

PUBLIC RELATIONS

PLACING YOUR CARDS ON THE CLIENT'S TABLE

How to avoid assumptions, the mother of all failures.

In the typical agency-client relationship, creativity, enthusiasm and understanding of the business are often cited as some of the more obvious success factors. But even after achieving these, why do these relationships still break down after a period of time?

The short answer is there is a disconnect between client and agency, resulting in poor management of expectations from each other. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of managing your client's expectations (and if you are a client, expectations of your agency) and being upfront about each other's capabilities and limitations. In any relationship, it is important that we clearly communicate our thoughts and expectations to each other. In addition, there is a need to understand the different environments that the both of you operate in.

Managing client expectations

Firstly, take the trouble to understand the challenges that your client faces everyday and the competitive landscape that your client operates in, not just externally but also internally.

In an in-house environment, our client contacts have to contend with internal politicking that could threaten their very existence in the organisation. With companies getting more focused on managing costs and maximising ROIs, clients often have very limited budgets and resources to help them.

They have to justify their existence all the time, manage expectations of their peers and bosses and most importantly, getting results from their communications initiatives.

Learn to say "No", when client's budget and expectations are unreasonable or not sustainable for your agency. If you agree to sign the retainer for half the usual fee, it does not mean that the

THREE SIMPLE RULES TO MANAGING CLIENT EXPECTATIONS

- Understand your client's world
- Agree on requirements
- Don't make promises you can't keep

Now if you are on a retainer, you should specify clearly and agree with the client on what you can deliver – whether in terms of consultancy hours or tangible deliverables. Chances are, your client will have a much longer list of deliverables that she (let's assume your client is a lady) expects from the agency. You need to have an agreement on what the agency will and will not do.

Then you have to figure out how over-serviced hours are dealt with. The list goes on and on, but some key items to discuss include agreement on the level of agency resources required, frequency of work-in-progress meetings and treatment of out-of-pockets and other expenses.

The operative word here is flexibility. There is a need to give and take, by both agency and client, if the relationship is to have a chance to survive longer than the marriages of many a Hollywood star.

client agrees to half the deliverables. In the long run, nobody wins. The agency gets frustrated because it's no longer worth their while to service the client, and the client gets upset because the agency is delivering sub-standard work or assigning very junior consultants to service her.

Likewise, if your client gives you a tight deadline, negotiate for more time. If you are not able to meet your client's deadline, say so. But not when the deadline is just minutes away. Nothing frustrates a client more when the agency misses a deadline, especially when she had promised her boss that the proposal will be on his table that day.



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