



Creative pitching: Is there a better way?

Of course creative agencies should never have agreed to offer up free ideas to win new clients. But, judging from 'Mad Men' it has been going on for a long time.

I agree with most agencies that it is not *always* the best way of choosing a new agency. Note the qualification there.

Many clients find creative pitching the easiest way to compare agencies:-

- It is not overly time consuming for the client;
- It enables them to see all of the agency's capabilities;
- They find it easier to judge creative work in response to a brief for their business (rather than case studies for other clients);
- It's more exciting than assessing capabilities, personal chemistry, or even strategic insights;
- It's nearly always free and agencies never refuse – so why wouldn't you?

In some reviews, the creative pitch is the only way: Government for example. Or when a client is only a short skip away from a launch – and they need a market-ready campaign. In both situations, the client is buying the campaign and the relationship is secondary.

In most reviews, I remind my clients that they should be choosing an agency for the long haul - and not one campaign. I point out that agencies don't always present the 'right' work, and particularly not at arms length, as in a pitch, when the agency is not able to work closely with the client. Agencies usually do their best work for existing clients. This strikes a chord with many clients.



I think that most pitches could be confined to credentials and chemistry. I think this would reduce the time and money agencies spend on pitching (which is surely to everyone's benefit) – and lead to more productive and enduring client/agency partnerships.

Here is the process that I use when I can convince my clients of the wisdom...

1. Develop an 'identikit' profile of the ideal agency;
2. Prepare a long list (6-10) of agencies that, in my opinion, best match the profile;
3. Invite the best six (as agreed with the client) to submit credentials in response to the selection criteria (which enables them to assess their chances of success);
4. Let the client meet with at least four (and possibly all six) to assess personal chemistry;
5. Invite 3 or 4 to respond to a 'workshop' brief. The brief will ask the agency to think about two or three challenges facing the client. These challenges will test different skills needed by the client. There are no right or wrong answers and the agency can handle the workshop in whatever way suits them best. Ideally they will involve the client but that is not imperative. I also ask the agency to present one case history that best demonstrates why we should hire them. I insist that as many of the team that would work on the business as possible, participate.
6. In parallel, I ask the agencies to respond in writing to a 'resources & remuneration' brief. While there may be room for negotiation, we don't want that to start after we have chosen the preferred agency.

This process works well for the client and for the agencies. It puts the decision-making focus on the agency's skills and people. It avoids these being hi-jacked by a solitary creative idea.



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