

Stretched accountability

Agency evaluation: it's time to act, says **Imad Kublawi**

"Fortune favours the prepared mind" - Louis Pasteur.

With the dramatic shifts in our globalised playing field, and with my own agency experience of 25 years, it is clear there is a need to improve the competitive advantage of clients' and agencies' brands. The region has the opportunity to challenge the status quo and raise the stakes to achieve quality standards in great quantities.

That there is a need to improve may be accepted, but what is it we can learn, implement and benefit from?

In brief, it is introducing ways of evaluation that have been in practice in Europe and elsewhere for a quarter of a century. It's about introducing and adapting best practice that gives us long term sustainable benefit.

The first is agency search and selection. This involves many facets, from having up-to-date market knowledge and a deep cultural understanding, to being able to assimilate the insights to find the most efficient relationship. There is a way and an art to managing this process. For example, how do you conduct and conclude the critical phase of chemistry meetings? An agency may appear perfect on paper, but human factors play a crucial role in suitability. Which strategic questions to ask? How to manage the financial negotiations? How to introduce 'future retrospective'?

The process is similar whether one is looking for an agency to develop an employee communication programme or atl, integrated, media, DM, online, CRM/eCRM, PR, brand, NPD or design work. It is the



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same for global, international and in domestic markets.

Searching for a new agency is not always the best route. Sometimes it is the relationship itself that has gone wrong. Research indicates there are growing tensions between clients and their agencies with clients becoming more demanding of agency efficiency and effectiveness.

Since the 1970's agencies have ceded functions to a host of specialist agencies and consultants - and to the client itself. Increasingly clients are dealing with a substantial number of suppliers and their own strict procurement processes. Clients like to retain a multiplicity of agencies but it is going to be hard for clients to have a relationship with all of them: Creative agencies, media buying, media/communications planning, direct marketing, sales promotion, sponsorship, trade marketing, interactive, buzz, guerrilla, content, events, PR.

That's a lot of suppliers to manage.

With marketers and agencies both facing tough challenges, they need to work well together as never before. Client-Agency Relationship Evaluations are emerging as a top priority for advertisers to ensure that they are maximizing the value of their budgets.

Training is on everyone's agenda. In my 10 years of training experience, I have come to the conclusion that all training should be rooted in a real environment, working on actual cases, hence the phrase. I term this 'Reality Training'.

In the case of agencies it becomes self-financing if at the end of the course, the client (current or prospective) approves the direction of the work or sometimes even the final creative route.

Last but not least is media auditing and consultancy. A hot subject and probably the hottest potato in our industry. It need not be. The reality is that, with clients having fewer options than ever before, it's crucial to have independent evaluation.

Media auditing can analyse media planning and buying performance with the aim of improving efficiency. From a planning point of view there are 8-9 principles to look at such as break position, programming environment or the use of non-conventional media.

Cost performance analysis is the problem simply because of absence of benchmarking. The solution for cost performance analysis is attainable if the top 10 spenders commit and supply auditors with the rates they pay. The industry can then develop an average benchmark that kicks off the process and starts the database using best practice tools and processes used in more developed markets. The rates need not be shared with any one else, secured by signed abiding non-disclosure agreements.

All these changes are important to the communication industry. With the age of information racing at a fast pace, they are bound to happen.

Isn't it time to act?

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