can be anywhere between 400-1,200% higher than those advertised (\$800-\$2,400 per month).



If your clients earn \$10 million or more in annual revenue, discussions about marketing automation may be a lot easier. However, our clients are typically much smaller. They still have a viable need for marketing automation, but only so long as they can afford it.

For us, an average inbound marketing retainer is \$3,000; this means that the HubSpot platform itself, before any investment in time and resources, was almost 27% of the client billing.

That overhead is hard to justify in and of itself.

Each client was required to pay a monthly HubSpot "platform fee," and this would pose an issue in every proposal we submitted. The larger the client,

Using HubSpot increased each client's monthly investment, making it much more difficult for us to deliver the ROI that clients wanted.

	 SharpSpring	 HubSpot
Our Monthly Retainer	\$3,000	\$3,000
Platform % of Retainer	6.7%	26.7%

the smaller that fee was as a percentage of their marketing investment – but it always, and I mean always, became a topic of discussion. And things tend to get uncomfortable when you have to start explaining and justifying your costs.

More importantly, using HubSpot increased each client's monthly investment in our services by 25-50%. That made it much more difficult for us to deliver the ROI and results that clients wanted. Not necessarily in the long run, since we are comfortable with our abilities as an agency, but the payoff timeline for the clients was definitely longer – it's just basic math.

Even under the best of circumstances, marketing results take some time to develop, so this extra-long ROI timeline due to HubSpot's platform fee quickly became a point of contention for most of our clients.

Enter SharpSpring.

As we learned about SharpSpring's capabilities, which included all of the marketing automation and inbound tools that you'd expect, we were prepared for a similar pricing model to that of HubSpot, Marketo, etc.

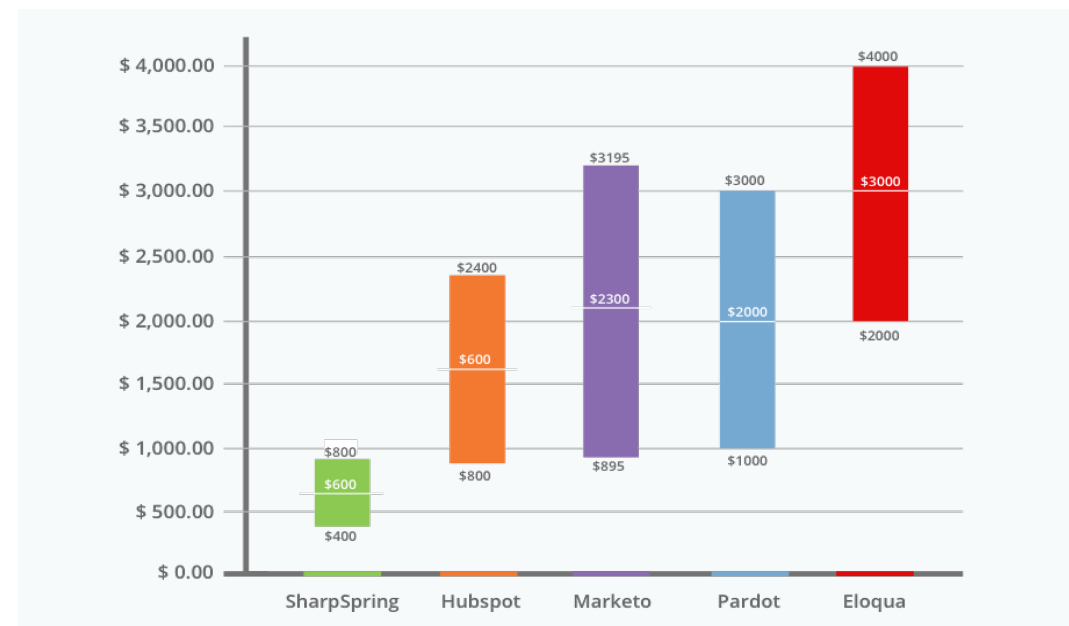
But what we discovered was the first of many very pleasant surprises. SharpSpring would cost us about 10% of what we'd been paying for HubSpot. We would also enjoy the benefit of utilizing SharpSpring for our agency's own marketing efforts at no additional cost.

All of a sudden, marketing automation was not a significant expense. It wasn't a line item in our proposals that we had to explain and sometimes even apologize for. Now it was indeed a profit center.

If you could reduce your marketing automation costs by 90%, how would that impact your ability to sell your services?

For us, it was the difference between being able to just talk to prospects about marketing automation and being able to put together a workable, affordable and complete marketing automation package.

SharpSpring opened up our market dramatically and helped us make inbound marketing automation affordable for the businesses that needed it most. All of a sudden, marketing automation was not a significant expense. It wasn't a line item in our proposals that we had to explain and sometimes even apologize for. Now it was indeed a profit center.



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Due to the unique way that SharpSpring prices its platform for agencies, the cost of the services becomes much less important than the discussions you can have about the services themselves. In fact, the more clients you have utilizing the platform, the lower the incremental cost. None of SharpSpring's competitors can say that.

A Feature-for-Feature Comparison

In any situation where you are switching software platforms, the first thing to do is compare features and capabilities.

During our analysis, it came down to comparing what we had with HubSpot vs. what we actually used and needed. We discovered there were huge gaps, and at the end of the day, we gave up nothing by switching to SharpSpring.

For us as an agency, an important measure of success is how effectively we're using the platform as a whole. If it's complicated and has too many ancillary features, it's not going to be fully understood or implemented – ever. This was the case with HubSpot, at least for us.

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In the past year alone, dynamic content and dynamic emails have been added, along with a robust landing page designer and blog builder.

For every new feature that gets rolled out, SharpSpring includes free, detailed training and agency-specific webinars that show us how to effectively incorporate the new tools.

Can you tell we are in love?

Inevitably, when you talk about how deeply you care for someone or something, your friends look for the gray lining to your silver cloud. What's wrong? What could be improved? Not everything could be wine and roses, right?

With HubSpot, there were challenges from the beginning.

HubSpot's onboarding is "a little of each, not enough of any" when it comes to how they present their features, and because each client is different, this one-size-fits-all approach doesn't really work. They do offer custom onboarding, but it costs significantly more. HubSpot will even send consultants to your business to set up and customize everything for you, but all for a price. For the rest of us, a rather generic set of conference calls and checklists is about all we get – and sometimes that's just not enough.

SharpSpring, in contrast, provides you with an Onboarding Specialist who will hold a number of calls with you to help you get set up and comfortable with the basics. SharpSpring is intuitive and simple at it's core, so the





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learning curve is exponentially smaller – but the onboarding process is designed to ensure you get all the support you need until you’re ready to do it on your own.

It’s easy to hit the ground running and start seeing quick ROI with SharpSpring. To top it off, the free license for your agency’s own efforts means you can be your own guinea pig, testing the platform on yourself before you use it for your clients.

It’s a Dog-Eat-Dog World Out There...

The ultimate reason we switched from HubSpot to SharpSpring, and the reason we’ve never even considered looking back, is competition.

Competition for clients is already tough enough. Marketing prospects are becoming more educated and have more and more choices available to them all the time. One party we *didn’t* anticipate competing against was our own marketing automation partner.

We didn’t realize that HubSpot would be marketing its platform and services to exactly the same companies that we were. There is no exclusivity or loyalty. All that exists is a poorly executed “tag” list on your platform where you can indicate contacts or companies that you are pursuing, which supposedly precludes HubSpot from pursuing them, too. But if this isn’t done in what they prescribe as exactly the right way (e.g.,

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distinguishing between the corporate office and a local office of the same company), all bets are off.

SharpSpring provides yet another stark contrast here. They have built their business entirely around marketing agencies, so they put the interests of their agency partners first. They don't try to sell their services to companies that we might be seeking to work with, and they go even further by referring potential clients to us if they seem like a good fit.

So just remember – if you are evaluating providers such as HubSpot, SharpSpring, Marketo, etc., be sure that you understand their business models. Certain questions, when left unasked, can become the undoing of the relationship. When trust is gone, there is little left to salvage – and that's what happened in our experience with HubSpot.

SharpSpring's agency-focused business model is a game changer, and it's yet another aspect that makes SharpSpring a profit contributor, and not an expense.

I can confidently say that we are proud to be numbered among the many SharpSpring agency partners that have switched over from HubSpot.



See how adding marketing automation to your agency's services can drive revenue from existing clients and help you add new ones. Schedule a demo with a partnerships specialist to chat about your specific needs.

[Get a Demo](#)

SharpSpring

SharpSpring is the marketing automation platform of choice for more than 1,200 digital marketing agencies and their 6,000+ clients. Since 2014, SharpSpring has provided its powerful marketing automation solution to businesses around the globe. In the short time since its inception, the company has gained significant market share from industry leaders with its competitive pricing, agency-focused business model, and robust platform.

Visit www.sharpspring.com for more information.



CX3 Group is a full-service digital marketing agency based in Williamsburg, VA. It specializes in providing inbound marketing and marketing automation services through SharpSpring to small to mid-sized businesses. Services include responsive web development, email and content marketing campaigns, social media profile development and strategy, application development, business strategy, and marketing planning.

Visit www.cx3group.com for more information.