

I HEART MY AGENCY

Summer 2009

Building a Strong Client-Agency Relationship for Better Work—and Better Results

“There are no bad advertising agencies, only bad agency-client relationships.”

Kenneth G. Romanzi, Domestic Chief Operating Officer, Ocean Spray Cranberries

I believe that Mr. Romanzi is onto something. Sure, he may have missed the mark with his hyperbolic assertion that there are no bad agencies. But I wholeheartedly subscribe to the concept that a strong client-agency relationship is necessary to deliver superior advertising and marketing communications.

To help you foster a positive client-agency relationship and get the best category-leading, sales-building, ROI-yielding work out of your agency, I’ve outlined key insights and helpful tips. These principles are based on 20 years of agency account management on both B-to-C and B-to-B accounts in the U.S., Europe and Asia, and were derived from both outstanding relationships and those that weren’t so great. As a former CEO of two Internet companies that employed the services of advertising, direct marketing and PR agencies, I also have a client’s perspective. Believe me, I’ve been there.



To have and to hold.

Yin and yang. PB and J. Antony and Cleopatra. Like all great twosomes, clients and agencies were meant to be together.

The client-agency relationship is very much like a marriage. (Except that there’s usually no spooning in front of the TV.) It requires a conscious and concerted effort by both parties in order to succeed and continue beyond the infatuation phase. Short of having a date night or writing sonnets, here are key elements for building solid, enduring relationships that lead to superior programs.

Trust.

As with any healthy relationship, the client-agency bond must be built on trust. You should trust that the agency always has your best interest in mind. You should trust that your agency will work hard to be experts on your business and be focused on meeting—and exceeding—your business objectives. You should feel secure in sharing confidential marketing-related information that will help craft optimal marketing programs.

If at any time you need information from the agency to promote transparency, ask for it. Your agency should be happy to provide billing details and audits, competitive pricing analyses and other reports that detail agency costs and services.

Honesty.

Can we talk? No, really. Communication—the honest, forthright variety—is essential in the communications business. You should feel that you can be direct in your assessment of the work and the agency must feel comfortable in stating their opinion and recommendations – and occasionally defending their position. They should feel comfortable in the intelligent expression of their passion for ideas and programs.

Respect.

Mutual R-E-S-P-E-C-T is key to a successful and productive business relationship. Your goals and views must be respected. You are the representative of your company's objectives, products and services, and your agency must respect your perspective. In return, the agency's service, employees, ideas and creative concepts must be respected. If either party feels disrespected, there is no question that the relationship will eventually F-A-I-L.

Shared beliefs.

Agencies work best with clients that share their belief in the power of marketing. Both should be dedicated to the idea that objective-driven advertising and design can grow sales and build brands. The best clients look like Apple's Steve Jobs and Nike's Phil Knight. Belief in the power of marketing is a core element in the success of both of these companies.

Fairness.

Life may not be fair. But there's no reason your relationship can't be. The best relationship is based on agreement that the compensation structure is fair and that the agency's services are fairly valued. In an economic environment where virtually every company is looking for more for less, agencies do have a breaking point where it becomes clear that their ideas, people and services are not fairly valued. Conversely, your agency must be available and willing to discuss pricing and be open to negotiation to reach a mutually agreeable cost structure.

Mutual appreciation.

Like many service organizations, agencies often work late and through the weekend to help their clients meet their goals. An occasional verbal or written "thank you" for hard work, the client-agency equivalent of flowers, helps morale and motivates your team to work even harder. There is no question that great agencies work for more than just their paycheck. Likewise, clients should feel appreciated by the agency as a valued customer. (Because you are.) Mutual appreciation drives better work. What's not to love?

The Client Compatibility Test

There is no eharmony.com for clients and agencies. So how do you tell the good agencies from the great? In addition to the qualities listed above, we believe that agencies should guarantee specific services that strengthen the relationship and ensure that the client is receiving the best service and creative possible. A good agency will deliver to the industry standard. A great agency will go beyond.

We believe that it is critical for clients and their agencies to set base-level service requirements at the start of the client-agency relationship and to annually review these services with their current agency. Here are some “great expectations” to get the conversation started. This list, a client compatibility test of sorts, might not tell you which agency will partake in the marketing equivalent of leaving the cap off the toothpaste. But it will keep expectations—and results—on track.

Can you answer yes to the following statements?

My agency is invested in my business.

Your agency should spend the time and effort that is required to fully learn your business and study your market and competition. The most successful agencies immerse themselves in their client’s business and stay well ahead of category trends.

Yes No

My agency is accountable.

Your agency should work with you to establish performance goals and tracking systems for your marketing programs. Planning and tracking the ROI of marketing programs is critical in today’s business environment.

Yes No

My agency is an overachiever.

Your agency should over-deliver. Simply put, they should be overachievers dedicated to going beyond the expected to explore what is possible.

Yes No

My agency has no “b-team.”

You should expect your agency to supply you with an experienced and dedicated creative, account management, media and production team.

Yes No

My agency is ahead of the curve.

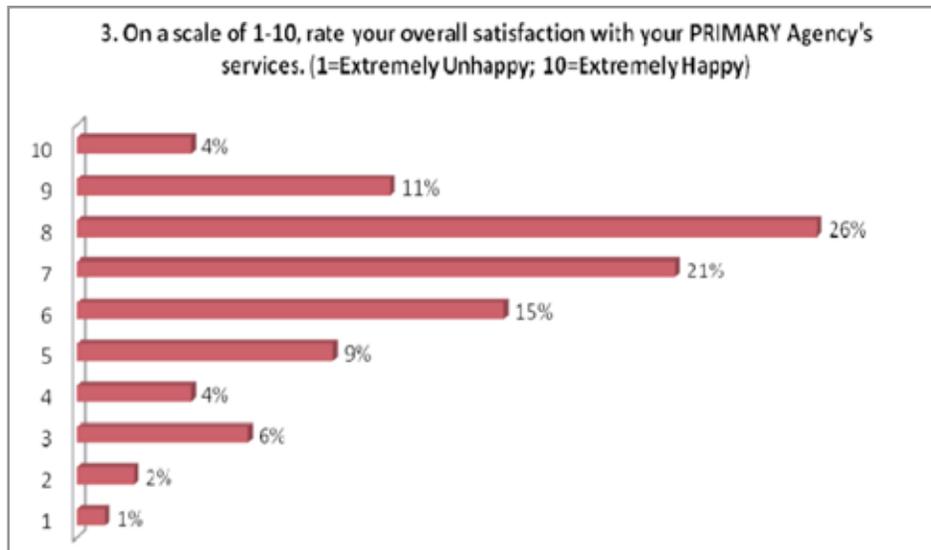
We are living in a rapidly changing marketing environment. Your agency should ensure that you and your team are aware of the most critical trends and new tools in marketing communications. Smart agencies stay abreast of the changes and deliver thought-leadership programs and viewpoints through agency-funded presentations and white papers.

Yes No

Somewhat Happily Ever After?

Did you answer “No” to any of the relationship questions above? If so, you’re not alone.

Client satisfaction research from the “Reardon Smith Whittaker 2008 NEW BUSINESS REPORT: A CLIENT’S PERSPECTIVE” (completed in November 2008 by 184 key marketing decision-makers from across the United States) indicates that: “In general, marketers suggest that they are only somewhat happy with their primary agency’s performance, with only 41% of marketing executives responding to the survey rating their “happiness” with their agency an 8+, on a 1-10 scale.” That doesn’t exactly sound like paradise, does it?



Relationships like this don’t have to end in demands for the return of a favorite sweatshirt or BeeGees record collection, however. Many can be improved with the simple suggestions mentioned previously.

Get Going

If your honeymoon really is over, it might be time to move on. In that case, we’d be glad to be there to help you through this difficult time. You might find that we share many common interests (your success, for example). We even offer a useful interactive tool to help you let your current agency down easy at dearagency.com. That’s just the kind of helpful, service-oriented agency we are.

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To learn more about Citrus and to see if our philosophy and service orientation align with your goals, please visit citrusbegin.com.

If you would like to discuss our perspective on the industry, please give me a call at 541.419.2309 or shoot me an email at plevitan@citruspdx.com.

This could be the start of something great.

Peter Levitan
President

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