



finding the

**perfect**

**match**

BUILDING  
AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS  
THAT LAST  
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According to a 2014 survey by the ANA and Millward Brown Vermeer, 58 percent of marketers report working with one to five agencies; a strong minority, 19 percent, use six to 10. With just over half of marketers believing the overall number of agencies they work with now will stay true for the next five years, it stands to reason that maintaining healthy marketing/agency relationships cannot be overstated. Regardless of the number of agencies a marketer uses, building lasting bonds that remain stable and mutually beneficial requires work.

### START WITH COMPATIBILITY

A good relationship should start by reviewing whether a possible agency is the right fit, advises Barbara Ford, principal at Ford Partners LLC and an instructor with the ANA School of Marketing. Rather than just look at an agency's output, marketers should also consider the way the agency works, its approach to developing ideas, and how that jibes with the marketing organization's culture.

Christine Whitehawk, external communications manager at Ikea North America, agrees with Ford's advice: "Ikea is a mission-driven company. We have a series of values that are really core to who we are and we ensure that everyone who works here understands and exhibits these values. We look for the same thing in our agency partners."

While expectations for partners differ from company to company, finding what works is important. Like Ikea, which looks for partners who share its core values to form a good cultural fit, Wells Fargo looks for collaborators. "Our company and culture are very collaborative in nature," says Michael Lacorazza, executive vice president and head of integrated marketing at Wells Fargo. "If an agency is comfortable operating in that sort of culture and that is a part of who they are, we tend to gravitate toward them because of the fit." He and his team go into the agency selection process expecting the relationship they establish to be long term, so they tend to look beyond the needs of the moment and make it a strategic decision for the business.

This same rule applies to agencies as well, according to Sarah Cunningham, senior managing director of client services and development, and Bobbi Merkel, managing director and senior vice president of convergence, both at retail marketing agency TPN. "We start with very basic tenets around trust, respect, and open communication," Cunningham says. In addition to defining what the parameters of the relationship are, they also define what success would look like ahead of time. But most important is the chemistry and realizing whether the client fits in with the agency culture. "We've walked away from situations that we felt weren't a good fit for the agency," Cunningham says. ➤➤➤



## DEVELOP TRUST

Sometimes, even with the right partner and the best intentions, things may not go as planned. According to Ford, having unrealistic or unclear expectations by both parties is a common challenge.

“It begins with open, honest communication and a genuine, shared spirit of wanting to be successful,” says Lacorazza, who oversees all agency relationships within Wells Fargo, including that with the lead creative agency, BBDO. “We’ve found that when we do that, it’s so much easier to navigate any sort of challenging situation because we’ve built the trust.”

According to Whitehawk, giving open and honest feedback may be a challenge, but it is important for both parties. “Sometimes it might be easier not to say something, but it isn’t going to make the relationship better,” she says. “It’s about working through the situation in a way that ensures both parties have a voice. It’s something you have to work up to.” She believes situations that aren’t working smoothly can always be traced back to some kind of miscommunication or withheld information. To counter this at Ikea, all those responsible for different disciplines meet as a team to ensure they’re talking. While everyone has their own areas of responsibility, Whitehawk explains, “we all work together to make sure a project is completed.”

Formally, they have a partnership agreement document outlining how Ikea employees and agency partners should work together. By accepting feedback from partners on what’s working and what’s not, Whitehawk and her team can ensure they fix problems as they arise.

According to Merkel, mutual respect is a vital component in a healthy relationship, as is being able to demonstrate that there are no ulterior motives — that the goals of the client and the agency are the same. “Nothing is ever perfect,” she adds. “But being open enough to talk

## feeling the LOVE

Maintaining agency relationships that stand the test of time requires the marketer and the agency to create mutually beneficial processes. To do this, Barbara Ford, principal at Ford Partners LLC, offers these four steps for marketers:

- 1 Ensure a healthy amount of respect and trust exists. Letting an agency know that trust is there gives the marketer permission to be candid with them.
- 2 Be clear about expectations and compensation. Agencies want to feel they are a trusted partner, which comes from honesty and transparency.
- 3 Be open with what’s not working, but acknowledge when things go well and celebrate those wins. A thank you can go a long way.
- 4 Be introspective. Great clients get great work, so consider whether you are doing everything you can to build a relationship that works for everybody. — U.O.

to each other and understand what’s not working and how we solve it is something we really try to do.”

## BUILD A LASTING BOND

Transparency is the basis of trust, says Ford, and it sets the stage for other things to come, including evaluations, performance metrics, and determining compensation. Although transparency is important from both parties, the impetus falls on marketers to take the lead and set expectations from the very beginning. “I think that marketers need to really lead the process, set clear expectations, and be clear about what they want and need and expect from an agency or multiple agencies,” Ford says. “They need to have some kind of process or approach lined out.” While this process doesn’t have to be excruciatingly detailed, it should set baseline expectations and provide clarity internally and externally on who the key players are.

At Wells Fargo, this leadership role is cemented in its processes. “We have a single leader who is responsible principally for each of the agency relationships on a day-to-day basis, and then we also have a quarterly process where we provide formal feedback in writing to each of the

agencies and the leaders that manage our agencies,” Lacorazza says. More important to solidifying the relationship is the way they actually interact with partners. “If either one of us sees some sort of issue, we quickly bring it up and discuss it in a very fact-based way,” he says. “It’s a collaborative problem-solving approach.”

Through it all, marketers need to strive to be great clients because, as Cunningham puts it, agencies are working in the best interest of the marketers. “What defines character is how you handle yourself in tough situations, which involves identifying the problem, being honest from the beginning, and then saying ‘here’s what we can do about it,’” she adds. “Clients respect that and it helps them know that you’re working on their behalf and you’re always going to be looking out for them.” As such, marketers should be open to giving and receiving honest feedback, being decisive and clear, and providing access to decision makers.

“Whatever the process is, agencies should feel they are working with marketers who care about what the agencies are doing, and that they’re getting good, honest, candid feedback,” Ford says. “At the end of the day, that’s what’s going to help save, remedy, or really make for a great relationship.” 