How to improve your agency’s strike rate

IN HIS PREVIOUS ARTICLE, COLIN WILSON-BROWN LOOKED AT PITCHING FROM THE CLIENT’S PERSPECTIVE. TO PLAY FAIR, HE NOW TAKES THE AGENCY’S PERSPECTIVE.

Most good agencies have experienced purple patches of new business success – frequently followed by a string of failures – and then, hopefully, another run of success. This says to me that most agency leaders know what it takes to win business, but it’s not always easy to put it into practice.

You may find nothing new here, but the following should be useful reminders from someone who regularly sees agencies getting it right – and getting it wrong.

Clients are more comfortable giving the business to someone they know. So, when a client with whom you have had a successful relationship moves to a new company, stay in touch. Make sure that prospective clients know who you are and what your agency stands for, long before the account comes up for review. You need to strike a careful balance here between staying on the radar and not becoming a pain in the neck.

Relevant experience is a major asset. Clients like to work with people who understand the task and who have a proven track record of success, either in the same category or with a similar problem. They are after genuine insights and experience. Don’t confuse this with providing a long list of clients that people in the agency have worked on during the past 20 years – this can be a source of irritation rather than enlightenment.

Credentials documents should be concise and focused on answering the brief. Remember that these are usually being speed-read alongside several others (sorry guys, but that’s the way it is.) Avoid rambling narrative in eight-point type in a tasteful shade of grey. This is a sales document, and every page should have a relevant selling proposition. If you provide a CD or DVD of your work, make sure it’s easy to navigate on basic equipment. Most clients don’t have techno-kit like yours.

A formal RFI (Request for Information) or RFP (Request for Proposal) is akin to sitting an exam and greeted by most agencies with similar enthusiasm. But they are a fact of life. There is likely to be a formal scoring process, so make sure you have answered each point in the same order in which it has been asked. A different order may make more sense to you, but it makes it harder for the assessors. If procurement or “strategic sourcing” people are involved, they will be looking for value (not necessarily the lowest price).

Chemistry wins pitches. Jeff Goodby, co-chairman of Goodby Silverstein & Partners wrote: “Most agencies go into a pitch and think what will win the day is coming up with a great idea. What it’s really about is whether they like you as people and want to hang around with you. Even if you don’t have such a powerful idea on the day of the pitch, if you can convince them you have the ability to come up with it, they’ll hire you.”

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>
> **Luke Sullivan**

As I’ve said earlier, building chemistry ideally starts before the review, although it is critical to also build it during the review. You want to be the agency that the client hopes is going to win on pitch day.

Make sure you know who will be the decision-makers. Spend as much time with them as possible, but don’t waste their time. Understand what the problem is, what turns them on, what turns them off. Grab the chance of a workshop if it’s offered, and expose them to as much of your thinking as possible. It’s better to make them feel a part of the solution, than to aim for the grand reveal on pitch day – only to be greeted by stony silence.

Show enthusiasm. Clients want to work with people who are passionate about the business. Don’t be afraid to show it. It may be a dull product, but surely the challenge is interesting? Generally speaking, cool is not cool.

Agencies frequently stuff up their presentation. There is a raft of ways in which this happens:

Don’t take too many people to the presentation – I suggest no more than five, because it is impossible to build chemistry with any more.

Don’t take people who are weak or unproven in presentations – they can lose it for the whole team.

Visual aids are meant to be just that – visual aids. Do not rely on PowerPoint to make the presentation.

Don’t rely on the “big guns” for pitch day. Most clients want the team who pitches to be the team they will work with. Think about the client team and choose the people who you think they will want to work with. They will not always be the most senior.

Get your ideas up early in the presentation. What you think is building suspense may be putting them to sleep. Strategy seldom wins pitches so don’t waste time telling them what they already know – or worse still, what they have already told you.

Have a clear point of view. Don’t hedge your bets. Stand for something.

Present practical, affordable, thought-through solutions. Don’t present ideas that you don’t know to implement.

Beware of gimmicks unless they dramatise your point of view.

Try and keep the mood relaxed. Treat the pitch as you would a presentation with one of your existing clients. “Fireside” usually beats “ringside”.

Less can be more. Don’t try and squeeze too much in. The client won’t take it in if you rush and lose composure.

Don’t rely on “it’s all in the book”. The game is usually over before they read the book – if indeed they ever do. Luke Sullivan, author of *Hey, Whipple, Squeeze This* gives some examples of what not to do in a pitch: “Don’t be slick. Clients hate slick. Don’t present your campaign as ‘risk-taking’ work. Clients hate that. Don’t assure clients that ‘you’re going to love this’. They won’t.”

Lastly, if you don’t agree with the brief, don’t pitch. Present work that you believe in. Give them a long-term vision for the brand. There’s no point in showing how the current campaign could have been done better – and a decent brief shouldn’t ask for this.

Good luck. ★

Colin Wilson-Brown is principal of The Clinic, a consultancy which advises advertisers on agency relationships, reviews and remuneration.