

# Ad agencies: treat as partners, not suppliers

By [Pedro de Gouveia](#)

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Few business relationships are as tough and intense as those between advertisers and advertising agencies. There are many reasons, from the natural subjectivity of the business, to the stereotypes portrayed in shows such as *Thirtysomething* and locally *Generations*, to the generational gaps that can exist between clients and their “trendy” agencies.

Nonetheless, one thing is certain. When the relationship does break up, making a change can be an expensive exercise.

## Be, not find, the right partner

It's preferable to try and make the marriage work. Like real marriage, it's less important to find the right partner than it is to be the right partner.

Here are a few client characteristics that seem to lead to the best possible work and the most successful client-agency partnerships:

### 1. Start with trust.

To do the best work, an advertising agency must be kept informed. It must know everything about a client's business. From sales and internal issues to strategies and plans. It's vital to treat an agency as a strategic partner – an extension of your marketing department – and not just another supplier. This includes sharing results. Nothing is more demotivating than sweating hard on a campaign and not knowing how it performed in the marketplace.

Sharing information is only half of the trust equation. The other half is having the faith that your agency knows what it's doing. You no doubt hired your agency because you were impressed with its work for other clients. If you want the same, you have to give it room in order for it to produce the necessary creative goods.

### 2. Give it your time.

If your company had to face a multimillion rand lawsuit that could forever influence its ability to operate profitably, you'd make time for your firm of lawyers. An advertising campaign isn't a lawsuit, but the stakes are the same in terms of potential business impact.

You can't just hire an agency and expect it to perform magic. Be prepared to work at ensuring that your agency is informed, prepared, and set up for success. Be open and honest with your agency, communicating your needs and goals

clearly. The agency will in turn provide you with honest and candid input, feedback and advice. The way it should be.

Make time for the agency, answer all of its questions no matter how silly, and allow it to immerse itself in your business.

### **3. Value risk**

For advertising to stand out and grab the necessary consumer attention, it has to be different. We know that anything different is usually risky. In every other area of your business you know reward is associated with some level of measured risk. If you want advertising that looks like your competitors', don't hire an ad agency, as it's then unnecessary. But if you want to lead your marketing sphere of influence, you're going to have to do something that, at the very least requires an element of faith and therefore risk.

Good agencies aren't reckless. They have a sense of what risks are appropriate and how to mitigate them. They can only do this for clients who value the benefits of a little calculated risk-taking. Naturally, the risks you and your agency take won't pay off every time. If your agency knows as long as it's acting in your best interests it's acceptable to occasionally to make a mistake, it will treat the responsibility you give it with the greatest of care.

Keep your eye on the big picture, not the fine print. Some ads will be better than others, and others may just downright flop. But if your focus remains on the overall growth and reinforcement of your brand you'll see that for every "one step back" there will be two or three steps forward. If your agency knows you're committed to it and you're in this together, it'll do everything possible to make those risks pay off.

### **4. Reserve judgment**

Remember what you thought the first time you saw a pair of Crocs? You thought it was the ugliest thing you'd ever seen. There's even an [ihatecrocs.com](http://ihatecrocs.com) blog! Yet for the last two years it's been the most talked about fashion item, which happened to sell pretty well.

Sometimes ideas and designs that will one day be widely accepted are at first looked upon with horror. Reserving judgment is probably the toughest part of the creative process.

If you see something you like, say as much. But if you see something you don't like, pause for a moment and give it some proper thought. Take a step or two back. Ask questions. Have a look and see how what you've been presented with may be a breakthrough.

If every idea was adopted right away, there would be no such thing as early adopters. Sleep on the idea and try to look at it from a fresh perspective.

Bear in mind that creative, intelligent (most of them) people who have your best interests at heart believe it's going to work. Let them help you see it through their eyes. You can always say no tomorrow.

### **5. Be considerate.**

The task of creating ideas is damn hard. Not every concept makes it, but everyone leaves the agency with the hopes and dreams of its creator. When those ideas are bombed (for whatever reason), so are the egos of those who worked on it at the agency. When you have to say no (and there will be times), say it with consideration.

Don't assume good work is its own reward, either. Thanking your agency for their endeavors will do wonders for morale and creativity. People will give their best to those who appreciate it the most.

### **6. Be brave and champion the work.**

After months of hard work, tough calls and often tension, a campaign is finally ready to launch. Then someone in your

company who doesn't understand the context or objectives sees the work and says, "I don't understand it." Or after the campaign launch, a consumer with a bee in her bonnet calls and complains about the work.

The first time this happens, it can be scary. It's usually a function of well-intentioned people making unreasonable rushes to judgment, and the biggest mistake you could make is reacting out of fear.

## 7. Reward them

If great ideas were easy to come up with, everybody would come up with great ideas. Good advertising takes time and effort. And time and effort take money.

Pay your agency fairly and educate yourself about how much things cost. Remind yourself you get what you pay for (the old adage "If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys", continues to ring true).

If your agency then makes a mistake, it should pay for it. But, it shouldn't pay for mistakes, delays, or changes in direction that are out of its control.

The days of agencies coining it on commissions are long gone, and the work they're called on to perform – creating breakthrough ideas that reach an increasingly sophisticated and cynical marketplace – is getting tougher by the minute. No one gets into advertising for the money, but many talented agencies have closed down for lack of it.

You are the one who shows the money, and your agency should never forget that. But you should ask your agency team to rate your performance at least once a year.

Do your best not to punish them for being honest. Clients that work according to the above principles not only get better work, they generate the kind of loyalty from their agency that makes it walk through fire.

And that can't be bad for business.

## ABOUT PEDRO DE GOUVEIA

Pedro de Gouveia is GM of Salient Strategic Advertising and Design, which opened its doors in March 2006. The agency has more than 80 years of accumulated management experience acquired from within the South African advertising and marketing industry. Clients include Red Security, Shoprite, Caturra, Hungry Lion, Boss Paving, International Academy of Health and Skin Care and OFRA Cosmetics (USA).

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