

Caring for those client/agency relationships

By  Gillian Rightford

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Experts say that the small things eventually destroy relationships. Like not putting the lid of the toothpaste tube back on, or squeezing from the top, not the bottom.



Tom Peters, in his book, *The Pursuit of Wow*, says that his company “sometimes asks clients to compare business relationships with romantic relationships. Take the ending of a typical long-term romantic relationship. Issues as mundane as leaving the loo seat up, socks on the floor and not putting the lid back on the toothpaste tube all mount up to break the romantic bond”.

The Forum Corporation of America analysed the causes of customer migration in 14 major manufacturing and service companies and found that 70% moved on because they didn't like the human side of doing business with the prior provider.

One of the biggest toothpaste tube lids in advertiser/agency relationships is how creative work is evaluated and how that evaluation is communicated. Of course there are other areas, such as the new marketing director wanting to change agency, creative work strategically unhinged, budgets not adhered to and so on. But this area of “judgment” is where trust is made or broken. And where trust is present, great work often follows. Why? Because the agency's best creative teams want to work on the business. They feel respected as professionals. And the client feels like a valued member of the creative process.

Tricky territory

Of course the starting block for evaluation is the brief. If the brief was poor, chances are the work will not be great. And if you are evaluating great work against a poor brief, that's going to be tricky.

Poor evaluation also comes as a result of “I don't like it” thinking. Not whether or not the target consumer's may or may not resonate with the message, but just because...

Given how subjective advertising is, and how so often the decision makers are nowhere close to the intended audience in terms of attitude, age, habits, gender and so on, it's tricky territory.

Layer this with the internal dynamics where the people in the room aren't always the final decision makers. And there may be a hierarchical speakers-order in the room.

Throw in the fact that the agency team is bursting with barely contained excitement. They KNOW it's right.

This is where “communication” comes in. The art of constructive criticism, feedback that accurately articulates concerns and aims to make the work better, is a rare skill.

This relates to both the marketing team as well as the account management team giving feedback/writing the brief back at the agency. Feedback should be about direction, not judgment.

Of course “I don't like it” is a perfectly acceptable thought. It's how it's articulated that makes the difference.

A great tool for agencies

Feedback can be sugar coated. This invites the wrong work to be presented again, an ambush!

Feedback that's overly prescriptive or worse, illogical, simply turns off the creative tap. Remember, there is no discount on hourly rates if the tap is off!

This is where the sometimes controversial, and usually hated by agencies, “huddle” comes in. A “huddle”, named by P&G, is simply an opportunity for the marketing team to “have a moment” with the work, without the agency looking at them like hungry hyenas. Agencies hate it because they think clients will choose the ‘safe’ work if they are left alone.

But the “huddle” is actually a great tool for agencies.

Agencies have lived with the work before the client sees it. All the rough edges have been challenged and ironed out in reviews. Good agencies may even have done consumer research to be sure they can answer the concerns the client may have.

The client on the other hand is a bit nervous, uncomfortable, because this is outside their comfort skills-zone; they worry about saying the right thing (from senior level to junior), or having to reject work, with excited people staring at them. Sometimes they just don't know what they think, or how to express it, at that moment.

Also, if you have a situation where you have a hierarchy of team players in the room and each one gets his or her say, there is a very good chance that there will be confusion about the debrief.

The huddle allows all layers of the hierarchy to feel free to speak, and able to contribute. Sometimes the junior is the best creative critic! In a big scary meeting the junior will not say a word, and an opportunity is lost. The marketing team can have a good debate, and go back into the discussion, with one clear message. And the discussion can continue.

Recent Adtherapy clients who exercised this reported that they are choosing more creative work than ever before.

Wouldn't it be great for 2010 if agencies and clients could crack these areas: great briefs, followed by skilled evaluation of creative, followed by constructive and positive feedback? And I repeat, these skills are as essential for the client to master as they are for the “internal client”, the account manager.

I can almost feel a great ad coming on!

ABOUT GILLIAN RIGHTFORD

Gillian Rightford's CV is a mix of marketing, advertising, and management. She started Adtherapy in 2007, a company that aims to help marketers optimise their advertising through skills, structure, strategy, and relationships, amongst other things. During 2009, Adtherapy (www.adtherapy.co.za) ran a creative skills workshop for a number of big advertisers. Feedback on "Creative advertising for Marketers" from both the marketing teams and their agencies has been very positive! She can be contacted on tel+27 (0)21 761 2812 or email gillian@adtherapy.co.za.

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