

We need to like you: Why client-agency relationships matter

By [Herman Degener](#)

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The other day, I was attending the briefing of a highly sought-after account. It's a piece of business that I'm rather passionate about and have had the privilege of working on before.



Image credit: Austin Distel on Unsplash.

When the CMO was wrapping up his presentation, he said a few things about relationships and chemistry: "This", he said, "is a marriage and "we need to *like* you!"



[For better, but not for worse: why the client/agency relationship isn't like a marriage](#)

Vicky Gillan 9 Apr 2019



Coming together

Given that we were all there with fellow shortlisted agencies, it's fair to assume we all had the necessary skills, access to technology and the experience the client needed, but the emphasis was on the *relationship*.

This got me thinking about client-agency relationships – especially with technology literally eroding the workplace. Just how relevant or valid is the client-agency relationship these days? Clearly, to this client, it's super important – which was great to hear!



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5 Jun 2018



There's a saying that Brian Solis coined called digital-Darwinism; it's when technology and society evolves faster than

humans. Scary, I know.

But similar to how we all thought cookie-based targeting was the silver bullet to all our marketing challenges, we are starting to realise that perhaps technology doesn't have all the answers and that as humans we are still exceptional at the one thing technology cannot do: have an emotional relationship.

It still begs belief that client-agency contracts are finite; it's not like when you marry your partner you only commit to a three-year term! So why is it different in business?



Adding value to client/agency relationship

Kerry Simpson 9 Sep 2016



It's only after a few years of working together (akin to moving in together as a couple) do you really get to know each other, and often just when you're getting to know each other and establish highly-productive ways of working, the partnership ends and the whole process starts again with a new 'spouse'.

“ *Running an agency means you're in the client services business:*

If the customer experience is poor ...

(e.g., poor communication and expectation setting)...

it can kill the relationship.— Anthony Tumbiolo (@AnthonyTumbiolo) [November 5, 2019](#) ”

Getting back on point. Right, so, to both clients and agencies alike, what are some of the ways we can enjoy our oft-fleeting relationships? I did some research online as well as some old-school human-to-human research, and here's what I found.

Communication

It goes without saying, right? But then why are so many relationships strained by a lack of clear and unambiguous communication? We communicate clearly with our friends and family because we feel comfortable enough to ask silly questions without fear of ridicule (well, mostly).

Yet in a business relationship, we tend to use fancy terms and TLAs (three-letter acronyms) to sound knowledgeable and important. Meanwhile, we've just strained the relationship through miscommunication, and no-one wants to ask the so-called silly question.



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Mogorosi Mashilo, TrendER 3 Jul 2019



In his biography, Elon Musk talks about how he banned the use of acronyms in his companies without his written approval, for obvious reasons.

Check your ego at the door!

No one likes an egomaniac or narcissist, and in the client-agency relationship egos are not exactly scarce. One of the best marketers I had the privilege of working with, Roland Reid who was the marketing director at Jaguar Land Rover South Africa at the time, used to always remind us that we were there to progress the *brand*, not our egos.



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Agencies are not always the guilty party here, but mostly we are. We all want to impress the client so much that our egos usurp the primary reason we're all there, to solve business problems. When we forget our egos and put energy into solving the business challenges first, relationships foster and everyone wins.

Warts and all

With social media being what it is, no agency is going to try and pull a fast one. If they did, the court of public opinion would write the death sentence for them.

As agencies, we are in the business of helping our clients reach their business goals, to do great work and to be fairly compensated for it. The best relationships are formed when everyone plays open cards, with no hidden agendas.



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When the latter prevails, all the energy available on both client and agency side goes into achieving strong business results.

Honesty

The problem with emotion is that it gets in the way of logic. It's like the ex-partner: your friends are like "wow, what took you so long?" as if you were oblivious to your ex-partner's shortcomings. You weren't, but because you liked, ahem, loved them, you didn't have the heart to give them negative feedback.



Frank talk: Rethinking value in agency-client relationships

Lynn Madeley, Havas Johannesburg 19 Oct 2017



In our industry we often form close, sometimes lifelong bonds with our counterparts and the best relationships have open, honest and regular feedback at their core. A shortcut to relationship failure is letting things fester; create the means for constructive feedback sessions where concerns can be addressed, but also don't be shy to celebrate the successes.

In closing, ability, integrity and benevolence are at the heart of each point above. So it's no surprise these are also foundational elements of building trust, both as individuals and as organisations.

None of us are getting out of here alive, so we may as well enjoy it while we can and build relationships that make it all worthwhile. :)

ABOUT HERMAN DEGENER

I am a passionate marketing and communications solutions architect, with experience spanning more than a decade in the print, out of home and digital strategy sectors. Coming from a traditional media background, I am well-positioned to understand the challenges facing many marketers in a world one digital. I have worked on the media owner, agency and client-side, and as such, I create holistic solutions to solving today's marketing challenges.

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