
How Agencies Reach Potential Clients

by **Bill Colbourne**

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Each year, we ask decision-makers at a group of 100 leading brands: "At pitch, what are the specific reasons for choosing one agency over another?"

In the latest results, "good chemistry" ranked as the leading factor once an agency is face-to-face pitching the potential client. So agencies should ensure that the team fielded to make the pitch has good relationship-building and interpersonal skills. Otherwise, no matter how logical the match seems based on service criteria, the pitch will fail.

Good chemistry was followed, based on number of times mentioned, by "strong creative" and the agency's having "an understanding of us."

Here's a complete list of the top 20 factors:

1. Good chemistry with us
2. Has strong creative
3. An understanding of us
4. Being on brief
5. Having sound strategy
6. Being innovative
7. Has a business case for return on investment
8. Challenging the brief
9. Having evaluation processes
10. Possesses rich insights from research
11. Strong commitment
12. An empathy with my brand
13. Ability to implement

14. Can stick to deadlines
15. Will "collaborate" with us
16. A high quality of work
17. Relevance to us
18. Can ad-lib creative thinking
19. Made good prep for the pitch
20. Has clear thinking
21. Has forward thinking
22. Offers us "big client" status
23. Will be pro-active
24. Will collaborate with my other agencies

The survey also asks the brand executives two other questions, which help determine how an agency gets to the pitching stage in the first place.

- What causes you to search for or be receptive to a new agency?
- When being approached by an agency, what manner of engagement works best?

Brand teams do have time to take initial agency approaches if they know the agency is not a waste of time. With so much noise now, an agency principal with the courage to pick up the phone and speak directly to prospects stands out from the crowd.

Clients appreciate when directors, rather than juniors, express interest in their business. Take advantage of this. While it may take several attempts over a few days to get through to someone, the reason is not because they don't like you; they're just very busy.

Once an agency gets the potential client on the phone, the dialogue should be progressive, intelligent, and feed some value rather than just "Hello, how's it going? Are you ready yet to let us be your agency or shall I call back next month?"

You'll need regular "silence breakers" as excuses to get back in touch. Hundreds of possibilities exist, including these:

- A relevant viewpoint piece
- A reflection on recent legislation
- Germane insight from recent research
- An observation about the company's being reported on in the news (but make sure it's accurate before you bring it up!)

Decision-makers want to be approached by agencies that have smart, well-thought, sector-savvy understanding of their particular organization and role. They note that unless an agency has something to say that's several levels more tailored and relevant than other agencies seeking their business, that agency is likely to fail.

If you're using printed collateral, keep it simple, clear, intelligent, and relevant. Expensive, coffee table-like material suggests poor cost controls, and clients don't want to just chuck money at their problems.

The same advice applies to direct marketing, which, when used on a continual basis, is the best way to actually trigger a brand into making a change rather than just waiting for a relationship between an incumbent and a client to break down. The direct marketing materials must be relevant, specifically tailored to the individual target, simple, and clear.

Whether using direct marketing or phone calling, agencies need to make sure their contact information is 100-percent accurate. Decision-makers find nothing worse for an agency's reputation as a communications expert than to get somebody's name wrong or send it to the wrong address.

Also make sure that your Web site is consistent with your other materials, but rely on the site as a means of pro-actively engaging with clients.

As a senior decision-maker remarked about agencies that approach her: "If they can't promote themselves, how could I expect them to promote me? And if they promote themselves poorly—then that's even worse."

That just about sums it up!

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