

Why Clients Defect

A speech presented by Jane Bedford

“Creative genius is not the only component of the success or failure of the agency relationship.”

Over my twenty-some years in the marketing and advertising business, both on the agency side and as a client advocate, I’ve come to recognize that it is many of the same behaviors, attitudes, and corporate upheaval at the root of many client/agency break-ups.

Clients justifiably expect their advertising partnerships to be mutually beneficial, low-maintenance, extremely-productive relationships – sometimes however, the relationship ends up being less than what they had dreamed. What often starts out as a match-made-in-heaven ends up as the next “War of the Roses.” Prince Charming sometimes ends up being old, fat, uninspired, and lazy. The Princess doesn’t fare much better, either. In many ways, our work at The Bedford Group is part marketing expert, part counselor, and part treaty-negotiator.

Through the years we’ve been able to compile some normative data on what makes clients happy and what doesn’t. I’m happy to share the major reasons clients defect, in the hopes that this discussion will aid your current and future client relationships.

In descending order of importance,

Money. Money. Money. – Money doesn’t just break up marriages between people. It also happens in client/agency relationships, while not tops on the list. Truth-be-told, clients usually want their partners to make a reasonable profit. However, value needs to be justified and sometimes excessive margins (or even just the appearance of them) is what brings strife to the relationship.

Business Changes – Whether a merger/acquisition environment has brought redundancy to a client’s agency arsenal, or shrinking budgets that require that savings be found, agencies must demonstrate that they have the flexibility to contract or expand due to economic fluctuations.

Creative Closed-Mindedness – Narrow-minded marketers and stubborn creative departments can spell disaster. Agencies seek (and deserve) respect, but flexibility around creative development should be honored as well. Feedback Boulevard is a two-way street on which everyone must occasionally yield.

Failing to Move the Numbers – The marketing department needs to draw connections between the advertising dollar and corporate results. When years of effort fail to impact brand recognition or top-of-mind-awareness – marketers should experiment more to bring results to the table.

Lack of Team Continuity – Clients may forgive the occasional change to the line-up, but when their team has a new roster each season they're more likely to feel as if they're always in spring training instead of a team that's dominating the playoffs.

A New Coaching Staff – Changes in an agency's leadership will reverberate throughout its entire culture. That change is tough for everyone, including clients. A marketer often builds bonds with those at the top of their agencies – and losing that bond often feels like losing the relationship altogether.

Outgrowing the Agency – Sometimes clients actually outgrow their agencies' capabilities. Once you bag a baby elephant – make sure you know what to do with him when he grows up. Add bandwidth along the way.

“We've Just Grown Apart” – The relationship needs a regular splash of spontaneity. Make sure you don't take the client for granted. Constantly improve your offerings and make sure your impact on the client's bottom line makes your firm unassailable and irreplaceable. It's hard to fire your agency when you're making the numbers.

Lack of Trust – No one ever said that you had to show your partner every card in your hand, but it never makes sense to intentionally deceive them. Whether overestimating man-hours or recycling old ideas as new ones – deceiving a client destroys trust like nothing else.

Disconnect between Strategy and Creative – Once the link between the creative product and the strategy to which a client is committed becomes unhinged, sometimes changing agencies is easier than retooling the strategic process. Poll the client regularly to ensure no issues or creative/strategic disconnects emerge.

New Marketing Director in Town – Sometimes New Marketing Directors need to demonstrate change-for-change's-sake. But a well rounded, well nurtured relationship will help guard against becoming a victim of a “changing of the guard.”

Although we see these “repeat offenders” happening relatively often, perhaps the most reassuring truth is that many of the challenges within a relationship can be overcome if you recognize the signals and fix problems early.