

Retainers vs projects

 By [Keri-Ann Stanton](#)

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We love retainers. We adore retainers. We want retainers. But are retainers what clients want and what PR brands need in 2013?

If we look at trends over the past year and look at the global work we are pitching on, it is very apparent that project work has become the new brief for clients (and the new swearword for the PR industry).

"We are looking for an agency to partner with on a project basis in 2013," does soften the blow somewhat. We like partners, we like partnerships. We like being seen as an extension of the marketing departments arm ...so why are we adverse to project work?

One word: consistency.

When we partner with a new client we immerse ourselves in its business. The first few months of a relationship are typically over-serviced as we meet with key stakeholders, do site visits, research history, hold comprehensive handovers from previous agencies, devise strategies and key message, plan calendars, itemise do's and don't's ...you get the picture.

Investment process

We see the immersion process as our investment period. And a brand that you trust us with needs this focused time so that we can deliver on strategy, on budget with as little impact to the clients' busy lives as possible.

It also means that we are pretty much available 24/7 (and a PR crisis hardly ever seems to happen during work hours) and can offer strategic counsel because we have been privy to key information and business objectives at board level.

When you take that away and ask us to step in on a short-term project, no matter how lovely the fees, you take away that immersion, that consistency and that partnership.

So do we turn away project work? Of course not! There are too many great brands out there that will only work this way, and we are not going to shoot ourselves in the foot. We simply ensure we have a coherent clear brief and that we have strong powerful messages that can deliver during that period. We adhere to a very outcomes-based model where we, together with client, decide upfront what outcome we are working towards. Are we after the thud-factor of a file of clippings, are we after securing some high-level stakeholder engagement or are we after moving xyz products off the shelves by a deadline. When you work on projects it is even more crucial to have clearly defined goals, especially as there is a clearly

defined end-date.

And why are clients and brands moving away from the retainer structure when sometimes it makes much more financial sense (projects are invariably costlier) not to? We only have ourselves as an industry to blame. Agencies that have been lazy, that have lost interest, that have high staff turnover (where clients have to continually re-educate the newcomers) and that operate by ticking off items on a status list without showing strategy, enthusiasm and creativity are forcing clients to re-think their ROI on budgets.

For those of us running agencies the love of retainers is a love for clear cash-flow, a love for being able to plan teams and capacities and a love for a clear growth path. But then PR has never been easy has it? It is time to add project management skills to your CV if you are in PR.

ABOUT KERI-ANN STANTON

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