

The other side

 By [Wendy Bergsteedt](#)

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The benefit of having seen both sides of the client-agency coin should equip both marketers and agency folk to apply more of a fair approach to their partnership, one would hope. Having settled back into the client world, almost one year later - I'm at goal setting phase for the next 12 months of my journey. I believe that leaders have two critical jobs to do, the first is to drive efficiency and performance and the second is to create happiness in the workplace. These were my two big goals for year one. Moving into year two, my focus is on building external relationships with the people that we do business with to drive exceptional outcomes.



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The romance

It's a global fact that hugely successful campaigns are borne from excellent client agency relationships with trust sitting at the heart of it. It's also a global fact that most of the client/agency relationships are broken. Remember the parody delivered in *The Naked Truth*; it was hilarious and cutting at the same time, but a telling pattern emerged. This was one of complete mutual disregard and ill appreciation for the battles faced on either side, it also illuminates the fundamentals that we often forgo, that inevitably lead the partnership into murky waters.

At the most basic level, relationship principals are universal and they can be applied across all our interactions, whether they are in business or in our personal lives. The traditional traits that forge trust and create winning relationships, I believe, are honesty, humility, forgiveness and openness about expectations. In winning relationships, when things get tough, we dig deeper and we remind each other of what brought us together to begin with – by having authentic conversations.

Never become the thing you hate

Six or seven years ago, after watching a host of the most talented creatives walk away from the ad industry to pursue creative journeys outside of the field – musicians, opening coffee shops, freelance design, photography, comedy, styling, etc. – I set out to find out why they were opting to do anything else other than expressing their creativity in adland. Their reasons were all very similar – the lack of respect for creativity and for the craft of outstanding work. They just couldn't live with the fact that being the client automatically meant that you deserved more respect than people in the agency; the people who were generally working longer hours to deliver on unreasonable deadlines, off the back of a bad brief, inside an agency strained to capacity.

Another common reason for them leaving was the generally dishonourable approach to the pitch process which is mostly accompanied by impossible deadlines, endless creative execution requirements, for little to no reward. I've walked into many of these presentations – after no sleep, too much caffeine and bloodshot eyes, watching my teams bare their souls and in the end, the work hardly makes it to a screen of any kind.

The great minds just lose patience and hit the 'opt out' button which is a sad reality for marketers because the effects of the creative exodus have a deleterious impact on our brands. The simple truth is that there is a dire need for a more ethical and fair process to protect the interests of creative talent and inevitably, the survival of ad agencies. Or I guess one could opt for the small boutique one stop shop that's willing to do just about anything for revenue, including the knee jerk work that never serves the brand in the long term.

The jacks of all trades

I've had the privilege of working for some of the giants in the industry where we were trained across channel, long before the tech revolution was on our radar. Thankfully we adapted fast enough and implemented holistic skills training for account management, which enabled basic delivery across channel. The leaders of the pack in this day and age are certainly those who are diversifying their agency proposition to offer holistic solutions to solving client problems, without the over promise, needless to say. To achieving agency 3.0 status, many industry doyens refer to the 4Ps – trust, technology, talent and time. This reinforces the need to prioritise the development of agency individuals – the lack thereof certainly stands in the way of agency greatness. Investing in people and creating subject matter experts who can tell a cohesive story across the disciplines of digital, content, PR, ATL, BTL and media divides the good from the great. Navigating our way through tough times certainly calls for people like me to reassess and streamline marketing efforts to make the most of budgets. Having one trusted partner to deliver a seamless story across channel is any brand's fantasy - but without empowering your people to have this dialogue and create effective work across channel, this is just a pipe dream. In this case, being a jack of all trades is really not a bad thing, it's an imperative.

Give me a cause and I'll fight

When Simon Sinek launched *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* – many of us were prompted to approach our work with a sense of deeper purpose and meaning. He unpacks how magic really happens when people are aligned to a common purpose, which is a potent lesson for us. In a more recent talk, Simon talks about how an alignment of values drives higher levels of trust, for better outcomes. Successfully implementing this thinking can only happen through a collaborative approach with your partners; taking them on your journey to galvanise them behind your grand vision. Winning is hard when the force is divided. The imperative is to level our gaze on a common goal, where the consumer comes first and where we craft work that enables shared success. No member of either side of the team should ever wonder what the fight is for.

Winning sometimes looks different

Having had new business development roles in my adland journey, I know the impact of the pressure 'hitting the numbers'

can have on an agency. In pursuit of new business, it often happens that too many pitch proposals are accepted, inevitably causing burnout of the star performers (who work on consecutive pitches) and perpetuating the mass exodus effect. Ten years into my career, the significance of organic growth created a new priority for me. I watched the demand for more and more work at a fraction of the budget – agencies were bleeding trying to deliver to the demand of work. Living the brands that we worked on and providing creative solutions that made a real impact on the businesses that we served was the most effective way of achieving organic growth. The great agencies that employed me, lived that value and it still resonates with me. Putting your clients' business at the centre of your efforts will take you places that are not always the norm. Understanding their business challenges and industry threats and proactively solving these problems is what creates this organic growth, it's often not part of the brief – but more about what happens beyond the brief that counts.

Tough times call for brands and agencies alike, to dig deep and tune into our resilience. My final note to self is (1) great relationships make for great work and (2) to be committed to developing trust in partnerships, to pursuit technological advancement in every execution, and (3) that investing in talent is certainly a solid route to achieving excellence.

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