

How To Build A Winning Advertising Agency New Business Program

This is all about the most important thing an agency has to do ... keep growing. Agencies are like sharks. They must keep moving forward or else.

As an advertising agency owner I woke up every morning (and even some nights) wondering about my new business program. I bet you have too. One of the things I could do to manage this issue was to know that I had an active new business plan in place.

Here are some (I stress some) of the elements of my new business plan. They helped me and I hope they help you.

Execution.

When I set out to create this list I didn't think that it would be this long – warning to the ADHD types. But, advertising agency new business planning is complex and getting more complex every day due to the rapid changes in our industry and technology. That said, the devil in business development, you know what's coming, is in the detail. Success is all about execution.

For example, having an agency video on your website is nice. But, having a video that gets watched and passed along by your target audience because it is SEO optimized, effectively uses the power of YouTube and provides value is way better. If your video drives incoming interest and the right business leads — you've won.

The Communications Agency Business Plan. First Things First.

I have never been able to construct an effective business development program without first having an agency business plan.

The business plan should include — *at least* – your business objectives, an assessment of your current strengths and weakness, a category analysis, clear target market objectives, a competitive agency positioning, a service plan (it might mean adding new services), a business development and communications plan and a staff and recruitment plan.

The plan should also help you plan for your future in the evolving world of marketing communications. I think that client confusion – this includes big and small clients – makes this is a great time to be an agency. Winning agencies are resolving their business challenges, crafting the right services and guidance and,

importantly, are willing to modify their business model to avoid disruption to achieve success.

It is imperative that you develop a roadmap for how to grow your current agency to become the agency of the future. The market, communication tools and client expectations are changing rapidly. Assess your current strengths, weaknesses and how your agency expertise and personnel are going to stay ahead of change. Change can be very profitable. What if you could restart with a blank sheet of paper? Would you build a replica of your agency or would it look dramatically different? If you think that change is in order, you better get started.

Here is a good mantra, *“If you dislike change, you’re going to dislike irrelevance even more.”* General Eric Shinseki.

The Agency New Business Program.

Armed with a business plan you can get ahead of your competitors by having a comprehensive new business plan. Most agencies do not have a plan.

The plan should include most, if not all, of the following:

Conduct an agency brand review to determine if your current brand, story and services create product and market differentiation; build a positive reputation; generate incoming client interest and attracts talented employees.

Have a compelling agency brand story that is driven by your history, products, services and your personality. Need help? Read Seth Godin’s *“All Marketers Are Liars.”*

5 Rules For Managing the Process.

Unless your phone is ringing off the hook, new business must be an agency priority.

1. Agency leadership has to be actively involved with establishing new business objectives, strategic planning and execution.
2. Stay on top of the process. Have at least bi-monthly new business planning meetings.
3. Business development is 24/7. Your digital marketing, management and staff activities must be ongoing and consistent.
4. Hire a Business Development Director to help manage the new business program and act as the agency sales leader or hunter. This person’s key job is to get meetings with the right prospects. Use the Business Development Director’s compensation plan to orient their focus.

5. Stimulate and empower others in the organization to participate. Best case, they will come up with a marketable new service. At the least they should be keeping their eyes open for leads.

7 Prospecting Tips.

Prospecting is a long-term play and takes time. Be prepared, persistent and patient.

1. Manage an active Excel prospect database and CRM system.
2. Build an “A-Level” prospect list. Establish selection criteria and do your research. I’ve always thought that there are three types of desirable clients: Those that pay well (that means they are profitable); those who demand great work; those who are famous and enhance your reputation. Two of the above are good. Pay well is best. My agency’s client Nike had all three.
3. To build up-to-date lists I’ve used the services of The List Inc., Red Books and LinkedIn.
4. Build an email list to keep all prospects, clients and associates aware of agency thinking, news and growth. To get this done quickly, I’ve used the services of lower cost interns and ODesk freelancers.
5. Referrals are good (well, great.) Periodically ask your friends, family, business associates, employees (many don’t think about new business) and – most importantly - current clients for referrals.
6. Track the career path and whereabouts of past clients. LinkedIn notifications could become your best friend.
7. Read business publications, industry press and pertinent websites. To manage agency time, assign information buckets to different staff members. Get past just reading the same trade press your competitors read.

A Word On Incoming.

Pitching and even working on everything that rings the doorbell can be a mistake. Qualify the lead. Pitching the right accounts will increase your batting average. Pitching the wrong accounts will sap your agency’s energy, cash and time.

15 Business Development Tools.

Years ago I heard Jonathan Bond of Kirshenbaum Bond make this comment about new business activity, “I don’t know what works so we do everything.” Here

are some tools worth considering.

1. Make sure that you have an agency website that sells. The great majority of agency websites do not. Get past brochure-ware. If you don't think that prospects are overwhelmed by agency websites, especially me-too websites, spend some time on my ad agency website directory.
2. Maintain sales pressure. Schedule your outbound marketing to keep up consistent pressure — you can't tell when a prospect will have a new project or an AOR account looking for a new agency. I've always made it an agency priority to send out high-value emails at least every four to six weeks.
3. Deliver high-value thought-leadership. Clients are looking for strategic agencies and solutions. But, keep in mind that you are not the only thought-leader on the block. There are 309,000 Google results for "best advertising blogs" and Advertising Age list the top 150. To beat these horrific odds you need to become a *narrow-subject* thought-leader to break through the clutter. Its better to become a mobile advertising expert than be a generalist.
4. Want more inbound? Get your brilliant thinking out there via a strategic social media program. Consider: blogs, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook (although I don't think Facebook is an effective B-To-B tool), Pinterest (yes, Pinterest) and Tumblr. Don't forget SlideShare, YouTube videos and good old-fashioned white papers, monthly emails and speaking engagements.
5. One of the keys to social media success is selecting platforms that your agency can manage on a day-to-day basis. There are a lot of empty agency Twitter feeds that do much more harm to reputations than good.
6. Run events for prospects and clients. My agency Citrus got senior executives from Facebook, Google, Google Maps, LinkedIn and Yahoo! to speak at our own Portland "Meet the Makers" events.
7. Optimize and integrate everything you do.
8. Quantify and analyze the success rate of everything you do.
9. Cold call. Yes, this still works – if handled with care. I like to soften the prospect with a mailing (if it's email you will see if has been opened) and then call early to reach the key prospect before their day begins or to leave a mini-pitch voicemail. Consider having a script handy. Before you make any calls, do basic research so you know about your prospect's business, possible pain points and what sales messages might resonant.

10. Email. Yes, email still works and volume is now being driven by increased mobile usage. But, make sure your emails have value and don't overwhelm.

11. Sometimes it is good to break out of digital... A personalized letter, as in paper, or a mailing just might break through the digital clutter.

12. Think even more different. Over the years, I've used online surveys, postcards, music CD's, etched wine bottles, targeted micro-sites, digital mad libs (yes, mad libs); books like Jeffery Abrahams' *"101 Mission Statements From Top Companies"* and even Krispy Kreme doughnuts to get meetings. Here is a case history for a food-smile-based program that announced our new Portland office. We delivered a box of hot Krispy Kreme doughnuts and a personalized digital promotional program to generate awareness and smiles.

13. Get out of the office and go to events to hear new ideas and meet new people. Join relevant groups and organizations. Here is a post I wrote for the blog AdPulp on curiosity and advertising agency grow.

14. Create some buzz. PR is your friend.

15. Win creative awards. Go get some EFFIE's to support your ROI story. But, watch the awards budget.

First Meetings X 4.

Whatever solicitation marketing you did worked and you landed a meeting. Here are some first meeting basics:

1. Listen: Probe for problems. Consider going beyond solution sales to tell them what they should be worried about. For more on this sales technique I suggest that you read *"The End of Solution Sales"* in the July – August 2012 issue of the Harvard Business Review.

2. Sell something special: Deliver a USP.

3. Make friends: Work the chemistry and dazzle.

4. The master goal: Get a second meeting to keep the dialog going.

RFPs.

Getting an RFP is like getting asked out on a date for a test-drive. You should be flattered — *but*. To manage incoming, build a RFP decision matrix. You should

quickly have an idea of which RFP's to respond to and which aren't worth the effort. RFP responses always chew up agencies. Make sure that this date is worthwhile.

If it's a go, ask for a meeting to discuss the RFP. If the client is unwilling to give you some time, you might want to pass.

Keep your response lean. Chances are that the client has asked for too many responses and could become brain-dead by the time they get to yours. Make sure you answer every question in the RFP before you go beyond what they are asking for.

Once you have ticked all the client boxes, go beyond. Don't forget to include agency personality and consider an "Easter Egg" surprise element.

The 14 Rules To Build Winning Pitches.

Oh, the uncertainty. Does the client have a favorite? Is this a strategic search or just a scheduled management or procurement exercise? Does the incumbent have an advantage? What type of agency is the client actually looking for? Who is the key decision maker? Do you present what they are asking for or what you think they need? Frankly, if there is a secret key to unlocking these answers, I haven't found it. Helping to understand the client's motivations is where your most experienced management comes into play.

Pitching is an art. I've been pitching new business since the 80's, ran business development at Saatchi & Saatchi, pitched often for my own agency and have sat through all-day seminars on how to pitch. Here are what I believe are the primary elements of a perfect pitch process. This is only a top line list.

1. Pick a pitch leader and the right team for planning and writing.
2. Watch your costs. Create a budget. We have all seen pitch costs gone wild.
3. Create a timetable that includes strategy development, creative development and staging and rehearsals.
4. Consider building a war room to help focus your effort.
5. Determine the client, category and customer issues and opportunities and make sure you address them.
6. Use research to support your strategic insights. But, note that the other agencies might be doing the same. That said, clients are always

interested in seeing brief strategic videos of their customers talking about their products and services.

7. Determine and manage how you communicate your strengths and manage your weaknesses. Consider doing an agency SWOT analysis through the client's lens.
8. Talk more about them than you. Actually, talk much more about them.
9. Act like you really want the business. I've been told by clients that not all agencies do this.
10. Pitches are theater. Stories are better than endless credentials. Case histories are better than showing endless amounts of work. For inspiration, watch Steve Jobs.
11. If you can, get the client to come to you. I've pitched in too many soulless client boardrooms or hotel conference rooms. It can be a buzz kill.
12. If you have to go to them, find a way to scout out the room and equipment ahead of the meeting.
13. Put the your best presenters in the room. Don't include talented but uninspiring people simply because its their turn or that they worked on the pitch. I've made this mistake. It's a bad one.
14. Smile.

Contact me. I Can Help Accelerate Your Agency's New Business Program.

Leverage my 20 years of global to local new business experience. I've pitched from New York to London to Seoul to Kuwait to Oshkosh.

Lets talk and get going on working together to build your agency a strategic, manageable new business program.