

STRATEGIC THINKER

💡 *The corporate and academic stand on communication*



LOVE YOUR AGENCIES

All too often, companies blame their agencies for mismanaged work. But it can cut both ways: a conscientious client will get the agency it deserves.

by Christian Schultz

26

Our agency is not performing,” “We always get information and briefings from our client at the last minute,” “Can you recommend a good agency, ours is rubbish,” “We’ve done all we were asked but

our client still isn’t happy.” Whether we are a client or an agency, we are probably all guilty of having uttered one or more of the sentences above at some point during our careers. The relationship between PR agencies

and clients is complex at the best of times. With the financial bodies of the business world currently undergoing open heart surgery, the relationship between client and agency is being tested. And so it should be.

As clients, we expect and rely on our agencies to have insights, expertise and commitment. However, after years of growth and prosperity and endless amounts of campaigns, we have tended to forget that agencies also rely on us to perform within exactly the same parameters. If a campaign didn't work, we just changed agencies. However, we forgot to look at ourselves. We forgot the basics. We forgot that if we don't share our insights, our agencies can't deliver insightful programmes. We forgot that if we are not experts on our product, organisation or industry, would it then be fair to expect our agencies to be experts? And we forgot that if we are not committed to our cause, how could we expect our agencies to be passionate about any of our initiatives? In other words, we forgot that if our agencies don't perform, then it is more than likely that it is because we are not performing as good clients. And this is what has caused many great PR initiatives to either be just plain bad or simply to never get off the ground. So with the financial crisis surrounding us, it is time that we look at ourselves before we start to blame our agencies. We must understand that when it goes wrong, it can often be us who are to blame.

So what can we do to avoid being bad clients, and what should agencies expect from us as a minimum? Here is a top five list on how to avoid being a rubbish client:

1) KNOW YOUR AGENCIES

With an influx of smaller specialised

agencies adding to the global all-encompassing agencies life has arguably become a bit more complicated for us clients in regards to picking our agencies. With today's array of opportunities to engage with our consumers, it has become critical that we identify the right channels to communicate with consumers. With the emergence of the 24 hour news cycle there are no longer any second chances: you get one shot at communicating your message. So just as we carefully select our staff depending on our mid to long term strategies, it is also our responsibility as clients to know ex-

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actly what type of agency we need to assist us in achieving a desired result. We must therefore dedicate time to really get to understand the skills and capabilities of the agencies we want to work with. And I am not just talking here about having a list of agencies sending us updated credentials lists but in fact a thorough research and understanding of the PR agencies operating in the market and their specialties. Agencies differ greatly in expertise, quality and experience. Some agencies know everything about digital and social media and some set and help mould the political landscape. Some are into B2B while others are into fashion. Some are locally inspired, some are globally focused. They are all great in their own way and they would certainly all be eager to work with you, but certainly not all of them could actually provide you with the right solution to your challenge. As clients it is therefore our responsibility to monitor the PR agencies and understand the trends in the marketplace while keeping an eye on the individual movers and shakers within the PR industry. In other words, if you keep picking 100 metre runners to run your marathon, you will never win in the long run. It is all about selection.

2) CLEAR BRIEFS Let's get it over with: it is absolutely true that many agencies overpromise in their pitches. I have sat through enough pitches promising me the moon, but when quizzed the promises quickly turn into fluffy dreams with no link to reality. And it is absolutely true that overpromising results can lead to the relationship between agency and client quickly turning sour as expectations are



not met. So am I really that blissfully ignorant that I will stick to my guns and say that overpromising agencies are not rubbish? Absolutely! It is our responsibility as clients to brief and work with agencies with utmost precision, depth and insight and thereby ensuring that agencies can't get away with sweet talk and fluffy daydreams. We must align our internal expectations, set clear objectives, specify ROI targets and pinpoint the criteria of success. And this is before we even think about consulting agencies. Only then will we be able to present our agencies with straight to the point briefs that don't leave room for overpromises of any kind. Should the odd overpromising agency still find its way into our meeting rooms it will then be easier to simply thank them for their time while kindly letting them know that we are in fact looking for other qualities. The secret behind any successful campaign lies in a successful brief.

3) FAMILY TIES When we appoint agencies, we should always hire agencies to work with us and never to work for us. Let me repeat: with us and never for us. A subtle difference? Perhaps. A critical difference? Certainly. Our agencies should always be treated as part of the family and be hired as we would hire our in-house staff. Once appointed,

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they must be kept just as well informed as our own staff. After all, we are investing our budget in them and each and every Euro, Dollar or Yen we as clients invest must be invested with commitment. Having worked on the agency side myself, I have first-hand experience with clients treating agencies as acquaintances that they choose to update whenever there is a free minute (and as clients we all know there is no such thing as a free minute). It is therefore critical that we make a conscious decision to treat our agencies as a member of the family to whom we dedicate our uninterrupted time and commitment.

4) TRUST THE ADVICE When you go to your dentist because you have a problem with a tooth, the dentist will give their recommendations on the next step. And what do you? You nod and let the dentist get on with the task at hand. After all, the dentist is the expert and does this every day for a living. Not just for you, but for a lot of different

people with similar problems to your own. I am therefore puzzled of the mental switch we as clients seem to make when we ask our agencies for advice. We have an amazing ability to disregard brilliant advice from PR agencies. “It is clear that they don't know my company and industry as well as I do”, or “The ideas my agency comes up with are far-fetched and simply not executionable”, are some of the classic comments made behind closed doors when the agencies leave our boardrooms. Well, my dentist doesn't know my teeth as well as I do, so I don't expect her to instinctively know which of my teeth aches. Instead, I brief her about which tooth it is that aches, for how long it has been aching, the cause of the toothache, etc. In other words, I give my dentist a clear and precise brief. Based on that my dentist uses all her expertise to get to the root of the problem and fix it. I trust her advice, and why shouldn't I? If she doesn't cure the toothache but instead focuses on making my front teeth shine, then I will leave with a shiny smile but still have a tooth ache and I would immediately seek another dentist to get it sorted. The same can be said about our agencies. If we don't trust or use the advice we get, then we should ask ourselves why we even went to seek their advice in the first place. Our agencies should have no reason to deliberately provide us with wrong or misleading advice, and any advice that falls short of expectations can more often than not be traced back to one of two things; an unclear brief or lack of understanding of agency strength.

5) LIVE IT We all fear and dread complacent and lazy agencies. We all want agencies that are upfront, proactive and eager to perform. But guess what: behind every complacent

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five rules for a productive relationship

- ▶ Carefully research the agencies that are out there before making your decision.
- ▶ The clearer and more defined the original brief, the less room for misunderstandings and promises that turn out to be hot air.
- ▶ Treat agencies as you (should) do your own staff; keep them fully informed all the way.
- ▶ Your (carefully chosen) agency should be an expert in its field, and so you should implicitly trust their advice, rather than picking and choosing which bits sit comfortably with you.
- ▶ If you show commitment and passion for your work, that will communicate itself to your agency and they will maintain an interest in doing the best that they can for you.

agency is a complacent client. A client's lack of clear direction and goals combined with providing information that is 'too little, too late' creates an atmosphere of complacency at an agency. And rightly so. If you as a client do not show enthusiasm and strongly believe in your products and campaigns, I will bet my Barbie collection that within a short period of time you will get an agency that has lost interest in you. In fact, I would actually go as far as to applaud the agencies who dedicate their resources to the clients who show a contagious enthusiasm and belief in their work.

ACCOUNTABILITY By sticking to the five criteria listed above, of 1) knowing the agencies that operate in our markets, 2) understanding and formulating precise briefs, 3) including and sharing information with our

agencies, 4) following trusted advice, and 5) being committed to the causes, we should have a solid foundation that allows us to navigate our way through the treacherous waters of working with agencies. Because it is absolutely treacherous. With a world in financial turmoil the buzzword at the moment is accountability. Not only are PR budgets across industries and markets being adjusted to the wobbling economies but, just as importantly, every ap-

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proved budget is being heavily scrutinised before, during and after implementation to ensure objectives and criteria of success are being achieved. Basically, after many years of uninterrupted growth and lightning-speed access to markets with wall-to-wall campaigns, we are forced to go back to basics. Getting the foundation right, once again. The financial crisis is allowing us to revisit and review our current agency setups. And perhaps more importantly, the financial crisis is forcing us to reflect on how we approach the way we conduct our Public Relations and treat our agencies, because none of us really wants to be the rubbish client, and this is our ‘get out of jail free’ card. And what a blessing in disguise this is turning out to be. As clients we are once again being held accountable, and excuses such as brushing it off on underperforming agencies no longer fly in the boardrooms. Mismanaged campaigns are being immediately punished on the stock exchanges around the world. It is therefore time to get out of our comfort zones and act with determination and accountability and let our agencies get on with doing what they do best: making us look good! |

Christian Schultz

Head of Communications,
Mattel (Central & Northern
Europe)



Since 2008, Christian Schultz has been Mattel's head of communications for Central & Northern Europe. He is also a guest lecturer at the University of Westminster and Copenhagen University. Prior to joining Mattel, Schultz worked as head of Ogilvy PR Denmark. He holds a Master's in PR and Public Communication from the University of Westminster.

