

Life's lessons learnt in the kitchen

 By [Greg McFarlane](#)

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I have just finished the most harrowing relationship of my life, that of me and a kitchen contractor. I will not regale you with the details (all six months of agony, pain and frustration) just to tell you it has been six months of agony, pain and endless pure unadulterated frustration.

Some very meaningful life lessons have been reinforced during this period, which overlay beautifully with my day job. These are some of the gems I walk away with.

1. Make the unknown known

Clients come to an agency filled with anxiety and a sense of foreboding. You are proposing they give a percentage of their annual turnover to you to do a job. Sometimes this is a great deal of money, sometimes not. If you agree to take it on, no matter what that figure may be, it is your responsibility to ensure the clients fears are allayed and they maintain a sense of calm - that they are kept abreast of the rise and fall and feel part of the team and the solution.

The client needs to trust and have faith in you, the marketing consultancy/agency/incubator/workshop (or whatever buzzword you have labelled yourself with). If there is no faith and trust, the relationship is doomed. It becomes a hot bed of confusion, miss-communication and chaos. It is absolutely your duty to hold the clients hand and make sure they are comfortable with each step of a process they are ultimately going to be judged on. They are entrusting their future, their bosses opinion of them, on you. A big responsibility. If you are taking the money, step up. Be answerable, be honest and educate as you move forward. You only really have one job, to make your client look good.

2. Added value

Brands seek out an agency because communication through the various channels is not their speciality. They have their own job, one that in modern times keeps them busy. They trust you know what you are talking about, so mean what you say. Agencies and the like charge a premium - for this there should be insights from the agency's side clients would not otherwise know.

There is the constant drive to set up in house agencies (Woolworths, Naartjie Kids). The adage of "in-house, the-place-where-wanna-be-agency-people-go-to-die" is not bearing fruit anymore, and sure - why entrust your valuable asset, your brand, to an outside contractor? Well for the following reasons: External agencies have the benefit of working on a number of brands, insights gained often cross polarise with your brand/product ie. Car consumers also buy hair care products - whose to say innovation in motor vehicles does not add to the thinking behind "that" shampoo?

Agencies are in the business of selling ideas, wouldn't you want your brand in the hands of people who are constantly innovating to keep up with the competition? Of people who live and die by their creative solutions? Who everyday walk into a hotbed of genius? Who understand the market, know what is happening and strive to compete? So the extra hundreds of rands you pay per hour is well spent. And if you follow point 1) clients will understand that and at the end of the month will gladly accept your invoice, without quibble, and pay up, happy in the knowledge they are getting far more than the monetary value the invoice represents.

3. Honesty is the benchmark of success

Tell the truth, no relationship can flourish if it is based on deceit. Every penny needs to work as hard as possible. Publish these figures. ROI is both client and agency responsibility, if you cock up, hold up your hand. Garner some self esteem and respect, there are mistakes that happen on every single job. It is the nature of our business, by not telling clients, you are lying by omission - and yes, this does stand up in court. I guarantee you, clients will be a lot happier knowing the truth. They will either fire you or continue the working relationship in a more collaborative manner. Refer to pt 1) and 2) above.

4. Be open to criticism

Success is in everyone's best interest. Clients live with the heartbeat every day, they are always one step ahead in terms of the business plan and are exceptionally valuable in delivering a product/service/campaign that will be judged by critics and embraced (hopefully) by clients and final market alike.

Good, hard, uncomfortable debate is part of the process and often makes for a better end result. We are all here to learn, to be the best representation of ourselves we can be. Don't shy away from confrontation. If you believe in what you have done, have the balls to fight for it, but remember pt 1) and see pt 5)

5. Don't be a d*ck and let your ego drive conversation

Nobody is interested and it is a waste of good profitable time. If you are wrong, back off - why fight something that can clearly be made better. Remember we are judged by how many bottles of shampoo we sell. That is it. Awards come and go, are a great accolade for any creative or agency, and most agencies award "points" for awards gained. To what end?

If the campaign crushed the market and sold ten times more shampoo than the competitor, surely this is the measure of success. Not some creatives wet dream, only ever seen in one obscure publication, paid for by the agency. Is a gold that important? Does your client stand up in a board meeting and say: "Good news, we won a gold. Bad news, our competitors are killing us 4 bottles to 1. Shareholders will be pleased!"

6. Controlling the outcome

There is much safety that is housed within the agency walls and client boardroom. You can project manage a campaign into next year, but at some point you need to have faith in what you have produced, and the people you have hired, and set it free. This part of the process you have no control over - let's face it, it is this little step that keeps us coming back for the all-nighters, the tears, the whoops of joy. This fraction of time when our work gets judged by the people we are trying to win over.

Every idea stands on the precipice of this levelling. Not being a higher power (unless you are), let go of the desire to control this. You cannot. Absolutely and without question. Step back, and if you have followed the steps above, you are probably more likely to succeed, but if you don't, it is OK. Really. Promise. The lesson is in the learning. Go back, dissect, post-mortem, do whatever you need to to get to the place of learning. It is only in this place do we grow and ultimately get better and become better marketers for our clients and brands (see pt 2 regarding added value).

7. Grow a pair

Fight for what is right, discard the bullsh*t. Have the courage to stand by your convictions and have the grace, respect and decency to walk away from something that is too big for you. See 1) 2) 3) 4).

There is plenty to go around. If something does not fit, do not waste time trying to shove your size 12's into a 6. You will be the one with a sore foot, broken shoe and worse, a limp. Move on, find brands and clients that sit beside you ethically and values wise. The projects will be much more rewarding, the relationships easily better and your 8-7 (Jhb) and 9-4 (CT) so much happier.

8. Everyone is busy, get over it

ABOUT GREG MCFARLANE

Gregory McFarlane is the man behind creative agency, Where is my Horse? (WIMH) Rooted in branding and design, simply put, McFarlane specialises in the delivery of solutions to brand problems. He effectively offers up a space, within WIMH, where brands are sacrosanct and nurtured, where client and agency are encouraged to enjoy the journey along the multi channelled, ever changing media super highway, where honesty and integrity is paramount and results, the pinnacle of success.
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