

What is the Agency's Presentation Really Telling you ?

| Text/Patricia J. Fiske |

Selecting and hiring an agency is one of the most important decisions you will make in your corporate career. Whether you are hiring your first agency or have been through the process in the past and are hiring your second, third, or fourth agency, you know it's going to be time-consuming and the ultimate decision may not be easy. You have read the books on how other clients have selected their agency. You have spoken with the other decision-makers on your team and set your criteria. You have scouted the agencies in your market. You may even have hired an agency search consultant to help you through the process of finding and hiring an agency who will be best for you and

your company.

And now you are ready for the first round of presentations, a time for you and the agency to get to know one another. As the agencies make their presentations, consider these two ideas. How well they differentiate themselves from the other agencies suggests how well they will be able to differentiate you from your competition. How well they make themselves relevant to you suggests how well they will make you relevant to your market.

Joe Hoke, Worldwide Partners' Business Development Consultant, began studying this issue in earnest about five years ago. The difficulty clients face in reviewing agency credentials really jelled for him when

he viewed what should have been very different kinds of agency presentations. One was by a Norwegian agency, and one was by an agency in Central America. The problem, he observed, is that most agencies look alike and sound alike when presenting their credentials. And, the problem is international in scope. Joe's insight is backed up by agency search consultants—mostly advertising industry veterans who work with companies that want to change their advertising but who want professional help finding the right agency for the job—who had also stated their concerns about presentation styles that make each agency look just like the next.

Working with a client who had

recently retired, a former brand manager who had seen many new business presentations during his 30-year career, and an agency search consultant, Joe examined the credentials presentations from more than 40 agencies. Together, Joe and his colleagues identified several key patterns of sameness and areas where presentations need improvement.

Ask the agency to be relevant. You need to know, from the beginning of the presentation, that the agency has your business needs in mind. But what actually happens? It is usual for an agency to begin its credentials presentation by talking strictly about itself. "Hello, let us start by giving you some background on XYZ agency." Slide shows picture of the three founders. "It was founded in 1984 by an artist, a writer and an account guy." Slide is a chart of agency growth. "XYZ agency has grown every year since, even during the recessionary periods." Slide is a list of services. "By adding the services to deliver integrated marketing communications to our clients." Slide shows current (and even some historic) client logos. "We do work for..." and the agency will then give the names of the clients whose logos are on the chart. Slide of dense typography describing the agency's

purpose/philosophy is displayed while the agency describes its philosophy. Here comes the time-consumer. The agency shows a slide, or many, of the agency's process. All the while the agency is talking, in agonizing detail, about how it approaches a marketing communications problem.

The problem is that the processes are starting to look like everyone else's. So, how do you know which is best for your product or service?

The agency that deserves to make your short-list is the agency that makes its credentials relevant to you, that demonstrates they understand your needs, benefits, problems and opportunities.

Knowing you is the best way an agency can differentiate themselves from their competitors.

Look for a common theme. Superior agency presentations are focused on a central theme of overriding importance to your company. But what do you hear? Joe and the industry experts with whom he worked saw that many presentations lack unity; they were missing a central idea that made all parts of the presentation work together. As a good example of unity, Joe describes a presentation tactic used by a U.S. agency when it won an automotive account. The

agency's name did not appear on any of the slides used in its presentation. Instead, the agency simply put at the bottom of each electronic image: "200,000 cars." The point was unmistakable: the agency had the same determination as the client to sell cars, and did not let an emphasis on its own philosophy, image, or methods interfere.

Beware of buzzwords. Advertising, like other professions, has developed a specific business vocabulary, something like an internal "dialect" spoken by account executives, creatives, and media planners. Unfortunately, these words can interfere with the message you need to receive. "Branding" is one of those words. How often have you heard "branding" as a generic word? "Branding" is not an end in itself, but the means to an end. In a presentation to you, you want to know branding is not something done for its own sake. Brand-building is about increasing your sales and gaining you a greater share of the market. But when terminology specific to the advertising industry, such as branding, is overused, you hear a cold, clinical, message that obscures what the agency is able to do for you. Again, expect the agencies to speak directly to your immediate needs and concerns. They are the

agencies that are truly dedicated to helping build your business.

Listen for results. Agency presentations should be, to a very high degree, about results: either the results an agency's work has gained for clients in the past, presented in a way that is relevant to your company's needs, or the results the agency plans to achieve for you. If they don't show results it may mean that they don't achieve them.

Also listen to see if the agency gives credit where it is due-to its client, because the client's insights are essential to effective marketing communications. An agency that does not explain how they worked with their client to achieve results is probably one that is too focused on itself, and may not appreciate the contribution of the people who hired them.

Style and content. Electronic presentations have been a standard industry practice for the past two decades. After his analysis, Joe observed that the misuse of electronic media, especially Microsoft PowerPoint, could detract from what is crucial in a business relationship: the human element. For example, many presenters put as many words on a single slide as possible, and then proceed to read out that text to you and your team. Have you noticed

from your own experience that in a darkened room, the "energy level" diminishes, and the rhythm of displaying screen after screen of text and graphics can put an audience to sleep?

But more importantly, PowerPoint can steal the "chemistry" that might otherwise be present between agency personnel and you and your selection team. The opportunities for spontaneity, for humor, for theater, can be lost.

The problem here is perplexing. Some new business directors for agencies have said they are afraid not to use PowerPoint, since it has been a standard presentation tool for so many companies. They fear you will think the agency is not technologically sophisticated if they don't use PowerPoint.

Joe describes one presentation, in which billings of \$100 million were at stake. The winning agency used no electronic media whatsoever. Instead, poster-sized cards were created and shown in consecutive order. This "old-fashioned" method of explaining just how well the agency understood its prospect's business was used with great elegance and refinement. It did not obscure the personalities of the presenters, and it made the client feel welcome to interact. In fact, presentations without electronics

frequently provide the best opportunities for agency and client to get to know each other.


Here are some things that you might consider when asking an agency to present to your company. One is, if an agency that you are considering believes it must include an electronic dimension in their new business presentation, watch to see how creatively they use it. They can also limit the use of that technology. In an hour-long presentation, a PowerPoint slide show can be narrowed down to five or ten minutes and the lights do not have to be completely turned out if the slides are bold enough. The key point is that you want the opportunity to get to know that agency.

Agencies that create the best campaigns for their clients are invariably the ones that understand their clients because they have asked the right questions. Strangely, many agencies are reluctant to ask questions of prospects. Perhaps they fear they will annoy you. So another thing for you to consider is whether or not you would appreciate the persistence shown by the prospective agency that makes telephone calls and asks intelligent questions. One of the marks of a good agency is that it has a good prospecting program, and this includes doing whatever it

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takes to meet with you before the presentation, even if that means driving to an airport for a 15-minute face-to-face meeting, before the presentation.

And above all, the best agencies, and the ones most successful at winning new accounts (and then keeping them) are those that build relevance into all aspects of their research, and do not let the structure of the presentation obscure this. They are the agencies that stand out from a crowded field of competitors that increasingly look the same when they try to persuade you they are the best agency for the job. They start and finish their presentations with assessments of what needs to be done to build your business. And in doing that, they show their superiority, without having to talk too much about it. 

Worldwide Partners is a corporation equally owned by entrepreneurial marketing communications firms located in 55 countries. Its mission is to multiply the power of the idea by extending the reach of the lead agency. Its commitment is to create customers with marketing communications that respect and honor the consumer. With US\$4.1 billion dollars in billings and employing more than 5,000 people, Worldwide Partners is the 10th largest marketing communications firm on the planet.

After almost 30 years of successfully managing his own agency, Mintz & Hoke, in Avon, Connecticut, and winning business in good and bad times, Joe Hoke agreed to become a business development resource for Worldwide Partners agencies. Joe kept a diary of brilliant new business ideas in which he continually analyzed his successes and failures to understand what works and why. He hired some of the best consultants in the business and sucked every bit of knowledge he could out of them. Beyond advice he provides tools-processes and models that make new business and creative efforts work better.



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