

# How to be an Effective Client: Secrets Revealed



By Jeffrey M. McGinnis

*Being a client can be one of the toughest jobs in the marketing communications world. Those of us who have been there before know the terrain pretty well.*

*It's one fraught with dangers at every turn. Knowing how to navigate through the political, philosophical and attitudinal pitfalls can mean the difference between building a successful client/agency relationship and failing at this critical marriage of the two key players in the field.*

## Agency as Vendor or Partner?

**A**The first step in the process of improving the relationship is to decide exactly what kind of agency you're looking for. Are you looking for an executional team to function simply as a supplier to your organization or for a strategic partner who can help you make decisions pertinent to running a successful business? This is a critical decision.

Not all clients want a strong agency partner. It requires investing the time to make your agency "smart" about your business. It can be a real annoyance to busy clients to get and keep their agency up to speed. A strong agency can sometimes look threatening to an inexperienced client. Such a person might want an agency that will simply carry out its orders, meekly accepting all client dictates as any vendor would.

On the other hand, other agencies will fight for an idea or suggestion they deem is right, even at the risk of incurring client wrath. Often, this kind of agency argues from a strategic standpoint, making communications

recommendations grounded in a solid business rationale. This partner approach entails being kept "in the loop" on important developments with the client's business and on maintaining contacts at all levels within the client's company. It is important to note that most good agency people resent being treated simply as a vendor, as one would treat, say, a supplier of copy paper.

No doubt some companies are happy with the "agency as vendor" approach. For those that make the leap to true partnership, however, the potential benefits are far greater. Marketing communications programs tend to be better integrated, both with one another and with the client's overall business objectives. The relationship leads to a collaborative approach in which the best creative ideas percolate to the top in the natural push and pull between the client and their agency partner. Partnership, if handled correctly, can help improve communication between the two "sides," allowing for clarified expectations and more rapid and efficient resolution of whatever difficulties do arise.

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## **Know What You're Buying**

Now that we've squared away our understanding of two possible ways to work with agencies, we're ready to move on to the consideration of exactly what a client is paying for. Sometimes it's not the same as what they thought they were buying.

What clients sometimes fail to recognize upfront in the agency selection process — and then later on during the relationship — is that what they're really paying for, first and foremost, is ideas. An agency is only as good as the ideas it generates, its perspective on the world, if you will. Good ideas take time to cultivate and harvest.

A powerful good idea has the potential to change an entire business. Because good ideas and good people go hand-in-hand, we come to the next point.

Experience in the field is critical. Senior counselors bring a more diverse skill set to the table than their more junior counterparts. Often, the client can be fooled into buying an agency for its experience — after meeting the gray-haired president of the firm — only to be disappointed by the realization that junior staff and interns are really doing all the work on their account.

Also, business relationships depend to a large extent on individual personal relationships. Consequently, a switch in key account personnel or a personal conflict with the client can have devastating results. Like a good marriage, a good teaming of the right agency person with the right client communications manager can make for a long-lasting match. Personal chemistry is, therefore, an important part of what the client is actually buying from its agency.

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## **Manage the Agency Well**

Clients challenged with the task of managing an agency have a tough assignment. If they don't make the right decisions and establish the right processes, the relationship can suffer — along with the project work.

A good client doesn't impose unnecessary restrictions, unworkable budgets or unrealistic deadlines on its agency — at least not often. It is important to remember that in order to do good work, an agency must have a certain amount of freedom. When clients go too far in dictating content, style and approach, there's not much point even in having an agency since the parameters are so narrow that a "good" idea may be nearly impossible to arrive at.

Another issue concerns the role of strategic planning in the marketing communications process. Experienced clients understand that communications is serious business and should proceed from an overall strategy tied to business and marketing objectives. Far from being arbitrary, communications programs must be as rock-solid as the situation will allow. The more planning clients allow their agencies to do (or be heavily involved in), the better the results will likely be when it's time to measure program effectiveness.

Additionally, many clients subscribe to the notion that everything the agency produces has to be loaded up with all available corporate and product information. The agency that pushes back, claiming that all the information overloads the ad or brochure, is often considered either incompetent or difficult to work with. A good client will resist the temptation to throw everything into an individual piece; remember you hired the agency for their expertise — take it.

Even something as simple as client revisions represent another potential stumbling block in the relationship. Experts insist that revisions usually fall into three main categories:

- One-quarter of them make great sense and will improve the copy.
- One-quarter don't make sense and will make the copy worse.
- Half of all comments won't make a difference one way or the other.

Revisions of a substantial nature that result in a change of direction are even more dangerous. They can lead to project delays at best and

feelings of mistrust between the two parties at worst.

A good client will learn to recognize when their own requested revisions are interfering with the agency's ability to do its job. They realize that agencies hate arguing with clients about desired revisions. After all, doing so only delays the time it takes to complete the project and get paid.

To reduce the power of subjective judgment in the revision process, smart agencies typically prepare a written outline or "creative work plan" for larger jobs before proceeding with any work.

**The smart client knows that agency staff give their best efforts to their best clients**

Although such a checklist doesn't ensure the client will like the work, it can provide a rational basis for reviewing the work against agreed upon specifications and objectives. A good client knows to expect this kind of service.

Deadlines offer another sticking point. Good clients know when a job needs to be handled on a "rush" basis. Most experienced business people realize that deadlines are often artificial — that is, not anchored to a key business event or milestone. The truth is that rush deadlines are a bad

idea for both agency and client. A rush drives up the cost and decreases the likelihood that the creative staff will come up with effective ideas. The

good client can question their own deadlines and give the agency creative team time to do good work.

Finally, managing your agency the right way must include a consideration for the human side of the business. Agency people are still people and they function best when they are well-motivated and well-rewarded. The smart client knows that agency staff give their best efforts to their best clients. It pays to be a well-liked client as opposed to a "difficult" one.

Making the arrangement work is not easy. For the client/agency team that succeeds, however, the payoff can be substantial with many personal and professional benefits resulting. High-quality, effective, cost-efficient communications to help the client's bottomline — those are the stakes. With the success or failure of countless client marketing programs in the balance, understanding how to be a "better" client is one secret well worth learning.

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Jeffrey M. McGinnis has a diverse background helping businesses to enhance their selling effectiveness and improve their market positions. His expertise includes advising firms in all major areas of marketing communications ranging from collateral development to product publicity to national television appearances.

Mr. McGinnis is a Partner in Gaul Advertising, Inc., an independent, full-service marketing communications agency founded in 1988. The firm currently has 34 clients and capitalized billings of \$4 million.

### **How to Work with Agencies: A Checklist**

1. Pay fairly for services rendered. If the agency doesn't profit on your account, do you really think they'll give you their best people and their best thinking?
2. Pay on time. The agency business is a low-margin business. Agencies are generally very sensitive to cash flow issues so paying late won't earn you extra points as a favorite client.
3. Cooperate. Be available for questions, to review copy and layouts and to give direction — all in a timely fashion.
4. Respect agency time. To the agency, time is indeed money; to stay on the good client list, don't waste it.
5. Critique work rationally and specifically. Simply saying "I don't like it" doesn't cut it. Subjective or vague comments are frustrating for an agency to deal with and they offer no real guidelines for improvement.
6. Fewer levels of approval are better for all concerned. Too many people results only in a project that pleases no one and says nothing.
7. Proofread everything. Don't rely solely on the agency or the printer. By all means they should proof, but the final responsibility belongs to the client.

## **Are You Ready to Take Your Business to the Next Level?**

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## **Gaul Advertising, Inc.**

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