

Are communications agencies ready for the new reality?

There are a number of phrases that have been coined this year, but the two cardinal business buzzwords for 2020 are adaptability and agility. Both are essential to current and future brand communications and both underline the new direction in which agency-client partnerships must evolve. Most importantly, both words are more layered than the 'speed' and 'changeability' boxes into which they have been neatly assigned.



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Businesses making use of an external agency to manage their communication needs will probably have heard these two words at some point in 2020, more than likely during an online strategy or briefing session.

But has this sentiment impacted the service that has been delivered? Has your company's strategic messaging changed as a result? Has your corporate communication been reactive or responsive? Was it impactful or impotent?

Does the impact of agile and adaptive messaging jump out in your strategic communications?

If not, then circle back to the words. Agility and adaptability, at their best, require a strategic communications firm to incorporate a company's steep learnings during times of crisis into their creative thinking, believes James Moffatt, CEO and co-founder of Promise Agency.

The effect of change

This requires a deep relationship that is close enough for the agency to fathom the effect of a change in systems or approach, which appreciates the complexities behind operational thought processes and the risks embedded in the new landscape of business.

When this is in place, agility becomes about value, learning from the past and growing as a result. Adaptability morphs into an innovative mindset focused on responding effectively and with flexibility to solve complex problems.

“ If your existing business model has been radically disrupted and turned on its head by the current crisis, and if you have had to transform the way you operate and come to market, then your communication needs will be far more strategic and more closely aligned to your business objectives ”

Since opening its doors in 2005, Promise has weathered its fair share of global headwinds over the past 15 years. “First there was the global financial crisis of 2008,” recalls Moffatt, followed by the deep economic impact of the Zuma years in South Africa. “And this year the world has been forever changed as we face down the 'Spanish flu' of our time.”



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Drawing on the agency’s own experience, as well as the close partnerships it has developed over the years with clients such as SAB, AfriSam, PPS and RMB, Promise has been able to take the words ‘adaptability’ and ‘agility’ and translate them into practical solutions for clients.

A deeper understanding of clients

“Clients are looking for different things from their agencies at the moment,” explains Marc Watson, co-founder and executive creative director at Promise Agency. “In our experience, clients are looking for responsiveness from their communications partners, but also a deeper understanding of their business and a commitment to weathering this storm together. This means that agencies themselves have to offer more than advertising and communications insights, they need to step into the shoes of their clients and actively work to understand their pressures, challenges and long-term ambitions.”

By taking on the role of ‘changepreneurs’, agencies have the potential to deliver real and lasting value to clients.

The significance of partnering with an agency that ‘gets your world’, delivers on its promises and exceeds expectations is critical at this point in time, says Watson. This calls on agencies to ensure they are delving into client challenges and perceptions and asking questions which take into account the current flux, as well as rapidly shifting consumer trends and ways of working.

It’s very easy to focus on surface issues and shifts such as working from home or digital pitching as examples of agility, adds Verushen Reddy, director of strategy and innovation at Promise Agency, but everyone has been forced in this direction – so “these are hardly differentiators”.

Instead, says Reddy, the ability “to walk with our clients and mould a service offering that adapts and embraces the present and future needs of the client’s business and the operational context is what we believe will set agencies apart in the future. And that means putting palpable and creative solutions on the table for clients.”

These shifts are not new, says Moffatt. The client-agency relationship has been steadily evolving in this direction over

recent years; the current crisis merely accelerated the push. Back in 2017 Promise already saw the writing on the wall and established an in-house business consulting arm. The division has already rewarded the foresight of its leadership team by successfully tackling projects such as the digitisation of client businesses and exploring innovative ways to improve EBITA (earnings before interest, taxes and amortisation) by using right-brained problem-solving.

Not just about delivering creatively

Promise firmly believes that the agencies of tomorrow must be focused on more than just the ability to deliver creatively on a brief. For example, in the case of insurer PPS, Promise was able to step in during lockdown, when disposable incomes were under pressure and the value of the insurance industry was being interrogated, and work closely with the client to adapt an existing campaign on customer acquisition to reflect the new reality.

For Ayanda Seboni, PPS Executive: Brand, Marketing and Communications, this underlined the value of their winning collaboration. “There is no darker moment than realising that a campaign you have worked on for three months would be tone-deaf in light of the pandemic and the lockdown. Promise delivered on the promise of agility and solutions orientation. What started as a crisis gave us the most authentic and heart-warming campaign we have ever done,” she says.



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This fluidity of communication needs, coupled with the ability to respond with intelligence and brand awareness, favours the partnership approach of smaller and mid-level agencies, believes Watson. It’s a shift that offers dynamic and innovative agencies an edge over big, globally-aligned firms.

But are communications professionals across the board prepared to interrogate their own skills-sets using the lens of 2020 as a learning platform to transform the client-agency relationship into a fertile partnership?

Many are not, says Watson. “Those that are will be heavily focused right now on securing top talent and ensuring that their teams are fit for purpose,” he says. “Agencies that refuse to adapt themselves will certainly be caught on the back foot.”

As 2020 rolls to a close, Reddy suggests every company stops to reflect on what 2021 has in store and how they need to communicate in this context. “Ask yourself if your communications agency is well-equipped to deal with current global changes,” he says. “And, as you do, remember that the ability to anticipate and embrace change will increasingly be the differentiator in the world of strategic communications.”

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