

A marriage made in mediation - world class client: agency management

 By [Johanna McDowell](#)

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The two viewpoints couldn't be further apart: An agency says, "You never lose a client on delivery, it's always the relationship"; while their client says, "I really like them as people, but it's all about delivery". The fact that the two aren't talking to each other when these things are said is clearly why client-agency relationships fail unnecessarily.



Johanna McDowell

In 14 years of counselling clients and agencies around expectations in the advertising, marketing and communication process, the Independent Agency Search and Selection Company (IAS) has salvaged many a valuable client-agency relationship by having each actually hear what the other is actually saying and fostering a spirit of transparency and willingness to communicate between the two. Global research by our UK partners AAR show that lack of delivery is a clients' key issue with their agency, whereas agencies often feel that they were not briefed correctly, or the brief was late and the client shows little understanding of times required to complete the task at hand.

Each perspective is valid: No agency can be expected to deliver on an incomplete brief and under unrealistic time constraints. On the other hand, if a client is launching a product or undertaking a sales drive, there are so many strings to pull together to ensure success that agencies often don't realise. While the agency is trying to figure out the brief, the client is seeing sales or production opportunities slip by.

At this point, neither is going to truly "hear" the other, and carefully managed change is vital to keep an already fragile relationship on track. Clients must be encouraged to see how clarity on deadlines and detailed briefs can get a campaign started on the right foot. Their knee-jerk reactions to economic issues that affect their market also affect their agency and its delivery, which creates tension and leaves agencies thinking the client just doesn't want to continue the relationship.

Plasters don't work

Continually “putting a plaster” on irritations that arise in the relationship doesn’t heal the core issue, and ending the association is costly and often traumatic. So, what are the key solutions to nursing it back to health?

Briefly, it begins with talking openly in a mediated environment where both parties agree the relationship is worth saving. Then, both must be clear on what they understand about the other – requirements, deadlines, deliverables and expectations on delivery. Regular and constructive feedback sessions should be formally structured and implemented, and a 360° appraisal programme to support learning and progression for both parties should not be left until it’s too late. Both parties accepting responsibility for their part in any issues will also encourage more trust and understanding and leave the door open for honest discussions into the future.

In reviewing global issues between clients and agencies, it’s clear that a breakdown in communications often sees real business concerns end up in “he said, she said” spats and an irretrievable breakdown in communications. The question of “fix or fire” arises again and – like a marriage that just requires an adjustment of expectations – the IAS suggests always opting to fix before fire.

If you feel that your agency or client gives you “a poor response”, know that research shows they feel exactly the same way you do. Without mediated communication, your sense of “they don’t deliver” is met with “their demands are unrealistic”. A proactive response from both parties is required and we recommend ongoing evaluations to ensure reasonable expectations are being met by both parties.

To both clients and agencies we say, set yourself up for success. Get your team dynamic right, be purposeful, be communicative and – importantly – ensure you create a strategic space for both parties to come together and discuss issues that can see a long and mutually beneficial relationship thrive.

ABOUT JOHANNA MCDOWELL

MD of the Independent Agency Search and Selection Company (IAS), and partner in Scopen Africa, with a background that includes being on both the agency and the client side of the fence, Johanna McDowell is well-placed to offer commentary on marketing and advertising in the South African and international contexts. She built her career in marketing and advertising since 1974, holding directorship in both SA and British advertising agencies. She was MD of Grey Phillips Advertising in 1988.
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