

How to be an Awesome Client

Forging a Profitable Relationship with Your Agency

[mothers of **invention**]

Introduction

It's been said that an agency will walk through fire for a great client. Awesome clients often get more of an "above and beyond" effort than typical clients, and bad clients tend to get less of everything. In an industry where one idea can be worth a fortune, it clearly pays to keep agency staffers pumped up. So why is so little attention paid to the quality of client/agency relationships?

Normally, we don't answer a question with a question, but in this case, we can't resist: Why aren't more married couples working on their relationships — and why aren't more dysfunctional families in therapy?

Indeed, relationships aren't easy to talk about. Agency people are generally reluctant to discuss relationship-related problems with clients — even when they interfere with what the agency was hired to do. These conversations are particularly difficult when they relate to organizational or cultural problems. On the other side of the fence, clients operating in oppressive environments often consider it best to remain silent.

We've noticed that dysfunctional marketing teams often have embedded systems in place to perpetuate the status quo. When agents of change periodically arrive on the scene, the old guard wheels out an ancient tactic commonly known as Shoot the Messenger.

Now for the good news: These situations are often far from hopeless. We've repeatedly found clients able to successfully innovate within organizations not previously known for awesome marketing. And while it's true that a client moving in the wrong direction tends to stay in the wrong direction, we've seen bad clients become good, and good clients become awesome.

This document will give you tips to make you a better client, make your work more satisfying, and even make your business more money. Don't be intimidated by its length — it's really not that hard to be awesome. Most of it comes down to a belief in "doing unto others" combined with good common sense.

And please don't think for even a minute that agencies expect clients to be perfect. Awesome agency people are flawed human beings who make plenty of mistakes. This is simply about raising the bar.

Of course, feel free to share this document with your colleagues.

Tips to Becoming an Awesome Client

Collaborate, Rather than Compete

Every day they ride the elevator, awesome agencies aim to do transformational stuff. Awesome clients support their efforts, rather than stand in the way.

Client/agency collaboration is a beautiful sight to behold. During those moments, when it's all about the work, it might be hard for an outsider to know who is the client and who is the agency.

Periodically, agencies encounter a client who feels threatened by the agency. The logic goes like this: The more good the agency does, the less valuable the client contact appears. (In reality, an awesome agency tends to make the client look awesome.)

Fortunately, these cases aren't the norm. But when agencies run into them, the client contact seems to justify his or her existence by finding fault. The client is essentially saying, "Good thing you have me, to keep those agency people from screwing up." These clients might claim their job is to "keep the agency on its toes." In these situations, it's easy for an awesome agency to quickly become dispirited.

Ironically, this is most likely to occur in cases where there's a substantial mismatch between the experience of the agency personnel and their client counterpart. Senior managers sometimes turn a blind eye to these counterproductive situations, rather than confront the problem – especially if they consider their colleague helpful in other respects. But make no mistake: These toxic situations negatively affect the bottom line.

Self-confident clients tend to welcome awesome agencies with open arms, figuring their presence will raise everyone's level of play. If you don't know whether your employees are interacting with your agency productively, you may want to run "360-degree" evaluations, and bring agency members into the loop – if you're able to assure the agency that there'll be absolutely no negative repercussions for complete candor.

Defer, Rather than Dictate

Awesome agencies never, ever work in a vacuum. They need the client's opinions, suggestions, and recommendations to do their best work. But of course, there are limits.

Which brings us to command and control techniques, long used to make military units run efficiently. It's certainly logical for some people to ask, "Why not carry these proven approaches into the business realm?"

Because marketing teams aren't military units. Free-thinking creative people don't respond to those techniques, and clients miss out on opportunities to capitalize on valuable outside expertise.

You hired your agency because of their relevant accomplishments – because they had important skills you needed. So why stunt their contribution by force-feeding your ideas? If you prefer to do all the heavy lifting, don't hire an agency. Do it yourself.

Client-side managers who often dictate orders don't just miss out on important outside opinions. Very often, they end up with a staff of sycophants who consistently march in lock-step with the boss. When the agency presents ideas, the chorus predictably begins with, "We all think..." Groupthink is more than a drag to witness. It's extremely costly.

Simply by converting commands to questions, clients may receive a range of opinions that could be immensely useful. By welcoming dissenting views, clients make better decisions more often.

Awesome agency people will definitely be opinionated and may at times be a royal pain in the butt. If you're working with people like that, thank your lucky stars. Worry about the yes-men and yes-women, rather than the skillful marketers with backbone.

Work with Partners, Not Vendors

Awesome agency people dislike being referred to as "vendors," for good reason. When prospects use the term, it often signals that agencies have been placed in the same category as businesses that sell commodities like copy paper. Not a good omen.

On several occasions, when a prospect has mentioned something about not needing another advertising "vendor," we've said maybe they needed a partner instead of a vendor. The difference between the two is significant.

Partners work to solve important business problems. Partners tell you what you need to hear, not simply what you want to hear. Partners are in it with you for the long haul, to build something successful. Vendors sell things.

Be Responsive

Stuff happens, and periodic delays on the client side are inevitable. But by generally providing your agency with what they need when they need it — including answering emails and returning phone calls in a timely manner — you're not just being courteous. You're giving your agency more time to improve outcomes.

Awesome agencies create schedules they're able to stand behind, and rarely miss a deadline. When they say you'll see concepts on Monday, you see concepts on Monday. It's frustrating when deadlines are missed due to unnecessary client-side delays and the agency ends up being criticized for not hitting the original deadline.

Yes, part of our job is to pester clients and keep them on track. But when a client consistently operates at the low end of the responsiveness spectrum, the agency is often able to do little more than focus on producing competent work on time and within budget. Conversely, a responsive client helps maximize the odds of seeing something awesome.

Keep the Focus on What Really Counts

An advertising campaign is a commercial endeavor designed to ultimately earn the advertiser an acceptable return on investment. Unfortunately, a small percentage of clients seem to worry about everything but the things that actually impact outcomes.

Awesome agencies try to improve their work throughout the process, right up until the moment it goes out the door. When an awesome client mentions a potential improvement, an awesome agency generally welcomes the suggestion. In fact, they love messing with ideas to make them better.

On the other hand, these highly skilled workers avoid wasting large chunks of time on busywork with zero odds of improving results. Here's a simple test: If reasonable people would overwhelmingly say, "That would never improve things or could even be counter-productive," let the agency fry other fish. We all do best when we sweat the genuinely important stuff.

If a boss originally raised an issue you know is off base based on your expertise, do everyone a favor and tell the boss. If your agency must address every comment, question or concern that comes your way, they may be forced to do little more than play defense.

Embrace Experimentation

The best direct marketers are the best testers. Testing is to direct marketers what R&D is to manufacturers. Making it "OK to fail" isn't a good sound bite — it's good business.

Tests that run on modest circulation are relatively inexpensive, and ultimately, an outstanding value. Following testing, good direct marketers quickly eliminate failures and expose successes to larger audiences, for minimum downside risk and maximum payoff. It clearly pays for clients to encourage agencies to run essential tests.

Yet some clients resent agencies that advocate testing, believing agency staffers should have all the answers in advance. They ask, “Isn’t that why we hired you?”

Yes, an awesome agency will keep you from running completely unnecessary tests. They’ll also start you off on solid ground, structure tests with favorable risk/return ratios, and raise your odds of success. But if you’re looking for a crystal ball, you won’t find it at an awesome agency.

Budget for Innovation

Some of our strongest ideas required no money for visuals — but that doesn’t mean it’s best to operate with little or no budget for things like original photography, illustrations, or special effects.

Very often, the right execution is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. When a client says, “Just use stock photography,” an agency may have to eliminate over 90% of ideas that emerge — including the potential winner.

The decision to starve the budget for visuals often has everything to do with minimizing costs and nothing to do with maximizing ROI. An awesome idea, flawlessly executed, may be worth exponentially more than its production cost.

Better to listen to Grandma and not be penny-wise and pound foolish. Budget appropriately for visual elements and all the stuff that contributes significantly to outcomes: Media, offers, segmentation, formats, and more.

What if you’ve got big dreams and a paltry budget? Share your situation with your agency. Be totally honest. If they’re awesome, they’ll do their best to prioritize and fashion a program — within your current budget — everyone can feel good about.

And even if you’re on a fast track, don’t forget to budget enough *time* for your agency to create something awesome. We’ve never encountered a situation where the number one objective was simply to get something out as soon as possible. It’s usually all about getting awesome *results* in the shortest possible time.

Hold Up Your End of the Bargain

Most awesome campaigns are successful as a direct result of the client's efforts; some are successful in spite of them. A client either chooses to give its agency what it needs, or throws up a series of barriers.

If you hired an agency with a strong track record, they know what they need to optimize the odds of success. Count on them to attempt to immerse themselves in your business. Any attempt to discount the importance of their operating procedures is likely to be met with resistance and could damage outcomes. Yes, they'll try to be as flexible as possible. But all great companies have important procedures — including agencies.

And if you're wondering why your agency operates in a particular way, ask. You're likely to discover solid reasons behind your agency's procedures. Finally, keep in mind that you generally get back what you put in.

Stand Up for What's Right

What awesome clients DON'T do is important. They don't delegate away leadership. They don't seek the path of least resistance. They don't automatically agree with bosses.

When awesome clients see something wrong, they make it right. When they make a mistake, they accept responsibility. When they need to do some selling to implement what they believe in, they do it. Awesome clients support people who try to do the right thing. They have the courage of their convictions.

The industry needs more young clients who stand up for their beliefs — and not just speak up when it seems safe. As well as executives willing to support their agency when their colleagues make the wrong move.

It's trite but true: We're all in this together.

Stay Positive

Awesome clients keep things positive as often as possible. Bad clients seem to look for chances to go negative.

If you've been burned by an agency, don't act like a jaded New Yorker and believe that all agencies are the same. Remember: There are disreputable agencies, lovers, doctors, teachers, and clients. And never forget that awesome agencies often earn clients enormous amounts of money.

An awesome agency continually busts their butts to make clients successful. Do keep that in mind should a problem arise. Rule of thumb: If you wouldn't dump on a partner over an unexpected problem, don't dump on your agency. It really does pay to treat professionals like professionals. (See the Golden Rule.)

Be Clear

That's the mantra of John Sturtevant, founder of The Writing Workshop. Whether it's a brief, email, or conversation, give your agency clear instructions and you'll see better work, fewer mistakes, and less grief. And of course, be honest.

Be Appreciative

Awesome clients appreciate a job well done. Sadly, some clients who expect the most appreciate it the least. Generally, these clients see a gradual erosion of service. No, they don't get bad service from their good agency. They just lose the "extras" the agency routinely threw in to exceed expectations.

"Thank you" may be two of the highest value words available to clients. They take just seconds to relay and always make a difference.

Be Loyal

Awesome clients operate a meritocracy and are loyal to agencies that do great things. Loyal clients receive consistently higher levels of service than typical clients.

We've worked with Harris Connect since the 1990s. When they need to make a big splash on a small budget, or need something in the next 20 minutes, or need a favor when there's no money in it for us, they can count on us — and they know it.

Current business volatility clearly makes loyalty more of a challenge. But if you're brought in to improve a marketing operation, why not try to keep what's good and change what's bad? If the incumbent agency was contributing something valuable, don't dismiss them in a knee-jerk way. If you suddenly had a new boss but were performing your job in a consistently exemplary manner, wouldn't you expect to keep your job?

Very often, recently hired marketing managers automatically remove the prior agency and install an agency they've worked with in the past, not taking into account the accomplishments of the incumbent agency. Or even worse, they ask the incumbent to "defend the business," even if they already have their mind made up and are going with another shop. Talk about adding insult to injury.

Some clients continually become “infatuated” with an agency, then move on to another when the “hot and heavy” stage wears off. These clients often go from agency to agency year after year, looking for something they believe they're not getting, when at least most of the solution lies within. Of course, with a fickle client, it's hard for an agency to plan ahead. But the client who misses out on the opportunity for campaign consistency and all the benefits of a long-term client/agency relationship is ultimately the biggest loser.

Awesome clients generally stick with awesome agencies, and believe that loyalty is a concept that's as relevant as ever.

Get Good Value, but Don't be a Chiseler

Over the long run, market forces influence agency fees far more than the desires of agency principals. But basically, agency CFOs want what CFOs in other businesses want: To earn a reasonable profit.

Some clients assume agency fees are excessive, without taking into account the ultimate value of a campaign in comparison to its cost, the effort that goes into campaign development, or the economics of an agency operation. Clients aren't expected to care about agency salaries, benefits, rent, utilities, equipment, insurance, supplies, or marketing expenses. But they are expected to understand the legitimate need to establish profitable relationships. In that respect, agencies are really no different than clients.

Some managers with sales backgrounds have asked agencies to “put skin in the game.” Why not, if we believe so much in our work? Here's the short answer: Like client-side managers, agencies only contribute some of the elements that impact outcomes. Some clients offer products that aren't ever going to provide enough value to enough customers. Should the agency not be paid for its efforts?

If you believe an agency can make an important contribution to your business, don't try to chisel their fees for no good reason. Better to level with them about your budget and see if they're able to fashion a scenario everyone can feel good about. Once you've reached an agreement, give your agency sufficient time — six months to a year — to prove their worth. If the ROI is acceptable, continue to pay their going rate. If it isn't, renegotiate or replace them.

An agency that's paid what they deserve is more likely to give you work on par with what you originally saw in their portfolio. Discounted fees may end up being very costly.

Share Results

An awesome direct marketing agency will ensure that your campaign is traceable down to the original creative version, offer, or media unit. Win, lose, or draw, it's important for your agency to receive results data in a timely manner. Results are the scorecards that enable agencies to improve – as well as justification for rollouts. In short, we can't manage what we don't measure.

Agencies need referenceable clients to attract new clients. If you're able to provide a reference, testimonial, or case example without violating corporate policies or putting your business at a competitive disadvantage, you'll help your agency stay strong. By allowing reporters to cover your success stories and permitting your agency to enter awards competitions, you do more than help your agency attract new clients. You energize your marketing team, share credit for a job well done, and demonstrate the value of marketing.

Don't Ask Professionals to Work for Free

Asking agencies to work for free (otherwise known as “on spec”) to win your business is a mistake. If you don't agree, consider this: Clients that ask agencies to work for free to win the business often get an agency constantly preoccupied with similar pitches.

Here's a fairly common client retort: “We never ask anyone to do ‘spec’ work; agencies just walk in with it on their own.” Here's an easy fix: Ask each agency whether they genuinely prefer to work on “spec.” If even one shop says they're opposed, let everyone know you don't want to see any “spec” work, and if anyone comes in with it, they'll automatically be eliminated from consideration.

Clients can choose the right agency by focusing on each shop's relevant accomplishments — their actual deeds. If you need still more reasons to avoid “spec” work, please call us, and we'll be happy to share other insights.

Don't Act Like a Jerk

In this line of work, we meet some exceptional people — as well as some who behave inappropriately. Big businesses seem to contain the most frequent offenders.

Why? Probably because they can. Let's face it: The higher an account's value, the easier it is to find an agency willing to tolerate a regular dose of less-than-polite behavior. But notice we didn't say anything about finding an awesome agency.

Clients usually get the advertising they deserve. In the long run, bad clients generally get less-than-awesome advertising from less-than-awesome agencies, and awesome clients tend to fare far better. For the most part, nice people end up working with nice people.

What if you've acted like a jerk in the past? As the cliché goes, it's never too late to change. In fact, most agencies warmly welcome clients who've made a 180-degree turn.

Dare to be Awesome

Awesome clients consistently operate with a “swing for the fences” mentality when it comes to marketing innovation. They simply don't consider mediocrity a viable option.

These clients avoid sacred cows and keep as many of the major marketing variables as possible on the table. As a result, the team never feels handcuffed and has ample room to innovate successfully.

Clients who prefer to introduce marketing innovation in microscopic morsels don't realize what agency-side innovators have known forever: Those incremental measures hardly ever result in meaningful change.

A more useful strategy for risk-averse managers is to embrace the direct marketer's model of controlled experimentation, because playing it safe truly is risky business.

About Mothers of Invention

Mothers of Invention (formerly Passaic Parc) is a direct marketing agency that creates awesome campaigns in all media for awesome clients. To date, the agency has developed dozens of record-breaking campaigns and won more than 40 awards. For more information, go to www.themothersofinvention.com, or call our founder, Robert Rosenthal, at **978-897-3800 x11**. You may also email Robert at robert@themothersofinvention.com.

