

Keeping a good client relationship

Interview Louise Lawton

How much influence does a client really have over an agency? Kim Fry, a sales and marketing director with experience in several firms, talks about agency relationships from a client perspective.

Q. Do you think the relationship dynamics and expectations between the client and agency have changed over the past five years?

A. Not considerably in that time frame. Any relationship evolves and the longer that is, with agencies I have dealt with in the past, the better in terms of equal understanding about what our business is trying to achieve. Certainly expectations change, depending on what impacts we are facing as a business and how we need to manage those impacts. Right now we all appreciate that recent macro-economic events can potentially change dynamics and expectations in a fundamental way.

Our business has a very seasonal nature to it and having the agency understand what that means, the language we need to use, the critical timing of campaigns and how our message needs to be geared toward distinct customer groups, is important. That comes with being able to state what the expectations are (both ways) and being open to talk frankly when needed.

Q. Having worked with a variety of agencies, is there a common issue that arises when the agency has a change of account management or creatives working on your account?

A. For sure. It really is the intellectual collateral that goes with a change of a significant part of the support team we need from our agency, which is the issue. Some change is needed,

either to reset expectations or just because things need to change anyway. So long as a core part of the people we deal with do not change, then as a client you can cope. It really is an interesting relationship... we want the agency to be absolutely there when and as we need them, yet we can sometimes conveniently ignore them when it suits. So long as there is a strong, consistent core of people on both sides of the equation, the relationship stays strong and mutually beneficial.

Q. How does this lack of continuity affect your end product?

A. I think the impact is more on the process and how smoothly this runs rather than the end product. I say this because we seldom compromise on the end product just because we have certain events that get in the way. Don't ever underestimate though the impact of the process; if it is fraught with difficulty and stress due to a lack of continuity, then it will negatively impact on the client/agency relationship and before you know it, you are not putting in the effort to keep the relationship alive and hey presto the next thing you know the client is seeking a change in agency.

Q. Have you had a say in who the agency recruits to work on your account? Do you get an invitation to be part of the process?

A. I have never been asked! Mind you, the converse applies, I have never asked. I guess so long as the senior who works on the account and is doing the recruiting understands what works for us and what doesn't, our needs are considered. Recently we have had some staff turnover with our agency and there was good

discussion as the recruitment process unfolded. It is good to be kept in the loop, but I also respect the agency's right to recruit as they see fit. Mind you, if the appointment doesn't work out well with my marketing and sales team, then that frank conversation I mentioned earlier occurs!

Q. How about creativity? Do you feel that an agency listens to your creative ideas and uses them?

A. This is probably the area in my experience that generates the most debate. Sometimes an agency will have the philosophy that they are the sole arbiter of the creative element. In large part, I guess as the client, that is what I am paying for. However, there needs to be a balance and an opportunity for the client to have a meaningful voice in the development of creative ideas.

This is where the value of a strong brief is important (to those agencies I have worked with before that reinforced this, your message has been received!). With clarity around the brief comes the opportunity for the client to manage the creative development. This has to be good for the agency too...it must be very disheartening for an agency to present a concept where the client has had little input into the creative development, only to have the client pan the idea at that point.

Personally I get quite excited by being closely involved in the creative element and some of the best times I have had have been with those creative genius', around a table battling ideas back and forth until you get to that eureka moment... like the time I was presented with a miniature 'flea circus' in a matchbox concept to support a flea treatment product for cats and dogs!

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