

PITCHING

Re-inventing the pitch

THE PITCH PROCESS NEEDS SOME SERIOUS REFORM IN AUSTRALIA, BOTH FROM CLIENTS AND AGENCIES, ARGUES COLIN WILSON-BROWN.

My London-based colleague, David Wethey, tells me prior to 1969, any agency reported to the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (the UK equivalent of the Advertising Federation of Australia) by another member agency for having made an unsolicited approach to the client of another member agency risked being flung out of the institute.

Then they changed the rules and the floodgates opened.

I don't know if similar rules ever existed in Australia, but the floodgates have been open for as long as I can remember and pitching has become the mating ritual for agencies and advertisers.

Agency principals don't need me to tell them it's out of hand. I estimate 20% of agency time is spent chasing new business. Who pays? Not the prospective client. It's the agencies that pay and, indirectly, their existing clients who subsidise it. Unless a concerted effort is made to change the ritual, my prediction is instead of

getting better, it will get worse.

Agencies argue a creative pitch is a game of darts between blindfolded players. They say the process does not enable the client to assess which agency will be the best marriage partner.

I have no disagreement with this, but when agencies make it so easy to change partners, who needs marriage? With the average term of the marketing manager being about 18 months (according to the Australian Association of National Advertisers) and the pressure of quarterly results, most clients are more interested in speed-dating than long-term relationships.

The creative pitch is the perfect speed date. Maximum options from minimal outlay. Prepare a cursory brief that can be given to five agencies, limit access for questions, then rock up for a 90-minute presentation and pick the creative idea that the team likes best.

As much as 50% of initial creative proposals are rejected in a successful ongoing client/agency relationship. In a pitch, the odds must be longer as the agencies don't know enough about the business to be confident of their proposed solutions (not that they will have shown any lack of confidence in their presentations). So either the client doesn't run any of the creative work and all, or most of the work, ends up in the bin.

Alternatively, due to lack of time, they invest large sums of money in a hastily thought-out idea, that may or may not work. The agency chosen on the basis of its creative idea may have been the wrong choice of partner – and two years later the pitch ritual starts again.

I haven't complicated the ritual by the inclusion of the incumbent agency in the pitch, which ensures apples are being compared to bananas. Nor have I introduced the Scrooge-like procurement officer who can ensure the winning agency won't make any money on the business in the first two years, which may be as long as they manage to keep it anyway. However, it should be noted that not all procurement

people are so myopic.

Advertising has much in common with architecture, apart from both starting with the letter "a". Both combine creativity and commercialism. How do you choose an architect? First, you do research to identify candidates whose work you like. You call up to check availability and interest. Then you

The creative pitch: a game of darts between blindfolded players.

It's very different from the agency pitch process. But it's a process that could work.

There are certainly occasions when a creative pitch is the best solution for a client. If the client needs a campaign urgently, a creative pitch is most likely to deliver it. I have recommended them and will do so again.

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meet to see if you get on together. Do they understand what you want? Do they understand the realities of your budget? Do they have ideas that you like? Will they be good to work with? Are their fees fair? Then, you might check them out with some other people who've worked with them. Then you give them the job.

Lots of homework. Lots of foreplay. No sex before marriage.

I hear agencies (particularly those with great planners) argue the case for the strategic pitch. But I'm not convinced. At least you can hold the creative work up to the light for inspection, whereas the strategy planner's work is all smoke and mirrors.

I recall one strategic planner who could win business without ever speaking to anybody else in the agency until pitch day. No, I

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PITCHING



am not at liberty to divulge his name. Don't get me wrong. There are some first-rate planners in agencies but clients want to buy a whole agency, not just an under-resourced guru.

If the client is looking for a medium or long-term agency partner, I believe a combination of credentials and workshops is going to give a better solution than a creative pitch in many instances and with less wasted time. So, who is going to make the first move? Here are five suggestions for clients and five for agencies.

CLIENTS

- ★ Look ahead. Don't simply ask agencies to come up with a better campaign for spring/autumn/winter/summer. Give them the chance to show what a difference they can make.
- ★ Respect the agency's time. Can you make a decision on creden-

tials? At least keep the brief simple. You can tell just as much about an agency's potential from how they cook one dish. Consider workshops in the final stage instead of a creative shootout.

★ Remember that you stand to gain by being a favourite client. Start by showing the pitching agencies that it will be a fair pitch with clear criteria, reasonable demands, not too many agencies. If the homework is done, three agencies should be enough for the pitch.

★ Think carefully about including the incumbent. Are you trying to be kind or just wasting their time? How will you compare them with an agency that has no experience of your business? My default position is either give them another chance before you go out to pitch, or leave them out altogether.

★ Make agencies stakeholders in your success. Offer a contract and a remuneration package based on results. Don't become involved in their cost base. Leave them to manage it.

AGENCIES

★ Don't be tempted to pitch too often. Put your clients first and only invest time and money in pitches if a) you think you can win, b) you can make a difference, and c) you can make a reasonable buck.

★ Don't pitch if the demands are unreasonable or if there are too many agencies competing. Behave the way you talk. If enough agencies do this, the industry will be treated with more respect.

★ Keep it simple. Make sure they can digest your credentials in half an hour and get a solid top line in 15 minutes. Think of your pitch as

one commercial in a break. Do everything to enhance recall of your main points. Clarity beats quantity.

★ Don't promise you can do everything (unless you truly can). But understand that the biggest challenge facing clients is managing increasingly fragmented communications and you should be able to manage this for them.

★ Don't give it all away free. Think samples. Think trial size. Leave something for the imagination – and for when the knot has been tied.

So what can agencies do with the time that will be saved by doing fewer strategic and creative pitches? They could reduce staff to fix their bruised profit margins. Or they could reinvest the time in their clients.

A pitch can be wonderfully cathartic for an agency. Everyone pulls together. Everyone works late. Adrenalin is high. Ideas flourish. Wouldn't it be great to turn this big-match mentality to the benefit of existing clients?

How about giving clients an anniversary pitch without competition? Remind them why they chose you in the first place. Give them a look into the future: "Imagine it's two years hence; here is how our customers and prospects see us and here's what we did to get here." All done without the constraints of the short-term brief. An opportunity to blow their minds and a chance to use the agency's collective imagination to raise the client's sights. And a chance to defer the prospect of a competitive review. ★

Colin Wilson-Brown is principal of consultancy The Clinic.

Pitch ethics

The Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) this month released its *Pitch Ethics Practice Note* to members. A set of guidelines, based on an independent review of local and international pitch practice, was drawn up to assist members in maintaining ethical standards. The advice included:

- 1 Prepare a concise but thorough written brief, including:
 - ★ timelines with sufficient time to do the submission
 - ★ budget considerations
 - ★ terms and conditions
- 2 Create a prospective or "long" list of agencies on the basis of research including:
 - ★ known work
 - ★ respected personnel
 - ★ likely "fit"
- 3 Clearly communicate key factors for agency decision-making from the outset, including:
 - ★ number of agencies invited to compete*
 - ★ scale of pitch required (ie credentials only or full creative)
 - ★ pitch funding (client/agency/shared)

**Acknowledging the substantial time and financial costs to all parties, the AANA says a widely accepted standard sets norms of 10 agencies for solicitations of expressions of interest; six for credentials presentations and three for full creative presentations.*
- 4 Provide adequate confidential access to appropriate information and personnel in relation to:
 - ★ company background and future planning
 - ★ product/service research and development
 - ★ financial considerations
- 5 Offer a mutual confidentiality/non-disclosure agreement to underpin an ethical approach to all aspects of the pitch process, specifically including:
 - ★ participation being restricted to agencies with a reasonable chance of winning and accepting the business
 - ★ clearly agree by appropriate legal documentation the issue of ownership of intellectual property and copyright**
 - ★ protection of commercial confidentiality in relation to information provided and otherwise obtained by all participating agencies

***The AANA says reliance on the traditional standard of intellectual property rights being automatically vested in the client is insufficient when perceived misappropriation of ideas has the potential to damage the reputations of individuals, companies and the broader industry.*

The AANA also published a much more comprehensive document, *Pitching Guidelines*, in 2001, which includes a check list which can be used in conjunction with this advice. See also advice from the AANA's British counterpart, isba.org.uk.

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