

Both big business and startups need a partner to communicate their plans, as well as brand values, to a cross section of stakeholders including customers. But selecting the right partner or agency is not an easy task; not as easy as it seems initially – it's not unlike a partnership of marriage.

The cost of a failed relationship is enormous in terms of lost time, learning curves and setting comfort zones.

Will you select a partner merely on the basis of looks (the creative aspects of presentation) or inner beauty (strategic thinking and approach)?

The issues faced by small and medium-size businesses and startups are far more complicated. Most large agencies are not interested in them for the simple reason that their respective billing tabs will not be sufficient to justify the high overheads of the firm.

So how does one go about choosing the right partner for communications?

One obvious starting point in the decision-making process is considering past reviews of the agency under appraisal. The plethora of reasons why some agencies are fired are seldom related to the reasons for which they were hired.

Qualities such as 'outstanding creative product' and 'solid marketing strategy' are generally at the top of any client's wish list when they're looking for the right partner. However, when it comes to terminating an agency, it's usually due to poor administrative practices, bad chemistry or a lack of responsiveness rather than because the agency has lost its creative spark or strategic edge.

The criteria for selecting a communications partner should

INGIMAGE®

“The primary focus should be on strategic issues”



ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS

Dr. Muneer Muhamed presents a checklist to select an advertising agency

be based primarily on its ability to conceptualise a tangible benefit to the target customers. Here are a few simple rules that you can follow when you're in the process of deciding on a communications partner.

CREATIVE SKILLS Don't ask for 'speculative creative.' I would call this 'drive-by creative' because typically, it has a panoply of snappy headlines and quick visual puns – but the messages are poorly aimed and only skin-deep. Rarely is speculative creative used after a new agency is appointed and in most cases, it doesn't really enter into the decision-making process.

When I was on the other side of the fence working for an agency, my boss used to tell the creative group working on a new pitch: "Don't do ads to sell the product; do ads that will get us the business instead."

That's a pretty honest admission from the top gun. Many agencies these days don't do speculative ads themselves. Freelance talent is hired to do the work because unless the agency lost a big account recently, it probably doesn't have a lot of benched people. **SELECT WISELY** Take your time over the selection. You need to

allow a time range of 10-12 weeks for the selection process in order to do it right. Most companies have rushed this vital process and as a result, made several costly blunders.

When I consult for a company on choosing a good partner for them, I spend about a fortnight interviewing client top managers to assess their needs. Then I spend another week or so developing a preliminary list of seven to 10 agencies that might fit the bill. Thereafter, I telephone the agency heads to assess their interest and also check for possible conflicts before narrowing the field to no more than three finalists.

I rarely include the incumbent agency. People feel some sort of perverse moral obligation to include the current agency but the chances of the same set of strategists being reappointed are slim. If they were doing poorly enough to provoke an agency review in the first instance, the kindest thing you can do is to redirect their energies towards finding business elsewhere.

There are exceptions to this – such as when you want the current agency to refocus on your business with more vigour. A review would normally scare any agency into getting its act

together. Another exception is for industry associations or government accounts that are required by law to conduct periodic agency reviews.

Then the incumbent should be included provided that the client is satisfied with its work. **CORE STRATEGIES** The primary focus should be on strategic issues. Brief the prospective agencies on a short list of key strategic issues the client and agency will need to face, and ask for a final presentation based on how those issues will be addressed. This changes the selection process from a subjective creative shootout to a business based discussion of core strategies.

The consultant should be present at these briefings to ensure that all finalists are treated equally. There are no silver bullets and you shouldn't bother searching for any. An extended discussion of strategic business solutions will show you how an agency thinks – and that is ultimately what you are buying.

A creative hot shop is chosen only for short durations and that too when you know your strategy well. The idea is to ensure business success rather than win awards for creativity.



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