

PRESS RELEASE

Wednesday, 01 June 2005

THE ADVERTISING PITCH IS A FLAWED & OUTDATED PROCESS

The debate as to whether the advertising pitch has any merit, continues to rage. Adding his voice to those opposed to the pitch, is director and founder of Objectivity - South Africa's only specialist perception measurement firm – Clive Webster.

Says Webster: "In my experience as first an advertiser, then a marketer and for the past 22 years in perception measurement, I have found that selecting an advertising agency through the pitch process is an exercise in waste and futility. It is entirely possible to choose an ad agency that is exactly suited to delivering upon an advertiser's advertising requirements, without the word 'pitch' ever entering the equation."

According to Webster, once advertisers have filtered the available agencies through the five common must-have criteria, they will arrive at a shortlist that excludes those that are patently not suited for the task. Advertisers can do this by answering these questions:

- 1) Must the agency have an international affiliation/connection?
If the answer is yes and the advertiser is a South African company, there are just 15 agencies to choose from.
- 2) How big is the advertiser's advertising budget?
If it is not very large, the advertiser is unlikely to get the attention they need from a large agency. Better a big fish in a small pond. Thus, unsuitable agencies can be further eliminated according to their size versus the size of the advertiser's budget.
- 3) Where must the agency be located?
This is a no-brainer. Agencies that aren't located where the advertiser needs them are automatically eliminated.
- 4) Conflicts of interest?
A simple question - do the agencies service conflicting business or not? Those that do are bumped off the list.
- 5) BEE?
An easy to answer question - an agency is either empowered or it isn't.

Webster continues: "Having thus exhausted their must-have criteria, advertisers should proceed with the shortlisting process by rating the remaining agencies according to the top five agency performance criteria (of 2004). These are the top five performance requirements of ad agencies, as rated by advertisers and drawn from Objectivity's annual Ad Agency Performance Profiles."

According to Objectivity's 2004 Ad Agency Performance Profiles the top five criteria are:

- 1) Professional/Reliable – right first time, on time
- 2) Creativity
- 3) Client Understanding

- 4) Strategy/Planning
- 5) Effectiveness

“The only way to judge performance across these criteria,” says Webster “is to speak to the people who use the agencies; those who have experienced their service – their clients. It is reference checking, as you would when employing staff.

“Think about it, how can you accurately judge performance across any set of performance criteria through the pitch process? The only thing you are assessing using the pitch methodology is their skills in presentation!”

Speaking of which, anyone who has ever been involved on the agency-side of a pitch, will know the scenario all too well. Agencies are asked to pitch, and weigh the merits and costs thereof before accepting or declining the invitation. Having accepted, agencies have some tough calls to make. Do they pull their best people off current work for paying clients, or do they use freelancers (people who will never again work on the business if it is secured)? Should they bring in big names from overseas to impress the advertiser?

So is the pitch process valid? “Yes,” says Webster “in entertainment value. Not in selecting the best agency for an advertiser’s purposes. That is, if the advertiser is concerned with effective communication that: creates or increases awareness of their brand; creates or shifts the right perceptions that will grow their brand, and/or; generates physical responses for their brand.”

He concludes: “Unless the advertiser is unethical and uses the process to gather the best new ideas for its existing agency to implement, there is no justification for a pitch process. Fortunately a growing number of advertisers are tiring of this ineffective, flawed and outdated process. This has become evident from the fact that we are increasingly being approached by advertisers who want an objective approach to shortlisting the agencies best suited to meet their advertising needs.”

Shortlisting ad agencies is one of the services offered by Objectivity. The company filters its database of 125 South African ad agencies through the advertiser’s five must-have criteria, before filtering the shortlisted agencies through the most recent top five performance criteria, to arrive at a shortlist of up to five agencies. Thereafter, choosing an agency becomes somewhat more subjective, as the advertiser must meet with each of the shortlisted agencies to determine with whom they have the best ‘chemistry’.

Has the death knell sounded for the pitch? Probably not, but the tide is slowly turning and that is at least heartening for the new breed of marketers and ad agencies alike.

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