

# SELF-ANALYSIS HELPS COMMUNICATORS BETTER INTEGRATE AND MANAGE THEIR AGENCY PARTNERS

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Before digital marketing, word-of-mouth or corporate social responsibility, many organizations had only one or two agencies to manage. And even then it was hard for them to operate in unison. Like the media revolution, communicators today operate in a multi-channel world. It's not uncommon for a savvy communications leader to have a handful of specialist agencies.

Juniper Research claims that an integrated approach to communications can boost revenues four times more than a stand-alone program.

Are you integrated internally? Do you encourage integration with your business partners? A SCAN International survey of worldwide agency executives said that only 25 per cent of their clients are good at integration. That leaves three in four clients with room to improve.

To elevate your brand, well-developed processes can get your agencies working together. Remove agency and internal silos so you can optimize your budget.

Looking beyond integration, for client-agency relationships to succeed, corporate communicators need to consider some self-examination and be accountable to the partnership.

As a former agency leader and corporate client that managed many PR agencies, I co-founded AgencyLink to help clients improve client-agency performance. Historically, finger-pointing was all too often focused on an agency alone, but more clients now want to do a better job at managing their agencies.

What do agencies want, first and foremost? Clear direction from their clients. An agency can never be successful if the client doesn't know what they want. Responsiveness and approvals also top the chart of importance. Deadlines are a two-way street and clients need to respect deadlines if they expect agencies to deliver on time.

Also, agencies want their clients to be time-sensitive with requests. Don't regularly call an agency at 4:00 p.m. on a Friday and expect them to have a campaign outline to you by 9:00 a.m. on Monday!

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They'll deliver heroic acts once in a while, but if that is a normal mode of operation, it isn't a respectful relationship.

**Agencies are equally accountable for maximizing performance and nurturing a relationship. In a study by Reardon Smith Whittaker, the primary reasons that marketers change agencies are:**

- bad creative
- weak strategic thinking
- lack of proactivity or account focus

All of these reasons can be managed by the agency. To strengthen client relationships, avoid account team turnover, prepare thorough and regular contact reports, provide detailed billings and don't be an order-taker. Corporate communicators often recruit agencies for a different perspective and experts who will challenge their status quo.

Before engaging in a new assignment, form a consensus on the expectations and objectives. Articulate the scope of work to ensure a full understanding of the requirements, including budget, timing, skill and service needs, geography and other key insights to the project.

Agency account teams should put everything in writing so they don't encounter any misunderstandings, especially if it means that the client ends up paying for something they wanted to keep in-house.

Clients need to clearly define the approval process so that nothing goes to print or over the wire without going through the proper channels. If your company has a process in place, also identify back-up contacts who can approve materials in case of an emergency.

Agency reviews should be done periodically and could be led by either the agency, the client, or a credible third-party for total objectivity. Do a 360 together every quarter to ensure that you are on track and achieving value and creative ideas. Reviews conducted only on an annual basis can lead to an

agency search and you don't want to undergo that year to year; agency churn costs money and time. Studies suggest that at least 200 hours of dedicated time is needed for a thorough search, as well as industry knowledge, resources and much more.

Reviews offer both sides of the table an opportunity to improve, deliver ROI and work through any bumps encountered along the way. Direct and open communications is encouraged daily. You don't need to wait until reviews to uncover concerns.

Relationship-building is more important than ever. Clients need to ensure that their business partners are in a position to fire on all cylinders to provide the best value.

Like any relationship in life, communications is often the difference between success and failure. 🖋️

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