

The following article appeared in HotelExecutive.com and was written by ISM President and CEO Gary Leopold

How to Be a Great Client to Your Ad Agency and Get More Than You Paid For

An old axiom in the advertising business is that “clients get the advertising that they deserve.” Having worked on the client and agency sides of the business, I’ve had the chance to observe the relationship from both perspectives and I’ve learned all too well that there is indeed a direct correlation between the quality of the relationship and the quality of the work.

To consistently get great work from your ad agency you need to understand how to be a great client. It’s not about giving in to your agency—rather it’s about giving them the direction, feedback and opportunities to become one of your hotels most valued partners.

In my agency I’m fortunate to work with two people—Melissa Rose my Chief Talent Officer and Bob Minihan my Executive Creative Director—both of whom have had long and distinguished careers in the advertising industry. We often sit down and discuss the client-agency dynamic and we’ve assembled a brief list of our collective wisdom to help you maximize your agency relationship and get more out of it than you ever imagined.

Start at the beginning. The most important ingredient for having a great relationship with your agency is to be certain that you’ve chosen the right agency to begin with. Their experience, style, knowledge, values, approach, skills, staff, commitment to your business and more should all be well suited to meeting your exact needs and fulfilling your expectations. All agencies are not created equal. Even if you follow the advice we prescribe and proclaim yourself to be a great client, there’s no guarantee that you’ll get inspiring work if you’re tethered to a less than talented agency.

Your agency is trying their best to help you—they are not the enemy. All agencies want to do a great job and, if you’ve chosen yours wisely, should have the ability to help positively impact your business. Every agency values their reputation and they know that the better they make their client look the better they look. You hired them for their expertise and talents, give them the opportunity to share their skills with you and prove themselves worthy of your trust.

You want your agency to learn your business. Take a moment to learn theirs. It’s reasonable for every client to expect their agency to pour themselves into your business and to learn as much as they can about your industry and your property. You expect them to be knowledgeable and insightful so they can become a more valued partner. So too, it would be valuable if you took some time as a client to understand the agency and its business. How do they make money? How is their business doing and what can you do to help it grow? What is the creative process and how long do certain projects take? A little bit of knowledge can help fuel a whole lot of understanding.

“Great work” is like “great sex”—it means a million different things to a million different people. Work with your agency up front to discuss and manage expectations. Most agencies will adapt aspects of their processes and approach so it wraps around your requirements and style. By establishing your needs, wants and desires in the beginning, you help create a picture of what success looks like and how it will feel when you get there.

Use examples of work you admire to establish common ground. Everyone wants new and creative ideas, but it can be a very useful exercise to share with your agency work that you encounter, regardless of category or type, work that you admire, and to discuss with your agency why it resonates with you. This simple discussion can often help your agency understand how you think and can tell them a lot about your sensibilities and approach to marketing and advertising.

Be clear in what you want. Don't be shy about expressing your desires. Your agency needs to understand your goals, objectives, ideas, concerns, fears, internal politics and scores of other thoughts and realities. You can't expect them to read your mind and channel your thoughts. Communication and candor are at the heart of every great agency relationship.

Be clear and firm about what you don't want—you won't hurt anyone's feelings. Every agency wants feedback and your constructive criticism should be part of a rich and ongoing dialogue. If you feel you need to baby your agency, then get another agency. You have a responsibility to be honest, but you also have a responsibility to articulate your comments in a clear and concise way that people can understand, learn and take action from. Remember, your agency can't fix your problem unless you tell them you have one.

When your agency disagrees with you, try to understand why. Great work comes from understanding not from ignorance. Debate is a natural part of the creative and strategic process and it can lead to things that neither agency nor client could have done on its own. This type of collaboration is the sign of a healthy dynamic where differing opinions become the basis for new understanding and exploration. When an agency pushes back, they're not always trying to be arrogant know-it-alls—consider that they might actually care about your business.

The less time you give your agency to do a project, the lower the odds of a great result. Agencies are often trying to manage multiple jobs and tasks, for you and other clients, all at the same time. Reasonable deadlines enable the agency to schedule your job for maximum efficiencies and it gives the agency the time to think creatively about your assignment. More time allows the agency to explore a wider range of concepts and possibilities, all of which should translate into better work for you. Of course, that doesn't mean that there won't be rush jobs, same day turnaround and other chaos to deal with. It just means that those things should be the exception, not the rule.

Time is money. Manage it wisely. Virtually every agency's compensation has been calculated based on hours. Unless you're paying your agency on a straight hourly basis, the more time it takes to complete work and manage your account the less profitable your account becomes. Be respectful of your agency's time, resources and profitability and they'll happily invest in the relationship and give you extra time in those instances where it's warranted.

A beer budget lowers the odds of a champagne result. Another old ad expression says, "You can have things great, fast and cheap, but you can only choose two." All things are interconnected and one thing impacts the other. The cost of marketing today is escalating—not only the cost of media, printing, postage, etc.—but the cost of human talent as well. You need to be reasonable in your expectations and you can't expect your agency to consistently pull rabbits from hats and deliver great results if you don't give them the resources for success.

Try not to be a bully. Sure, you'll always get what you want, but you won't get the agency's best thinking or their most talented staff. You probably never liked working with a micro-managing, in-your-face, controlling boss, so why do you think your agency is going to be excited by the prospect of working with this type of a client? No agency wants to risk burning out their top talent by assigning them to the most difficult clients. Constant brow beating will get you the work you want, but not necessarily the work you need. It's a scenario in which everybody loses.

Don't let the agency bully you. If it feels wrong, really wrong, remember you're the client. There's nothing wrong with standing up for your convictions—because ultimately the success or failure of something will impact your business and rest at your feet. Being strong and firm isn't viewed negatively by most good agencies. It's not just your right, it's your job and responsibility as a client.

Try not to have a pre-conceived notion of what the work should look like—it prejudices you from all the other good ideas you may not have thought of. Don't lose sight of the fact that agencies aren't focused on you, they're focused on your customers and what you might like isn't always what will work best in the marketplace. A good agency will bring concepts and ideas that they feel will be most successful and they should be able to defend why they did and didn't take certain approaches to solve the problem. Everyone always talks about thinking outside the box and getting outside their "comfort" zone. Give your agency a chance to practice these thoughts and surprise you. If all else fails, it's always easy to regroup and crawl back inside the box.

Get to know the people actually working on your account. Getting face time with all those who touch your business will pay dividends down the road. Try to get to know not just the account team, but the creatives. Account people are more creative than you think and creatives get the business part more than you know. No one wants to disappoint someone they know personally, and taking the time to reach out and express your interest in all layers of the organization is an important way to get people to care about your business and go above and beyond on your behalf. A note of appreciation, a discount for employees at your hotel or restaurant, a free night certificate—small gestures that can help you move mountains when you someday may need to.

Everybody wants to make a profit. Your agency is in business just like yours and they need to make a fair profit to remain viable. Helping them achieve a 10% to 20% profit is reasonable in the agency world, and don't be afraid to give them incentives tied directly to those aspects of your business that they contribute to. Share the wealth and give them a reason to invest even more time and energy into your business success.

No one likes to work for free, so pay your bills promptly. You can't expect agencies to look out for your best interest when you're not looking out for theirs. Agencies aren't banks and it's not fair to expect them to float cash for you to media, printers and others. A prompt-paying client is a valued commodity and it makes you an account people will fight to keep. Your timely payments enable your agency to hire and retain the best staff and to make investments to improve their organizations, just as you regularly do to maintain and improve your property.

At every agency, there are clients the agency will run through walls for. They are the ones who respect smart work, understand what it takes to do it, and respect the talents and experience of the people doing it.

And finally, when all else fails remember this import fact:

For every kick in the butt you give your agency, try also providing two thank yous—it works wonders.

About the author: Gary Leopold is the President and CEO of ISM, a Boston-based marketing and advertising firm that specializes in the travel and leisure industries. In addition to Emirates, Mr. Leopold and his firm works with Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, American Express, Barbados, Harley-Davidson, Red Lion Hotels, Massport and many others. He is the 2004 recipient of the HSMIA Albert E. Koehl Award for lifetime achievement in travel advertising and marketing. He can be reached at gleopold@ismboston.com.