

How to choose an advertising agency

 By [Chris Brewer](#)

25 May 2015

Advertising can be one of the biggest items of expenditure on a company's balance sheet, so with such a major investment, it's crucial that your future agency should fully understand your business...

Remember above all else that a client/agency relationship needs to be nurtured, and this sometimes takes years to achieve.

Advertisers become aware of agencies through various means:

- By reading about them in magazines, blogs and press releases.
- By checking them out in Brewers Ad Agency Db (brewers.co.za) to see what other work they've done and/or who else works there.
- By recommendation from other businessmen - or by devious means so well-honed these days by many of our government departments.

The ideal way is to compile a short list (so that you limit the amount of wasted time and expectations - yours and theirs) and to do this, you must ensure:

That the agency doesn't handle any conflicting business. That it's financially sound and big enough to avoid your business being a strain on its staff resources.

During the informal meetings you'll have with them you'll want to see their client list, examples of their work, the qualifications of their personnel who'll be working on your account, their policies and philosophies (media and creative) and that sort of thing.

You will, of course, ask yourself how honest they appear to be and how much you believe you can trust them.

Above all else you'll want to see if you actually **like** them. In my opinion, this is the most important point of all and one which is often overlooked.

(It works in reverse too. There's a case of a very big advertiser in SA who is an absolute bastard to work with. Agencies ignore the warnings and still line up to pitch for this business - few last very long before resigning.)

Advertising is a very personable business. You'll be working very closely with them and sharing a lot of confidential information. Your relationship will hopefully be a long one and you can't do (good) business with people you don't like.



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Then at some point you have to decide whether to invite a couple of agencies to do a speculative (spec) presentation.

Most agencies are suspicious of spec presentations because there have been thousands of examples of unscrupulous clients getting free work - using it and not paying for it.

Then many agencies, who only have themselves to blame, start spending money like the Gupta family - producing print work, radio ads and even TV commercials on a client that hasn't even appointed them yet! Crazy.

The downside to a spec presentation is that the agencies have had no opportunity or time to get really close to your business.

As a rule, spec presentations should be avoided - but if you see no other way to help make a decision - then you must insist on paying each agency a fair, but substantial presentation fee. This is absolutely crucial.

The summary of questions you'll need answers to include:

1. Do I like these people?
2. Do they like me?
3. Will the people I'm talking to now be the ones actually working on my account or is this just the "A Team" brought out to bat in this presentation?
4. Do they have related experience?
5. Do they have sufficient resources to handle my business?
6. Do I agree with their policies and philosophies?
7. How do their other clients rate them? (What are their strengths/weaknesses?)
8. What failures do they admit to? (This is quite an important humility-testing point.)
9. Are they a successful business in their own right? And how do their cost structures compare?

You'll notice that I haven't mentioned creative or media expertise. If an agency can satisfy you on the above questions, chances are that you'll appoint them and their brilliance in all areas will quickly become apparent.

One final point is to be wary of the agency that parades you around their trophy room. Awards certainly do mean something - and good agencies collect a lot of them. But awards are not, and never will be, what advertising is all about. Remember that awards represent what other agencies think of your ads - not necessarily your customers!

Agencies that become preoccupied with winning awards write their advertisements for the judging panel - not you. In fact, you sometimes just get in the way - and remember that entering advertisements into competitions is an expensive business

and someone has to pay for it ultimately (just like the free lunch).

Of course, the easiest and most efficient way, is to brief someone like me to compile a short-list for you and provide other advice where necessary. Your call.

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