

Collaboration and changing role of lead agencies

 By [Johanna McDowell](#)

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A seven-member panel of leading marketers met with more than 30 agencies last month at an IAS Masterclass to discuss the thorny and often misjudged, issue of collaboration among agencies for the purpose of achieving business objectives for marketers.



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Sharing their views across a variety of aspects of collaboration were Thabisa Mkhwanazi, KFC Africa public affairs director; Pieter Pretorius, Eskom head of marketing; Candice de Bruin, Werksmans Attorneys head of marketing; Hein Kaiser, Fastjet Africa head of marketing; Anoshi Saretzki, Jacobs Douwe Egberts marketing executive; Rita Fernandes, Jacobs Douwe Egberts head of marketing; and Carla de Quintal, previously head of marketing at Simba/Pepsi and currently an independent marketing consultant.

Interesting

Some interesting points of view emerged:

- The brand has to be at the centre of any collaboration among agencies. It can't be about agencies vying for the top spot; it has to be about the success of the brand.
- The big idea may come from anywhere within the collaboration group or agency ecosystem; it's not restricted to the creative agency
- Collaboration is not easy, and isn't designed to be harmonious; there needs to be some tension, even competitiveness, among the agencies – as long as this isn't exploited by the marketer
- Strategic thinking is the most important discipline that the marketer requires from its agencies, and the presence of this among the collaborating agencies is of vital significance

What services do marketers require from their agencies, whether integrated or a series of collaborating specialists? The Agency Scope 2017 South Africa study reveals that marketers need, creative, digital, activations, PR and media planning and buying services primarily.



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Weakest area

In a collaboration among agencies, the marketers on the panel were unanimous that the **weakest area is often the link between the media and creative agencies**. This is especially evident among the media-only agencies which are quite separate from their creative agency partners and vice versa. This is when collaboration fails dismally.

I've been seeing a growing international and local trend of media services coming back into creative agencies and reintegrating for the benefit of marketers. Media agencies are often the repository of excellent data and strategic thinking.

Is there a role for a lead agency in a collaboration? Historically, the lead agency might have been seen as the creative agency which came up with the big idea and then drove that idea through the rest of the collaborating agencies. That role is a thing of the past, according to our marketers, who expect the lead agency to be the coordinator, rather than trying to dominate the other agencies. For a collaboration of agencies to succeed, everyone agreed that the marketer must create a collaboration-friendly environment in which the best ideas can thrive.

“Professional bullying”

One or two of the marketers commented that they have seen “professional bullying” among the agencies when they collaborate – and the marketers have quickly moved to stamp that out as it's unhealthy for the group relationships and doesn't allow good ideas to surface.



Challenges facing marketers and creative, media agencies

31 Jul 2018



Collaboration among the agencies works best when the leadership of each agency is involved, commented the marketers. There has to be a real drive and commitment to make this happen successfully.

Budget and egos are often the sources of failure of collaboration among agencies; marketers are aware of this and understand the dynamics at play. They will help and support where they can, as the goal is always better and more-relevant work.

Having large numbers of agency people in collaboration meetings is not advisable, said the marketers. This becomes costly

and unproductive, as well as using up resources unsustainably.

In-house

And what about agencies collaborating with marketers' in-house marketing departments or in-house agencies? This is to be encouraged, said the marketers, especially as there's growth in the digital resources within many client marketing departments. Currently, Agency Scope indicates that there's an average of three digital specialists per marketing department of about 12–15 people. It is anticipated that this area will grow quite dramatically, according to global trends, and agencies will need to collaborate more and more in this area.

Building or supplying an in-house agency for marketers is becoming more and more popular, where an agency will provide its own people for two to three days per week or even full-time within a client's premises. Prevalent among the much-larger advertisers, it certainly makes life a lot easier for those marketers. I believe that, with the increasing facilitation of technology, virtual agencies within a client environment might also be an option for agencies to consider as a way to drive closer collaboration.

Finally, integrated vs specialist agencies: clients agree that it would be wonderful to have everything they need all under one roof, but the reality is that this often means that an integrated agency is a "jack of all trades, master of none". Specialist smaller agencies are often more agile and nimble, said the marketers and can deliver at speed.

Business imperative

It might take up more time to brief all of these different agencies and to coordinate their outputs into one presentation – "on one laptop" – but marketers want the deeper levels of specialisation; hence the need for collaboration among these different specialist agencies is no longer a nice-to-have but a business imperative for marketers.

ABOUT JOHANNA MCDOWELL

MD of the Independent Agency Search and Selection Company (IAS), and partner in Scopen Africa, with a background that includes being on both the agency and the client side of the fence, Johanna McDowell is well-placed to offer commentary on marketing and advertising in the South African and international contexts. She built her career in marketing and advertising since 1974, holding directorship in both SA and British advertising agencies. She was MD of Grey Phillips Advertising in 1988.

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