How to keep clients happy - the age-old question

By Joy Turnbull

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Client advocacy is and should be the ultimate aim for any agency in terms of their relationships with their clients. This objective is an ever-turning, morphing "animal" - there are times you're on the up, and other times you're on the down, the very 'far down there' down. And as sure as the wind blows, the "animal" will turn from one side to the other.



Having said that, it should never be at the creative or financial expense of the agency. As an agency we need to be sure that we maintain the level of creativity we strive to (and base ourselves upon) while at the same time run a successful business so those creative showcase opportunities can continue.

Let's be honest

Let's be honest: in any relationship in our lives, the tide turns, and swings, and morphs, so why should this one be any different? We spend time on relationships outside of work... so why not at work?

When evaluating a client relationship that is on 'the bottom of the barrel' down, there are some key points you need to seriously consider before heading out the door, off to your client, with all the solutions in hand. We are so quick to think, "That's it, let's change it, da-da fixed, let's go tell them." But so often we haven't spent enough time considering all the possibilities.

Let's face it, we live in a fast-paced world where we have learnt to think on our feet, find a solution, and go! Relationships are not mended this way.

Let's look at some of the lessons I have learnt along my merry client-facing years:

1. Changing the account management team doesn't always work

A change in account management can cause a reaction that may seem right at the onset, but after some time, if the real issue is not the people, the relationship will go south again, and probably more south than before.

We have all seen this before- a quick change does not mean a long term change. The important thing to do is not to react quickly, and to truly evaluate what the problem is. Be honest with yourselves. You know the actual problem, so face up to it and take it on. Fix the real issue.

2. Look below the top level client

An agency is so often only worried about the 'top top" hob knobs at a client and it forgets about the people running the marketing of a business on a daily basis. The senior clients can love you, but if the junior clients are unhappy they *will* (over time) infect all of their marketing colleagues in the department.

This can only lead to senior clients hearing "I hate my agency" so often that they get so tired of hearing it that they offer their team to go out to pitch. Wham! You on a pitch list, as the incumbent, and your chances of winning them over now are minimal! This brings me to my next lesson...

3. Think of clients as a collection of individuals, rather than as single entities

Each client in the overall team works in different ways, for different objectives, with different "tick boxes" - and by this I mean you may have one client who loves the big picture stuff, enjoys talking about the strategy and the creative thoughts in immense detail, and truly looks forward to a healthy debate on the message take out with the agency team.

Then, sitting right next to said client, is client number two, who is only concerned with whether you will be on time to the meeting, holding a detailed budget spreadsheet in your hands, and should you consider asking a question on their brief, you will be starred down because you will be seen to be wasting everyone's time.

Yip, you know you have both of these people as clients. They have to be treated as individuals but they have to be understood as a collective.

4. What if the problem is the client?

Now this is always the first thing said by any agency representative when you have that dreaded internal meeting with all necessary parties that starts with "We have a problem on Client X..."

Guaranteed, without fail, at least three people will immediately spit out, "It's them!"

But seriously, if you have a good relationship with your client, and the problem honestly sits in their building, you need to be able to have that discussion with them, heart to heart. Difficult, but something that may have to be done. And, maybe I should add here, should only be done after all other possibilities have been explored and put to rest.

5. Client turnover is unavoidable, but can be used to your advantage

Clients come and go. Turnover happens but take the opportunity to "befriend" them to teach them all they need to know about the brand (as soon as you can get to them). Offer help with anything and everything. This will make you an invaluable part of their lives from day one.

It also automatically creates the relationship of adult-to-adult (based on trust and mutual respect), and there is no fear of an adult-to-child relationship.

6. Listen to the subtext

We have to listen to get to the nitty gritty facts that are pee-ing them off about the agency. Be honest, and admit the problems to the client. Didn't someone special once say, "If you can admit your problem, you're half way to solving it" or something like that?

7. Make the relationship more equal

I spoke briefly about the adult-to-adult relationship. When a relationship is equal, there is respect, and no one is spoken to as the child. As soon as an adult-to-child relationship rears its ugly head in a situation, all havoc will break lose. This develops into a relationship with fear, and nothing good can come of that (only maybe a super hero... if you believe in that type of stuff.)

For me, the most important thing is to meet clients in their views of the world. If you cannot take the time to understand how they see the world so you can talk to them in that way, using the facets that make them tick, you might as well go home and stay in bed.

Think back to those two different clients I explained above:

- *Client One* - who loves the big picture stuff, enjoys talking about the strategy and the creative thoughts in immense detail, and truly looks forward to a healthy debate on the message takeout with the agency team.
- *Client Two* - who is only concerned with whether you will be on time to the meeting, holding a detailed budget spreadsheet in your hands, and isn't interested in talking about the brief.

Two very different clients... Now, think about how you would start a discussion on the same topic with each of them - very differently I would imagine, and rightly so. The bottom line? Get to know your clients, as it is unbelievable how much that helps your relationship with them.

Hope this helps!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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