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## **WHEN CLIENT MEETS AGENCY: HOW DO YOU PLAY THE GAME?**

Why the right agency relationship could be an unexpected game changer in your brand's story

**By Jan Reiss**

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## WHEN CLIENT MEETS AGENCY: HOW DO YOU PLAY THE GAME?

**A week to go till your product launch and the new Digital Sales Aid looks fantastic. The agency's done a sterling job – in spite of delays on your side they've made up for lost time and the piece is signed off. Against all odds, it looks like you'll hit the deadline. Now, it's over to the vendor to publish.**

**Just as you're about to deploy to the sales team you discover it's not compatible with your eCRM template. Great, just great.**

We've all been there. The feeling of panic as you realise there's been a gaffe that could leave you with egg on your face. It could be spotting a typo on your newly printed leave piece, realising the courier's gone AWOL with your brochures the night before conference, or a last-minute game of 'PDF ping pong' as the printer tells

you the spec's wrong and the artwork has to go back to the agency (again).

I've worked for enough agencies now to know what the common niggles are (see below), and let's face it, whether you're in-house or in an agency, we're all capable of the odd oversight. That

said, when a brand owner brings an agency into the fold, you expect that robust processes and the input of a bigger team will seriously reduce the chances of anything slipping through the net. But it does. The question is, where do you draw the line?



### 10 agency headaches

- 1 Typos/lack of attention to detail
- 2 Poor version control
- 3 Not all the edits (you asked for) are made
- 4 Blagging it/not listening
- 5 Inflexibility – 'do it our way'
- 6 Missed deadlines
- 7 Team changes/staff churn
- 8 Covering their own back rather than finding a solution
- 9 Gobbling up budget/inaccurate pricing
- 10 Not 'playing nice' – friction with your other agencies

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## It's not you, it's me... well, sort of

As long as issues like this are the exception to the rule and the agency-client relationship is fruitful on the whole, it's in everyone's interests to learn from any mistakes and move on; a good agency will heed the warning signs and work to remedy them. Managed well, mistakes can act like relationship glue, re-establishing respect and appreciation between agency and client. If you can keep your (sometimes bruised) ego out of it, service issues or oversights can be a rare chance for a company to take stock, pull its socks up and emerge stronger and wiser. After all, who wants to go through a 'divorce' when

you understand each other and are getting the job done?

But in some cases, relations just can't be repaired. According to a recent [report by SoDA](#),\*<sup>1</sup> a US society of digital leaders and creative innovators, in 67% of cases, client-side marketers let their digital agencies go due to factors *within* the agency's control, such as an 'inexperienced team' or [lack of] 'value'. This tells us that on occasion, agencies *could* do more to align their service with clients' expectations or avoid getting too comfortable when it comes to quality and ROI.

In **67%** of cases client-side marketers let their digital agencies go due to factors *within* the agency's control<sup>1</sup>



## Markers of satisfaction: looking beyond creative

When it comes to avoiding bumps in the road with your agency, I believe there are two fundamental ingredients at play: **process** and **people**. So often, creative agencies are assessed primarily on the creative they can pull out of the bag in response to an RFP or a pitch brief. It's understandable to an extent – the quality of creative output is what we're hired for. But when selecting a new agency partner, looking *beyond* just the work is incredibly important. Process and

people might not typically attract the same attention as creative, but they're actually more likely to make or break your partnership.

### Process vs pragmatism

All agencies have Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs); the more rigorous of these tend to result in greater precision and quality. When considering an agency, make sure you ask them about their processes. If they haven't documented the steps in key

agency functions (from version control to keeping timesheets, finance or complaint handling) and can't explain their processes confidently in a pitch meeting, consider how ingrained processes may (or may not) be in agency culture.



\*33% of reasons cited for terminating digital agencies related to 'internal/client-side' factors; either because of new management in the client organisation or they just needed different capabilities their agency didn't offer. The other 67% of reasons given were factors within the agency's control, such as 'inexperienced team' or 'value'.

### Death by typo



After 6 months 'in quarantine' at my first agency I was finally let loose on a real client – a baked goods manufacturer. My Account Manager worked part time, making it tough to meet tight deadlines while sticking to the agency's rule that two people must proof any copy or revisions. Once, with the pressure on from the client, and with my manager unavailable to proof my copy a second time, she said: "just send it". A typo (mistaking 'pallet' for 'palate') meant our client lost face in front of her team and, within 3 months, lost us the (otherwise very satisfied) long-standing client. ”

*Account Director, anonymous*

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## A healthy dose of rigour

Particularly in healthcare marketing, where inaccuracies and disorganisation can have serious legal consequences, robust process is one factor that gives clients confidence in the quality and accuracy of the work. With regulatory bodies such as the ABPI and MHRA holding us to account, there's no margin for error when it comes to things like prescribing information, referencing and job codes. The devil's in the detail and parameters must be put in place to prevent things from slipping through the cracks.

But as with all things, it's about balance. It's key that processes aren't so rigid that there's no flexibility; there will always be times when deadlines are tight and an agency has to circumnavigate its usual process (without sacrificing quality). Procedures without room for manoeuvre built-in can be more common in big agency networks where, even if you're working with a smaller local affiliate, you're governed by the rules laid down by its more powerful (distant) relative; which doesn't help when you're up against it and just need to get things moving.

A lack of agreed processes should be a red flag for client-side marketers who are looking for a new agency. On the flip side, too much rigidity can cost you dear; when the honeymoon period is over you can find yourself being penalised for the unexpected. We like to think we've created a good hybrid of the two at IGNIFI. We apply (and police) day-to-day SOPs but our account managers have the discretion and autonomy to flex sensibly when the project calls for it. Being a relatively small team in an independent agency helps. We can mobilise quickly to unpick those unexpected problems and we get a kick out of relieving the pressure on our clients. A bit of Dunkirk spirit goes a long way, we find.

**To take it further, we've also developed an IGNIFI Client Blueprint, which gives us a formula to tackle what happens outside of the day-to-day. In it, we profile different client types and how we can adapt what we offer and how we support them depending on what they need and how close an agency partnership they're looking for.**

Budget comes into that too of course, as very few projects need an army of people to make them a success. Our Blueprint keeps us honest (with ourselves), involving only those people who will add value to a piece of work. Conversely, we're prepared for a glitch, and our Blueprint incorporates disaster recovery plans to minimise any discomfort for our clients if the unexpected happens.



### When process hampers progress

A client partnered with an agency to build an app. The agency created a critical path at the start of the project and then 'booked in' its developers around it. The client fed back later than planned (sometimes unavoidable), all the timings shifted and the developer was sitting twiddling his thumbs. Although the developer couldn't do anything (as he hadn't received the client feedback) the agency charged the client for his time because those hours had been blocked out for the project. When the client was ready to progress, having missed their original slot they had to get to the end of the queue and wait their turn.

*Agencies wouldn't last long if they kept staff on standby to respond to clients' whims and fancies, but taking a binary approach isn't in the spirit of collaboration either. Drafting in a freelancer to get things moving or compromising on the cost of the developer's (dead) time are a couple of ways the agency could have turned this situation into a win-win and come away with some goodwill in the bank.*



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## Connection counts

**I'm sure we'd all agree that when it comes to client–agency relationships, trust, mutual respect, honesty and teamwork (as opposed to passing the buck or finger pointing) all feature in the ideal collaborative scenario.**

But with the challenges of the healthcare marketing environment (pressure on budgets, ratio of internal:external resource, increasingly nuanced value propositions to name but a few), is genuine client–agency solidarity achievable?

In reality, beneath the surface, the relationship between client and agency can be strained. As our introduction describes, brand owners can feel vulnerable to agencies' missteps; ultimately, no matter who's

responsible for a problem, the in-house marketer has to be accountable and can be left with a seriously dented reputation if things go wrong. Equally, agencies can sometimes feel like a sacrificial lamb, taking (more than a fair share of) criticism when a project doesn't land as expected.

That's when it comes down to those less tangible (but just as important) qualities that, when you're choosing a new agency (especially if you're doing it in partnership with your colleagues in procurement), may rank lower on your wish list: attitude and chemistry. Crucial to creating rapport and understanding, these factors will shape how well you and your agency team can overcome any obstacles that stand in the way of success.

### The world is not (always) enough



The biggest client in the agency was disappointed when their main (senior) contact went on maternity leave. They had a superb relationship, mutual respect and genuine rapport. Another Account Director (a high performer, attentive, much more efficient and methodical but more introverted than her bubbly predecessor) was put in charge of the account for a year. When the chemistry died, so did the client's loyalty, and within 12 months they were wooed by a competitor. ”

*Client Services Director,  
anonymous*

## Grit: our secret to longevity

An agency may have the practical skills to solve a problem, but having the empathy, will and gumption that makes them *want* to do it is another quality entirely. **We call this grit.** Even more so than skill and academic ability, grit is a major determiner of success, as this [TED talk](#) by a teacher-turned-academic explains.

**At IGNIFI we pride ourselves on our readiness to 'dig in' to get the best results for clients; a quality that's helped us maintain strong relationships with clients, some of which go back many years.** We traced this back to the attitude of our staff – the fact they have a very positive, can-do, no-nonsense approach. They're pragmatic and straight talking but at the same time upbeat and friendly, which marries well with the makeup of our clients.

Aside from making us more driven and robust (especially when we're up against it), we believe grit fuels creativity too. To be gritty is to be fearless, unafraid to explore possibilities and evolve – all traits of creative people striving to produce original ideas.

In our experience, grit is such a pre-requisite for fruitful relationships, it's now something we actively seek out when getting to know prospective clients and employees.

**In the world of agency–client compatibility, as in life, finding a good match is difficult enough. And it's only when you're hooked up that the hard work starts.**

Having said that, with the right attitude and a good dose of grit and commitment from both sides, investing time in the relationship can create the kind of results and job satisfaction (for both parties) that other marketers dream of.

### Grit: "A combination of perseverance and passion for long-term goals"<sup>3</sup>

You might associate grit with things like resilience and determination, but there's a lot more to it than meets the eye; it's actually a recognised psychological trait. Grit is about a whole mindset and approach centred on the fact that your character is as important as your intellect or skill.

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## Making progress

IGNIFI has represented health and active lifestyle brands for over 20 years and our experience bears out that the pressures on client-side marketers have never been greater. A wider choice of (often content-hungry) media, changing legislation (ABPI tightening the rules, not to mention GDPR) and a tougher commercial climate (where marketing budgets and internal marketing resource are hard

won) are just a few factors that make collaboration, quality and efficiency all the more important.

In the effort to deliver a greater return *in spite* of these pressures, having a constructive, lasting working relationship with the right agencies gives marketers a distinct advantage. If we're agreed that a positive agency-client relationship

is a win-win, it's worth both parties considering what they can do to give the relationship the greatest chance of success. If you see room for improvement in the service you get from your agency, as well as thinking about constructive feedback for *them*, it's important that you also consider anything *you* could do to help get things on a positive footing (see *Food For Thought*, below).



### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Optimising the agency relationship

Ask yourself...	Points to consider
<p><b>Did you brief your agency thoroughly?</b></p>	<p>Try to reframe how you think about time spent on the brief. The more care you take up front, the more likely the output will meet your expectations. Could you brief face-to-face or over Skype? And could your agency input into the brief? Even if it's just for bigger campaigns, collaborating with your agency to write the brief could deliver some great results. Worth a try?</p>
<p><b>Do you invite them to your brand planning meetings?</b> <i>You can only expect them to understand your brand if they're involved.</i></p>	<p>When you put meetings and events in <b>your</b> diary, get into the habit of thinking about whether it would be useful for your agency to attend, just as you would other members of your (internal) team.</p> <p>If you're concerned there's no room in your budget for their time, be honest, invite them as a learning experience and if they're invested in the relationship, they'll come anyway or reach a compromise.</p>
<p><b>Are your timelines reasonable? And did you deliver on your deadlines?</b></p>	<p>If key milestones have moved, the staff they had on standby for your project may not be available to jump back onto it immediately. When you suspect you won't meet a project milestone, warn your agency ahead of time. If they know the phase of a project is 'at risk' they may be able to build in a safety net or extra resource so it doesn't jeopardise the final deadline. If you're recruiting for a new agency, ask about this at the pitch stage – find out what processes they have in place to deal with the unexpected.</p>
<p><b>When things change and you receive new 'intel', do you let the agency know promptly?</b></p>	<p>Forwarding on information takes no time at all and may avoid the agency wasting hours and becoming disheartened if you have to change direction.</p>

continued...

Ask yourself...	Points to consider
<p>With creative work, do you review it thoroughly at the first round (copy stage) or glance over it quickly then wait until you have the artwork before reviewing it in-depth and making changes/involving other reviewers?</p>	<p>The more detailed feedback you give earlier on, the more straightforward (and quicker) the process. Plus, more time on the first proof is budget-friendly too – making changes to a Word document is so much quicker than getting a designer to make changes to artwork.</p> <p>When you're busy, it's easy to put off doing a 'proper check', but too much feedback received too late in the game might mean the agency can't deliver on time or budget.</p>
<p>Do you let your agency feed back honestly, or are you defensive when they point out mistakes at your end? ('Who's paying who?' approach.)</p>	<p>Appreciate how difficult it is for agencies to highlight issues caused by you or your team and hear them out. Their motive is to work together better after all. Be honest – could they have a point? If you can't/won't change what you do (next time), could you change how they feel about it to keep them engaged? Even just listening to their concerns may alter the relationship for the better.</p>
<p>Do you share statistics/intelligence about your brand/market?</p>	<p>Whether it's inviting them to a meeting or forwarding on a presentation they might find useful, being generous with information may pay dividends. The feeling of being part of your team will generate bags of goodwill that you'll be thankful for when you're next up against it.</p>
<p>Does the agency have your congress plan/key dates?</p>	<p>Knowing your movements is a huge help to your agency because they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- know when you're going to be busy</li> <li>- can build in longer lead times</li> <li>- understand why certain deadlines are in place and re-prioritise accordingly</li> <li>- can keep non-urgent matters off your desk</li> <li>- can reserve extra resource to help deliver time-bound work in time for events.</li> </ul>
<p>Did you give them a brand induction and explain the ways you work/processes at your company? <i>They should also do this in return.</i></p>	<p>Establishing the rules of engagement early on will keep friction to a minimum as you both know where you stand and the agency can mirror your company processes and culture to embed themselves within your team and oil the wheels of agency–client collaboration.</p>
<p>Were you clear on the agency's service parameters before they started the project? <i>e.g. how many sets of revisions quotes include, what happens if hours exceed the budget, is travel included in their costs or yours?</i></p>	<p>If this was covered in their proposal (verbal or written) or the T&amp;Cs you agreed to, reacquaint yourself with this. If you still agree, you can avoid any nasty surprises on your next project. If you disagree (teams can't always reach a consensus on creative work with only two sets of revisions), be honest and negotiate a bespoke service level agreement so you don't feel short changed in future.</p>

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## Changing the game

**No agency can claim to delight all of their clients all of the time, or to achieve the 'Iron Triangle' of creating work that's fast, good and cheap.**

As with everything, it's a matter of balance, and of aiming for an agency–client relationship that's fruitful, reciprocal, equitable and free from (major) errors.

We're proud of the relationships we have with our clients, and the fact that we've worked with a number of them for many years. The way we see it, the ideal agency partner is a genuine 'running mate' (see right) and that's what we aim for with every new client. We're happy to put the time into companies who invest in us and have found that a bit of grit, intertwined with thorough yet flexible process, plus some natural curiosity and talent, goes a long way to creating some [fantastic work](#) that makes us all feel good.

“

The right advertising partner is a genuine running mate. Find people who you like and respect, who you can partner with confidence in a high-functioning team. Then invest in that relationship with that most precious commodity: not your money but your time. Feed the advertising with winning propositions, yes, but feed the team also with a sense of mission and togetherness.<sup>2</sup>”

*Laurence Green, founding partner of marketing agency 101 (now MullenLowe London) and a founder of advertising agency Fallon*



### About the author

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A marketer of 15 years standing, Jan embarked on her career in healthcare after graduating in Natural Sciences, specialising in Medical Biochemistry.

Moving from publishing into medical education, she then progressed through the ranks of creative agencies such as CDM, Langland, DDB and PAN, before bringing her experience of diverse therapeutic areas to her role at IGNIFI.

If you're interested in hearing more about IGNIFI, and how we could be a **Game Changer** for you, please contact:

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