

4 fundamental principles for great agency client service

 By [Jarred Cinman](#)

27 Jan 2022

I'm a philosopher and I've spent most of my career building software, doing digital things, and only fairly recently taken over as CEO. So what the hell do I know? However...



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Viewed through another lens I have run my own company in one or other mode for nearly 27 years and as such every client, every rand of revenue, every project that's gone right and gone wrong, every relationship that has thrived or dived, are in part my responsibility. In effect, I have been a client partner for almost three decades. What have I learnt in this absurdly long journey is that what clients really want from their direct contacts in an agency are four fundamental principles.

1. They want you to care

It's not easy to care. It doesn't just mean "I care that we got fired and I damaged my standing in the company" or "I don't want to be seen as a failure". That is caring about yourself.

Caring about a client means taking a genuine interest in their well-being and the company they work for; it means feeling true accomplishment when something works, when their business grows, when they score a huge victory. It means worrying and losing sleep when they are not doing well. This is not something you can pretend. If you think client service is a job built on the foundation of superficial enthusiasm, don't do it. The only people in client service should be deep empaths.

2. You should have a point of view

And it should be a helpful one. Clients do not want to pay you to say things like "I wouldn't know" or "I've never heard of that" or "I'll have to check with my strategist and get back to you".

You are not playing a valuable role if that is the kind of engagement you are capable of. Educate yourself, read up, watch some YouTube, book time with colleagues and have them explain stuff properly. Go and spend some time with the client in their organisation. I often see cases where clients would rather speak directly to the agency team than their client service person.

If you were a valuable asset to them, they would not try to evade you. The best client service people know the most about the client, their category and their preferences, and they can act as their emissary inside the agency. Without the internal pressures of a corporate hierarchy, they are also free to offer thoughts, advice and suggestions which the marketer may not see themselves.

This isn't "value add" – this is the core of the job. Taking notes and delivering them to others is the value add.

3. Talk benefits, not features (or scope)

Clients know they have to pay for our services. They know time costs money and that agencies make their money – by and large – by selling hours. They don't need reminding constantly.

When the first response to any request is "we will have to bill you for that" or "I'll send you a quote" what they hear is arrogance and threats. There is a reason the legal fraternity is lampooned and derided for billing for every phone call, text and email. But in their case, you generally have no choice – few people hire a lawyer unless they are under duress.

Lawyers may be brilliant, insightful and helpful. But no-one mistakes them for nice. Agencies are not law firms. Creative directors are not legal scholars. Marketing clients generally enjoy working with their agencies – they like to see us succeed, do amazing work, deliver exceptional results and yes, even occasionally, get a prize from our peers. They actively seek out something from us that should be a delight but is all too easily forgotten: fun.

That's why they hang out in our offices (used to). That's why they want to be part of the big film shoots and meetings with the famous stars. When clients ask for something extra, the only correct answer is "that's a great idea and I'm on it". That short sentence curdles the blood of many CFOs and grey-suited bureaucrats, but I stand by it every time. Because when you need to call and say "We need some extra budget to make this amazing" you're likely to find warmth rather than a brick wall.

4. Be human, see human

Labels are useful in some respects. Knowing who sits where in the hierarchy of a client business is necessary, as is who wields what authority within the agency. However, these are all human beings – whether the CEO or the cleaner – as well as you.

Being authentic, real caring, funny, and interesting works just as well at every level of the client's business – and it pays dividends. If you're a good person by and large, you can find a place where you can be real with your client, and they with you. And therein lies the magic.

ABOUT JARRED CINMAN

As the Joint CEO of VMLY&R South Africa, Jarred leads both the Johannesburg and Cape Town offices. He oversees the inner workings of the agency, managing all departments from a business, HR and operational point of view. Jarred is also the executive in charge of HR and IT. Before VMLY&R was established in 2018, Jarred served as co-chief operating officer of Y&R Africa Group, overseeing operations at Y&R South Africa and NATIVE VML.

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