

## **Step Back and Succeed**

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal illuminated recent shifts in client/ad agency relationships that have resulted in conflicts and break-ups. The difference was an increase in agencies firing their clients, instead of the other way around. Said one agency honcho whose firm recently fired a client whose annual ad spending totaled a whopping \$149.7 million: “[An agency has] a limited amount of resources and you want to direct them where you are going to be successful.” Whether the agency is on Madison Avenue or in Macon, Georgia, this thought holds true: if a client gets in the way of its own success, the agency cannot ‘afford’ to serve it, needing all its resources to service more cooperative clients they can actually help.

Certainly in a tough new-business climate, it’s hard to make a decision to walk away from a client or potential client, yet agencies of all sizes are rethinking their working relationships. This makes sense when you consider that a client’s success is a direct reflection on an agency’s work. To cultivate a win-win situation for both you and your chosen agency, and to get your money’s worth from your advertising/marketing/PR firm, it’s important that you understand the following:

### **Choosing an Agency is an Art**

An informed client is one who knows how to approach a potential agency with the right questions. Who are their current clients? What are the agency principals’ professional backgrounds? What services are offered? What are the agency’s strengths? How do they approach a creative project? Who will be working on your account? What is their history of follow-through? The point is: any creative agency can dazzle a potential client with a slick presentation, but the ultimate test lies in the successful working relationships that must be forged in order to create successfully. That’s why only the people who will be directly working with the agency, i.e. the marketing director and select members of the marketing department should conduct the agency interview. Creative direction “by committee” is not only destabilizing to the client/agency relationship, it’s the least efficient, least productive path to results that actually work. In most cases, too much input results in a diluted, less effective creative product. Casting out for ideas from competitive firms is a bad practice, too. Because creativity is the unique intangible commodity that agencies offer, they’re not about to give their good ideas away in the hope of landing your account. Besides, any agency that would do speculative creative work for a client before the essential groundwork and research is done is not looking after the potential client’s best interests; they’re simply trying to dazzle them long enough to get their business.

### **Project Work Only**

Certainly great graphics and scintillating ad copy are the most visible parts of your advertising program, but marketing as a discipline involves much, much more: research,

strategic planning, budget planning, media buying & placement, synchronized campaign creation, promotional sales analysis, public relations and all the related products. So, don't call a full-service ad agency or marketing firm if all you want is a logo; call a graphic artist. Last week one of the creative agencies representing Nike's Converse brand made a difficult decision to send their client on its way. The reason: Converse used its ad agencies for project work rather than tapping a single agency of record. This put the agency in a bad position because the client's success was largely out of their hands.

### **Research Rocks**

What are your business goals? Your target demographics? Your competitive landscape? Empower yourself and your agency by getting to the heart of this information before any work is undertaken and any money is spent.

### **Budget is a Key**

Regardless of the amount, it's important that you set aside a budget earmarked for marketing your business. All successful planning and decision-making depends on your agency knowing how much they have to work with on your behalf to buy media and produce creative products. They know how best to spend your available funds (whatever that amount may be), and a good agency won't allow you to make bad decisions that can be costly.

Of course, the healthier your marketing/PR/advertising budget is, the more effective your marketing will be... but, again, *only if you spend advertising dollars wisely*. Because agencies work with media vendors and media figures all day, *everyday*, they can best direct you. Their professional knowledge of the market is well worth their retainer or service charge.

### **Don't Second-Guess Your Agency**

You chose an agency based on your interview with its principals, its history of success, its client or vendor references, its reputation in the marketplace, its creative portfolio, and other factors. If you are satisfied they know what they're doing, let them do the job you are paying them to do. A good agency will treat you as a partner when it comes to making design or other marketing decisions, but they won't let you dictate a bad decision. As we've written before, it's a reflection on them, too.

### **Differentiate Your Business**

In the initial meeting, clients often say they want "cutting edge" differentiation, but often when it comes down to it, a client will opt for the standard graphic look and communications that characterize every other business in your industry. Keep in mind that you're not trying to meet the standard with your advertising messages...you are trying to raise it. Suspend your innate fears of being "different," and let the agency professionals guide you.

### **Follow the Plan and Save \$\$**

When you ask an agency to "stop, drop, and roll" to get a project out, most likely it will cost you more, because planning and balancing the workload is important. Disrupting that

line-up is a decision most departments don't take lightly because it may mean putting more employees on the job working after-hours to get the work out.

Like any other entity invested in the success of your business, your advertising agency needs your full cooperation and your willingness to stand back and let them work for you. Just like your business, agencies, PR and marketing firms must make the wisest possible partnership decisions –ones that will best position them for success.

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