

Client Insider

UNLOCKING THE SECRET
THOUGHTS OF YOUR CLIENTS...



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

The client-agency relationship is vital for retaining business. Regardless of your strategic or creative skills, it's the relationship that clients prioritise.

But what are the things that they think about? What are the things that keep them going back to an agency, or stop them from returning? What little frustrations can turn into, seemingly unexplained, dealbreakers?

With two decades' experience leading client-agency relationships and dealing with senior in-house clients, I have a few sneaky suspicions.

But, this isn't about my guess work. I've spoken to some of my past clients and senior in-house contacts to get the dirt from them. This is all anonymous, but it is useful for anyone in a client-facing role.

The next few pages summarise their most common thoughts and frustrations.



THINK LIKE A CLIENT

Put more bluntly, clients want you to make life easy for them. As an agency you are just one set of partners they will be dealing with on a regular basis. Legal, finance, sales, the list goes on...

Understand how the client works and make sure you complement it.

Many interviewees also highlighted the importance of agencies knowing exactly where they (the client) sit within the wider framework of the business. Are they in a dedicated marketing or comms function, or do they fall under sales for example? This can influence not only their drivers and priorities, but how the client works with and is viewed by the wider business.

Understand how the business operates and where their specific function fits. How does the service you are providing help the client to achieve their goals? Knowing this will help you to step into the client's shoes and approach problems in the right way.



The thing that I search for is an agency that can step outside the agency box and think about what it's like to be the client.





Sometimes, agencies will be focused on the senior decision maker, BUT the agency needs to know how to work with the manager and their team...

How does the agency turn up for the **whole** team?



DON'T PRIORITISE IMPRESSING THE TOP DOGS

We know it's important to keep the budget holder or final decision maker sweet, but they aren't the people you'll be dealing with on a day-to-day basis.

Never overlook the wider team, front-line colleagues or other stakeholders.

They are the ones that can have an influence on how long your relationship lasts.

Remember power and influence are not the same...

DON'T JUST SAY YOU'RE "AN EXTENSION OF THE TEAM"...

It's a line that most agencies will pull out at some point in their pitches, website or promotional content. But is it true?

Clients love the sound of it, but often feel disappointed when it doesn't actually happen. Whether its social events, sharing interesting stories, insights and experiences or just inviting them to work from your office every now and then, make that effort to really make them feel like part of your team.

One person suggested spending some time before a project or relationship kicks off, getting a better grip on what expertise exists on both sides. In the same way your agency team will have different strengths and skills to tap into, so will your client.

... ACT LIKE IT

A couple of respondents mentioned how much they enjoy joint ideas sessions, as they don't get that opportunity in their day-to-day but really miss it.

Agencies tend to struggle with not owning 'the thing' and can be guilty of thinking they know better than the clients. But working more closely together allows everyone to bring their skills to the table, to everyone's benefit.

Remember, your comms, content or marketing client contact is also your peer. They don't always have the benefit of being surrounded by a group of fellow creatives every day, so they might enjoy the opportunity to do that with your team every now and then.



Make it [the relationship] enjoyable and fun. We always like the little things that show you are thinking about us.

Agencies being aware of the fact we are human can make a difference. Add a human touch!



BE HONEST ABOUT CAPABILITIES AND OPEN TO COLLABORATION

As the lines of communications and marketing disciplines blur, agencies want to be able to offer everything, no matter how little experience they have in that area. So, rather than suddenly trying to sell yourself as an expert in a new channel or discipline, why not build a network of real experts you can work with.

Clients don't mind if you need to bring in a third party to enhance what you are doing. In fact, they appreciate the honesty and the determination to make things happen.

It's also important not to underestimate the experience and knowledge of clients themselves. Just because they might not be as hands on as they once were, that doesn't mean they are out of touch.



It's rare that agencies can genuinely fulfil a full service offer...
There's nothing wrong with being a specialist.

Agencies run into the danger of saying you know everything when the reality is you don't.





Even if it's a financial decision (you are not making money from us), maybe it's better to let it go rather than let the relationship wither. Be prepared to say no and walk away. It makes life easier for all involved.



KNOW WHEN TIME IS UP

Client-agency relationships can end for an a number of reasons, but nobody wants a slow, painful, bitter end.

If things are looking bad, be proactive in trying to rectify the situation. Asking for and giving constructive feedback benefits both sides.

But if you see no room for improvement, you can respectfully call time. It doesn't always need to be the client's responsibility to end the relationship.

Who knows when your paths might cross again, so you might as well end on a 'positive' note...

DON'T AVOID THE 'F' WORD...FINANCIALS

Management of the financial side of relationships seems to be a common point of friction. In fact one respondent believes current financial models are hampering relationships because most agencies are 'pretty rubbish at articulating financials'.

Agencies appear to be in a dangerous race to the bottom when it comes to pricing, as well-used models are increasingly unfit for purpose in the modern environment.

Unfortunately, rules that govern confidentiality are stopping agencies from getting closer to the client's P&L, but this could be one route to improving the financial relationship. If you can devise a financial model that focuses on the genuine performance of the business, delivers value to the client and profitability for the agency, allowing both sides to take a vested interest in the outcome, you are on to a winner.



Be realistic and transparent about cost management. Be honest about what can be delivered for the budget. PWC don't have a problem communicating that!



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Don't give me an uncosted idea to get excited about, then tell me it's a million pounds. At least warn me that it needs to be sense checked.

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It's the experience that makes me want to return...It's the experience that makes the difference.

Everyone can be creative. You don't need to be a big agency to come up with the best ideas. What is important is the ability to deliver and make that process as smooth as possible.



EXPERIENCE IS EVERYTHING

Clients want the confidence that you'll do what you said you'll do, with minimum issues.

Think about the balance of the WHAT and the How. It's the HOW that makes the difference and brings you back.

Where are you offering real value to the client? Not just exceeding your KPIs, but how else can the client feel that they need you in the business. What insight or expertise are you offering that they just can't get elsewhere?

As budgets continue to be squeezed, its more important to demonstrate the benefit your offer your client's business.

Many comms and creative services are at risk of commoditisation and the rise of AI is speeding this up. Have you thought about the services or products that can provide additional value to your clients?

SO, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

Taking a person-focussed approach to your client relationships is key. As in any relationship, clients want to feel seen and understood.

If there were three things to remember:

- Transparency, openness and humility can go a long way
- Understand the people as well as the business you are working with
- Continuous improvement through collaboration will create opportunities for your agency and your clients

FOUND THIS USEFUL?

If you've enjoyed this round-up, feel free to share it.

If you have any additional suggestions, let me know.

If you disagree with it, I'd love to know more.

If you're ready to evolve your agency's approach to client relationships, get in touch to discuss how we can help.



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