

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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DREADING THE CREATIVE REVIEW MEETING?

While client marketers may not admit it, many dread the creative review meeting. It's typically a highly charged session filled with tension on both sides of the table, client side and agency side. It's not the good kind of tension that exists when someone is straining to break the bonds of the familiar to create something new, or solve a knotty problem. Instead, it's the kind of tension one feels when facing something unpleasant, something that one does not expect to turn out well.

Why is it that creative review meetings are so tense? Why do we dread them so? Here are some of the reasons:

- **Excess baggage** – Often time clients have a negative perception of their agency, and vice versa. Each side feels that the other doesn't get it. Get what? The client doesn't believe the agency understands what needs to be communicated. Nor does the client believe the agency has the requisite talent to do great work. The agency feels the client doesn't understand advertising, appreciate ideas, or respect their unique talents. These feelings are exacerbated by long, drawn out copy development processes that have, in the past, yielded poor results, and/or left each side feeling victimized in some way. When one demands much, but doesn't expect to receive it, then one becomes embittered and personalizes the relationship in a negative way. These feelings become palpable and undermine a meeting of the minds, and hearts. Behind the smiles at the meeting are negative thoughts, and feelings of apprehension. Both the client and the agency feel stress.
- **Unclear direction** – The purpose of the Creative Brief is to provide the agency with the essential information to develop the creative product. It's about providing sound, strategically appropriate, single-minded direction. But clear direction is the exception versus the norm. More than 90% of the Creative Briefs that we review are neither strategically appropriate (as in providing a "legitimate" and "productive" customer insight, or a relevant, meaningfully differentiated benefit, or a strategically appropriate communication behavior objective, and so on, ad nauseum), or single-minded. When one reviews the needs and benefits it is not unusual to find three, four or more benefits. If not there, look further down the brief to the reason-why section where more benefit promises are stashed. What's the agency to communicate? We can't communicate everything, at least not successfully. What is the client hoping to communicate in the advertising? We know we cannot communicate everything yet each step up the management ladder adds more benefits. It creates so much uncertainty about what is really important, what is really meaningful. Uncertainty contributes to tension.

- ***Time constraints*** – We needed it yesterday. Why’s that? Clients tend to start the communication development work late. It’s that simple. It’s like we did not know we had the launch meeting coming, or we didn’t know that the start of our campaign is September 1. Not only is the process started late, but also the Creative Brief development period takes longer, much longer than anticipated leaving less time than needed for creative development. Now when the launch date is fixed both client and agency become emotionally invested, and frenzied, in meeting that date. If we don’t meet the scheduled launch date, the date management and the organization expects, then we do not look very good. In fact, we don’t look good at all. So the agency sells hard, pressuring the client. And the client becomes impatient with what it believes are needed revisions to the proposed advertising, growing increasingly shrill in its demands. In the end both parties settle for a creative product that is less than what each feels is needed. Tally another mark in the excess baggage category!
- ***Concern about appearances*** – We all want to look good in the eyes of our senior managers. If we don’t look good to them, then we don’t get promoted. So some clients become more concerned with what management will think about the proposed creative product rather than what the customer thinks. On the other hand, the agency may be more concerned with how the customer will receive the advertising. This puts client and agency at cross-purpose, which undoubtedly results in tension. Also, everyone junior to the senior client manager will feel guarded, and apprehensive, about commenting on agency submissions when the senior manager is present at the creative review meeting. Once again, everyone wants to make a good impression so s/he is likely to be very anxious, and cautious. Also, the focus is on what is wrong with the creative submissions, and the ensuing client comments hammer this home, stoking the fire of resentment among the agency team for the client.
- ***Evaluating versus coaching*** – What do we clients we are going to do at the creative review meeting? We say we are going to “evaluate” the agency’s work. “Evaluate” is such a nasty word when it comes to interpersonal relationships. It suggests that one is going about “identifying what’s wrong,” finding blame. To make matters worse, psychologists inform us that we live in a subjective world. If we are looking for something wrong then that is what we are certain to find. When we tell others what they have done wrong they become defensive, it’s only natural. This gives the client the impression that agency personnel are not listening, ratcheting-up feelings of resentment contributing to an adversarial relationship. The agency feels as though the client is talking down to them, or criticizing them, or dumping on their work, which, in turn, leads them to be adversarial too. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to be productive when we have an adversarial relationship. Coaching is not the same as evaluating. Coaching is about add-valuating. It is concerned with identifying needed direction to make the work productive. It is about what the client needs to see as opposed to what the client doesn’t like or finds to be incorrect.
- ***Poor skills*** – Managing the creative development process takes skill. Unfortunately far too many clients lack the requisite skills. Ad assessment and development is not about

showing up for a meeting and spouting our opinions. There's a lot involved in creating effective, no less leadership, advertising. Moreover, everyone can have an opinion. It's not about opinions. It's about sound judgment based upon proven principles, best practices and quality processes. And, we need to offer our judgment in a productive way (see previous point on coaching). They don't teach this in B-school and we are not going to pick-up what we need in our organizations unless we happen to work in a learning organization (which there are few), and/or we are obsessed with pursuing self-development in these areas (which few have the inclination or time to do). Lacking the skills, our efforts will be at best clumsy or, at worse, destructive. This can make anyone shudder at the thought of participating in, or the anticipated outcome from, a creative review meeting.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

But we don't have to dread the creative review meeting. Here are some thoughts regarding what we can do to make it a welcome, and rewarding, experience.

- 1) ***Get to know your agency personnel*** – It seems that the only time we talk with our agency personnel is when we need them. Clients tend to treat them as hired hands rather than as valuable team members. We only know them from our business dealings. It is important to really get to know these folks on a human level. We need to get to know who they are as people, their experiences, dreams, frustrations, lives away from work. Get social with agency team members to really know each of them (including the creative personnel), and help them get to know you too. Visit with them. Share a brew (Starbuck's or other) with them. Break bread with them. Let down your guard and invite them to let down theirs. Don't expect a kiss on your first date. This is not something to check-off your to-do list. It's a process of cultivating a relationship built on trust, and that takes work and time.
- 2) ***Collaborate on the development of the Creative Brief*** – Best practice is for the client and agency to develop this together. We repeat, best practice is for the client and agency to develop this together. Why repeat ourselves? Despite understanding this, clients will still take what they believe is the faster, easier route and provide the agency with the brief. Oh sure, clients will say that they're doing the first draft for the agency to review and provide comments. But this practice only invites a NIS (Not Invented Here) response. At the very least, it leads to misunderstandings. The agency typically does not spend a lot of time pushing the client for revisions. No, they will fix what they believe is wrong when they translate the client's brief into the agency's Creative Brief. Now we have dueling briefs, which adds to the confusion and makes it more difficult to get effective creative work. Working out the CB together will put the tension where it belongs, on problem solving.
- 3) ***Develop a realistic timetable and stick to it*** – What's realistic? Check with the agency. Let them start with the launch date and work backwards. Once you have the timing down, stick to it! Clients tend to expand the time for strategy development, which shrinks the time for creative development. As one Creative Director told us, "We need the time to

make mistakes and learn from them.” Don’t skimp on the time for creative development. It will make everyone feel less anxious and uptight.

- 4) ***Focus on the customer*** – Aha, this assumes we know, really know our customers. It also assumes that we know, really know what behavior we want to stimulate. Big assumptions! Let’s not assume. Do the requisite research to get to the heart of this matter. Know your customer so well that you can predict how s/he will respond to a piece of stimulus and only feed that customer the stimulus that will trigger the needed behaviors to achieve our business objectives. Then, and only then, can we appreciate whether the creative product is going to be productive. Review and assess the work, and coach the agency, with the customer uppermost in mind. If it is effective in stimulating the desired behaviors then management should be pleased, very pleased.
- 5) ***Coach, don’t evaluate*** – As mentioned earlier, coaching is about add-valuing. Coaching is assisting the agency to reach a place with the creative product that they otherwise could not have reached on their own. We need to provide direction, not be prescriptive, to what we believe will make the work more productive. Don’t talk about what you don’t like. Instead, identify what you would need to see to make the creative product more effective.
- 6) ***Enhance your skill set, and your organization’s*** – Hey, c’mon, this is not just about knowing what to do intellectually, but being able to do it. The fact the matter is that far too many marketers neither know what to do, nor how to do it. And, it’s unlikely one is going to learn this from your organization. Virtually all organizations have dysfunctional processes, and absentee leadership. Sure, everyone talks about the importance of the communications but try to get senior management to participate in the development of the Creative Brief, or approving it, or clear their calendars for the creative review meeting. It’s clear that it is neither a top priority. It is also clear that the process is more ad hoc rather than disciplined to best practices, proven principles and quality processes. If you believe it is appropriate, participate in one of our training programs, such as the High Impact Ad College and you are viewing this document from our website as opposed to a pdf or other copy, [please click here](#). We can customize one for your organization. If you are interested please reply to this DISPATCHES, or give us a call at 800 255-9831.
- 7) ***Enjoy don’t stress*** – A very senior manager told us that he looked forward to creative review meetings. He said that with all the talent present, something good had to come out of it. Also, he felt there was great theatre in the creative presentation, something to enjoy as opposed to stress over. We would be wise to take his counsel. Sit through the first presentation of material and take it in, enjoy it. Save your judgment for the second presentation of the material at the session. And, again, coach, don’t evaluate.

There’s no need to dread the creative review meeting. You can choose to make it an enjoyable and productive experience.

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