Five ways pitching out creative briefs will kill your brand

By Brett Horn

20 Jan 2015

Over the past few years, we have witnessed an ever-growing trend, in which large FMCG brands attempt to generate savings through aggressive procurement policies. In the marketing industry, this means 'pitching out' design projects to as many agencies as possible.

This may seem sensible when dealing with an apples-for-apples comparison of hardware, or a measurable service, but there are a number of good reasons why pitching out creative design will eventually destroy your brand.

Here's how:

1. The partnership dilemma

Generating creative content is the purest form of brand embodiment. To be authentic and honest in its delivery, the creative process needs to fully immerse itself in both the strategy and the vision of the brand and live its persona.

The creative pitch process however, removes any form of collaboration from the solution. Agencies are allowed one chance to absorb a brief and are then required to charge forth without any interaction with the brand owners, eventually emerging with a solution which may be good, but could have been considerably better, had the agency been able to share their early conceptual thinking with the client teams.

2. The true cost of saving

Procurement looks to immediate savings, but to what cost? It is virtually impossible to measure long term savings through procurement, especially as the creative world isn't black and white. There is no clear right or wrong, despite being driven by strategy and insight. Some creative executions are just more right, or just have a better fit than others.

Regrettably, the "you get what you pay for" paradigm now applies. In the words of a client, following a mandate to work through a procurement agency, "Thanks procurement, you've saved me R2m in production (this year), and cost me R10m in sales." Let's not forget the long-term damage to the brand.

3. The whole nine yards

Pitching on the manufacture of a tangible item is relatively simple and completely feasible. There is a clear output with measurable levels of quality, durability and service. It is an acceptable practice.

Pitching on creative design, however, means that an agency has to fully define, develop and deliver an entire body of work with every angle considered and each element crafted and designed, only to be told that they were unsuccessful.

It is comparable to asking five construction companies to build you a dream house, then selecting the one you like most and requesting the unsuccessful four to demolish their structures, all at their own cost, with a "better luck next time" sentiment. In no way can a creative pitch be viewed in the same way as a production pitch and it is unreasonable to expect suppliers of creative work to behave in the same way.

Inevitably, agencies deliver the bare essential, i.e. as little as possible for a pitch, as it is completely at risk. Ultimately, brands suffer the most because what may appear to be the winning solution, in principle, could fall down at execution and all due to many aspects of the 'end-to-end' solution not being thoroughly considered.

4. Waste not, want not

Brands have come to love the pitch process (for now). Let's face it - if anyone could have five houses built and only pay for the one they liked best, why wouldn't they?

They shouldn't, on the basis that it makes for unsustainable business practice for both parties in the long term. In order to sustain themselves, agencies will eventually need to make up for their losses. Consider this:

> If five agencies all take part in five pitches and by chance, each agency has one successful entry, then each agency would need to charge five times more than what they normally would in order to cover increased running costs, due to the 80% of wasted time. One would be naïve to think this is not the case. There is no other way an agency would be able to survive.From a brand's perspective, would you rather have an agency invest 100% of their time, focusing on perfectly executing your campaign, or would you prefer 20% focus for the same full price? Pitching equates to paying top dollar for mediocre work.

5. Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg

Here is a real life scenario:

> A few months ago, a leading FMCG brand briefed fifteen agencies (ourselves included) to develop three different brand solutions for them. They also requested that we supply three options of each solution.
> So that's 3 x 3 solutions x 15 agencies = 135 concepts.
>
> The brand is only progressing with three of these.
>
> That equates to a 2.2% hit rate.

Delightful as it may seem to have 135 concepts from which to choose, how could the brand possibly conceive that this practice would be good for the industry? Fourteen of the fifteen agencies could've been investing their time on building brands, developing the industry and ultimately, growing the economy.

As procurement policies introduce more stringent measures in the pursuit of "generating savings", they don't seem to acknowledge that if you keep peeling an onion, you will eventually be left empty handed. It is only effective as short term measure and certainly not as a long term strategy. Quite simply, this procurement process will damage the integrity of the FMCG industry and eventually be very detrimental to your brand.

ABOUT BRETT HORN

Brett Horn is a qualified Industrial Designer who, after spending 5 years in design and marketing companies joined Barrows in 2002. Barrows is a Durban based retail marketing solutions company with a footprint in New York, London, Singapore and Sao Paulo. Brett has been intimately involved with the development of hundreds of brands at retail and has spent 6 months embedded in Coca-Cola's Global Design team developing global design strategy and brand guidelines.

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