

Up with Sensitivity, Down with Arrogance

Agencies Should Tow the Line Head First

Speech Presented by Jane Bedford

In my twenty-five years of marketing and advertising experience, I have been fortunate to have worked both on the agency side and the client side. This has given me either the objectivity or the schizophrenia (I'm not sure which) to view certain recurring agency-client conflicts with a sympathetic understanding of both sides.

Currently, as a marketing consultant, I see daily some fundamental changes in the way agencies and their clients deal with each other – changes, which I believe will greatly affect the way agencies, do business in years to come.

Today, CEOs and senior management are subject to greater accountability than ever before. A downsized corporate America is looking for agencies whose informed objectivity can provide support and leadership in making decisions, which affect their clients' very survival. These clients want an agency whose principals genuinely know the difference between lip service and hands-on account service. They need – and they are beginning to seek out – agencies who see advertising as a part of the whole marketing scheme, and who relate as business-people to the CEO's top-down view of his or her own business.

This type of real involvement directly influences the way agencies sell themselves in new business presentations, as well as how they handle the business after getting the account. For example, senior management and CEOs are more likely to relate to agency personnel on their own level than to younger, greener account executives. As these young people use their day-to-day work on the account to become seasoned professionals themselves, ongoing involvement from agency principals and key management is now more necessary than it once was. It keeps clients focused and ensures a continuing flow of valid feedback in both directions.

Because so much is on the line, clients need to feel a comfortable rapport and trust for their agency. Clients have many fears, some valid, some unfounded, that must be assuaged. While some of

these fears may be unique to a given client, others seem to be popping up with increasing regularity. Among those I've heard voiced more frequently are concerns that: agencies are more interested in big media dollars for themselves than in the success of the marketing plan for the product; leaner agency staffs mean key people are spread too thin; agencies will put a campaign into place and consider their work done, never paying real heed to its success or failure; and agencies are scrambling so desperately for new business that they'll sometimes make promises they can't keep.

Unfortunately, dealing with such issues and making the client feel comfortable about the way you'll handle the business is only part of getting into his or her mind-set. There is also the matter of knowing what your client is doing as well as knowing what you're doing. While successful agencies have always educated themselves about advertising their clients' products, today they often need to learn the nitty-gritty stuff about the company's day-to-day operations if they want to excel. Only through comprehending the CEO's agenda from top to bottom can the agency people understand where the agency fits in.

One client recently told me that his agency didn't have the foggiest idea of the issues he had to deal with daily. "There is an arrogance that I can't define except to say that even the most junior member of the account team has the notion that they can do my job better. They are totally one-dimensional," he complained. He might have added they they're also wrong.

The good news about the contemporary client mind-set is that clients do not begrudge their agencies making profits on their accounts. Contrary to what some agency experts have reported recently, clients do not mind the fact that their advertising agency tries to make money. It's a business like any other. What they do object to is the agency's expectation that they can make unlimited recommendations and the client should blithely sign the checks for the execution of same. If the agency is to expect financial cooperation, it must also

expect to show the person who signs those checks what the company's investment is likely to yield.

It would also benefit the agency to be less sensitive when the client disagrees with budget allocations. Perhaps the brilliant new television campaign was scrapped for reasons completely unrelated to advertising. It could happen that current production and distribution problems mean the timing for the campaign is wrong. These are objective business decisions, not assaults on an agency's talent.

The bottom line for agencies is this: clients need you to understand and stay on top of their entire business operation, not just your corner of it. True, this means more of a time investment, more participation from key management, and more effort to serve as "in-house" people rather than as outside vendors. But it's worth it to agencies to start working now.

As agencies strive to make marginal accounts more profitable and seek to add new business to their client rosters, it becomes more apparent to me that the successful agency-client unions are going to hinge on a pronoun.

When "their" product becomes "your" product, when "their" problem becomes "your" problem, when "their" success becomes "your" success, then you're seeing through the eyes that look from the top down.