

Client/agency relationships: go from rickety to unbreakable



By [Jason Xenopoulos](#)

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Great relationships are like Russian Matryoshka Dolls. They are a series of partnerships within partnerships - between client and agency, between agencies, and even between departments within the client's own business.

These partnerships are all vital because they ultimately facilitate the most important partnership of all - the one between your customer and your brand.

Based on my 20 years of experience, here are 10 simple principles that can help you transform a rickety client/agency relationship into an unbreakable one.

A value exchange

In a client/agency relationship, an equitable value exchange cannot simply be based on money. It is not enough for a client to write a cheque, or for an agency to be an order-taker.

Great relationships require a deeper understanding of one another's business. As a client, you need to know what your agency is trying to achieve and then you have to help them fulfil that vision, in the same way that they need to go beyond simply answering briefs in order to help you achieve your goals.

Partnerships

Great client/agency relationships are partnerships - stemming from a profound change in focus. In an ordinary client/agency relationship there is a risk that the parties service different masters, because while the agency is answerable to the client, the client is ultimately answerable to their customer.

Being in partnership means that both agency and client work in service of the end-consumer. Firstly, it shifts attention away from the brand and towards the customer, where that attention should ultimately rest and, equally importantly, it makes both parties' goals congruent.

Remuneration

The right remuneration structures can support goal congruency. In an ideal world agencies would not be paid for their time or effort. They would be paid for their ideas and how well they work.

As the team from CP+B has said, "we need to be obsessed by the outcome we create, not the output we make." A simple performance-based bonus can do a great deal to ensure goal congruency.

Determining what success looks like

The challenge, and the benefit, of establishing a performance-based bonus is that it forces both client and agency to agree on a set of clearly-stated objectives so everyone knows upfront what success will look like. But also translating these objectives into appropriate KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) is vital.

Many campaigns fail because the agency is chasing arbitrary KPIs that have no real connection with the campaign's objectives. KPIs must serve as leading indicators signalling whether or not you are on track to achieve your goals.

A common vision

To forge a true partnership, your agency must understand and share your company's vision. They must also have clear sight of your commercial goals.

Armed with that information, your agency can truly begin to live your brand.

Integration across agencies

As the lines between digital, traditional, creative, and media all continue to blur, your respective agencies are vying for the same territory, while being told to work together in a more open and collaborative manner.

Marketers who want to avoid conflict between their agencies must ensure that those agencies are not pitted against one another. In my opinion, the future will belong to the agencies and marketers who can forge integration across multiple disciplines and businesses.

Motivation

Inspired and motivated agencies do better work than browbeaten ones. This may sound like an obvious thing to say, but many companies still hire bullies to manage their supplier relationships.

Companies who are serious about forging great relationships with their agencies must weed out those who abuse their positions of power. They must encourage creativity, proactive thinking, and even failure.

Failure

As we shift from a world of broadcast media to one defined by interactive, participative, and real-time communications, the marketing industry must shift from a linear way of working to a more iterative one. In this new era of lean thinking it is more effective to build, measure, and learn than it is to produce in a linear fashion.

In an iterative production cycle, failure is no longer an undesirable end-state, but a vital building block along the journey. As David Droga from Droga5 said, "as an industry we have to learn that when you put something out there, it really is just the beginning". We can make mistakes but what's important is how agile and responsive we are in fixing them.

Breaking down the silos

Marketing can no longer exist in isolation. The mobile, social, always-on nature of today's consumer demands that what you say and what you do are closely related. This means greater integration between marketing, IT, sales, distribution, and all the other parts of your business.

In the words of Lee Clow, the legendary adman, "brands have to understand that every touch point with their brand is an ad." The challenge is that every one of these touch points is often represented by a separate silo in the company.

From formal to fluid

The "always-on" nature of today's mediascape is demanding a far more flexible relationship between agency and client.

Client/agency relationships that are based on the old linear, formal structures of the past will not be sufficiently responsive to address the needs of today's consumer.

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