

## Tips For Building A Winning Relationship With Creative Agencies

Bendix Marketing recently polled leading Northwest advertising and graphic design firm principals to determine the most important elements of a successful client/agency relationship. Below is their input, with attribution withheld to encourage candid remarks.

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"Create an environment that allows people to try new things and fail forward.' There is always a reason NOT to attempt something innovative and fresh; look for the reasons TO do them. At the same time, the agency has a responsibility to *be* responsible—to understand a client's business and to communicate the brand in a culturally appropriate way. Also, both client and agency need to bring energy and optimism to the process. As Emerson said, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm."

"For me, the single most important component to a successful relationship is collaboration. We're all in the foxhole together. We have a shared, transparent mission. Brothers in arms. Saluting a common flag. Working as a team. Mutually respectful of each other's capabilities and contributions".

"I think it is about setting clear expectations and then consistently delivering against those goals—it is true for both the client and the agency".

"Agree together on a creative/project brief for each assignment that defines target audience, key take-away and desired action/outcome, and be sure all decision makers are present, bought-in and have understanding of deliverables throughout the process. Be your agency's partner, working together to get the best work approved and into the marketplace."

"This is a very interesting subject, because I know there is a LOT of skill involved in being a great client, and I KNOW that great clients consistently get better results for a lower cost over a longer period of time. Most advertising clients are typically inexperienced at working with agencies (or have only experienced a handful of agency relationships in their careers)...while on the agency side, we have experienced HUNDREDS of client relationships over the years".

"I think the most critical ingredient is mutual trust and respect. Clients need to trust that their agencies are mature, business people who truly want to help and don't have a separate agenda. They also need to respect the expertise agencies have and not try and do their jobs. Similarly agencies need to trust that their clients know what they are doing and to respect that advertising is only one part of their responsibilities and that many other business considerations go into their decisions around advertising and marketing".

"Some teams are great at promising but not at delivering. Others are not great at selling themselves but are solid in delivering collaborative and remarkable creative".

"If the partners trust each other -- the agency trusts the client to give good input and judge their ideas fairly, while the client trusts the agency to (more often than not) know the best ways to reach the audience -- then very good things can happen".

"The problem with trust is that sometimes the parties -- especially the agencies -- think you start the relationship with a free sample that you get to use during the relationship. No doubt there is a honeymoon phase in most relationships where some extra latitude is granted. But latitude isn't trust. Trust is earned over time by showing that you're genuinely interested and knowledgeable about the client's business and you're willing to do the small but essential things, like stick to deadlines and budgets, mind the details, visit stores, mystery shop, talk to customers, be on the lookout for competitive intelligence, and so on". On the other side of the street, clients earn trust by being reasonable with assignments, giving unusual solutions a chance, paying fairly, and respecting that ideas aren't something you can go pluck out of a warehouse at a moment's notice".

'It always strikes me as a shame when a new CMO checks in to a company and tosses the agency. He or she isn't just getting rid of a vendor. They're disposing of months or years of trust and knowledge -- something that's not easily replaced in a day'.

"Great agencies and design firms understand their client's businesses and how the creative skills they provide add to their client's bottom lines".

"I think the biggest key to a successful collaboration is that the person responsible for hiring the agency does their research very carefully, finding a group that is in tune with the goals of their organization - there should be a fit in terms of skill set, aesthetic, and working style/personal relationship".

"I think it's important for the person making that decision to sit down with key stakeholders within their organization and build consensus about what that ideal agency is going to be like, so when they make the hiring decision, it can be done with confidence.

"Set expectations early, be thorough, and communicate throughout the project. Many people can do creative work, but setting and meeting expectations is more of the business side. It will keep the client happy for possible continued work, and also help avoid any invoicing pitfalls at the end -- the surprises on the bill that can be deal breakers and leave a bad taste in a client's mouth".

"If the client treats the agency like a vendor, it is destined to fail. If they trust the agency, let them do what they were hired to do because of the expertise the client chose them for in the first place, they will become true partners, and the relationship will flourish for both".

"If agency people get a sense that you are working hard to get the work sold and keep it sold internally, you will have agency people busting their butt to work on your business. This means the best people in the agency will want to work on your business. This means that they will spend more hours on it than they can ever bill. And this means you'll get better work".