

Doctors and pop stars: lessons for ad agencies and marketers

 By [Gillian Rightford](#)

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Much has been written about the relationship between Michael Jackson and his doctor, Conrad Murray. And, of course, surely we've also been wondering whether Whitney Houston's doctor will go under the same microscope, no?

“ *The relationship between Jackson and Murray was a microcosm of the deep dysfunction in Jackson's life over his final years. On one side was a pop legend struggling to overcome addictions to painkillers and plastic surgery so he could go out on the road one more time and show the world a little of his former glory; on the other was a man desperate, and indebted, enough to be tempted by a monthly pay cheque of \$150,000 (£93,000) and indulge Jackson's craving for ever more powerful sedatives.* ”

- [The Guardian](#).

Sometimes-dysfunctional relationship

This got me thinking about the sometimes-dysfunctional relationship that exists between marketers and ad agencies - in fact, between any expert in a particular field, and the clients who pay their salaries.

An agency-client example: the ad agencies need the money, so they do work that they know is not right, that they don't like and don't believe in. They sit through endless meetings "pushing back", but ultimately get "pushed over", submit revert after revert into the creative stream, until the "just-give-them-what-they-want-and-get-it-out" moment.

The marketers believe that they must have the final say, because they pay the bills, and so force work through, even though they don't have the necessary skills to make the right decisions.

End result

And the end result? A consummate, complete and almost tragic waste of money, on sub-par advertising. A demoralising and frustrating, resentful, daily working relationship. The loss of any creative enthusiasm for the next project, and the continuation, and worsening, of the cycle.

For what? The desperate act of the agency, that will suck it up for the cash, will almost certainly result in the loss of the business for all the above reasons.

As speaker, environmental campaigner and swimmer Lewis Pugh ([@LewisPugh](#)) said on Twitter in February 2012: "Courage comes in many forms. Perhaps the greatest of all is standing alone against an injustice."

Same principles

Of course, he was talking about bigger, more important issues. And, in advertising, unlike the sad doctor-deluded patient example, no-one dies.

But the principles are the same.

Ad professionals: stand up for what you believe is right. And, if you are not heard, then perhaps the money is not worth the professional sacrifice. Flag this relationship with someone higher up in the organisation and get the correct balance of power in place (unless of course it is the chief who is the problem!).

Come back to bite you

But know this: if you don't, it will ultimately come back to bite you. It will affect your reputation, your staff morale, your company culture, your client relationship, your relationships with other clients. And, to top it all, you'll probably get fired anyway, eventually.

Marketers: consider the skills set at your disposal, in your agency. Let them do what they advise is the best solution to your business challenge. Of course, if they're no good, you need another, good, agency.

But there is a lot of excellent talent out there that is being told what to do, rather than being asked what to do.

And we've seen how well that works.

ABOUT GILLIAN RIGHTFORD

Gillian's CV is a mix of marketing, strategy, advertising, and leadership. She obtained a Business Science (Honours) degree in Marketing from UCT, worked in marketing strategy consulting, then headed into the creative world, doing account management and strategy for below and above the line agencies, before becoming co-founder and managing director of Hercules/DMB&B, and then group managing director of Lowe Bull...

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