

If it's broke... fix it!

 By [Gillian Rightford](#)

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There's a growing trend for companies to use a pitch consultant to help them source a new ad agency. No wonder, when the average tenure of a client-ad agency relationship has decreased by almost 45% since the '80s, according to UK company Bradford Consulting.



Accordingly, pitch consulting or broking is huge business internationally. The top executives of the global agencies have to ensure that they are well-regarded by the guys that wield the power by “selling themselves” to the pitch consultants on a regular basis. Big pitches don't even get off the ground without the pitch consultant being appointed first (even they have to pitch!).

Agencies in South Africa have, over the past few years, felt manhandled by clients in the pitch arena. So whatever helps ensure that pitches are run in a more effective, fairer way that ultimately finds the best communication partner for a client's needs is a good thing, and there are more and more companies focusing on this area.

Excellent way of dealing with problems

Equally, there are a number of companies helping to monitor and evaluate client/agency relationships. This is an excellent way of dealing with the problems in the relationship as they arise, and hopefully addressing them before the relationship hits rock bottom.

Many clients, however, get to a point with their current agency where the relationship has become difficult for both parties, there are huge frustrations on both sides and they think that a new agency is the only solution. So they decide to go out to pitch and increasingly this process starts with the appointment and briefing of a pitch consultant.

What's important to realise, though, is that a new agency will not necessarily fix the problem! If clients don't address the reasons why the relationship with their agencies came unstuck, they will often simply recreate the same problems with their new agencies.

Changing agencies is a disruptive, time-consuming process that can have very real business implications in terms of marketing downtime. Certainly not something to be taken lightly in times like these. And then, changing agencies is not necessarily a guarantee - how often is a pitch won on great work that then never sees the light of day - and so should be the last resort.

Opportunity to navel-gaze

So clients should use these crossroad opportunities to do some navel-gazing. Why did the wheels fall off? Was it all the agency's fault? Unlikely. Was the agency doing better work for its other clients? There's a good chance that there are areas that can be strengthened: skills weaknesses, resource and process issues, and decision-making channel problems.

The point of changing agencies should be for the client to optimise its spend in advertising - for it to get the best advertising its money can buy.

And this is a two-way street, a true partnership. It's impossible for this to happen if there is an imbalance between the partners that creates an unhealthy, and creatively unprofitable, relationship. So clients should use this time well.

Rules of engagement

And then, once the pitch process is done, spend some time with your new partners plotting some "Rules of Engagement".

It's not just about ticking off the remuneration agreement and the legal contract. The success of the partnership going forward is about establishing some ground rules, agreeing processes, benchmarking skills and defining deal breakers up front, as well as learning a bit about each other's personal and professional goals, likes and dislikes.

That way the new partnership moves forward with the benefit of hindsight, and clear boundaries and expectations for the future.

ABOUT GILLIAN RIGHTFORD

Gillian Rightford's CV is a mix of marketing, advertising, and management. A former group MD of Lowe Bull, she started Adtherapy (www.adtherapy.co.za), a company that aims to improve the quality of advertising out there through better skills and better client/agency relationships. Contact Gillian on tel +27 (0)21 761 2812 or email gillian@adtherapy.co.za, read her blog at <http://adtherapy.blogspot.com> and follow her on Twitter at @grightford.

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