

One-night stands frustrate agencies

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OPINION



If you put together a shortlist of the greatest ads of the 20th century it's highly likely that two of Apple's efforts would feature prominently.

The company's "1984" ad showing a young female athlete running into the middle of a room filled with grey, unthinking men and smashing things with a giant hammer would surely be in there. And so would be Apple's "Think Different" campaign from 1997 in which a series of iconic creative thinkers, from Einstein to Picasso, are shown in monochrome to highlight the value of doing things differently.

Both ads came from the same agency, TBWA/Chiat/Day, and the same legendary adman, Lee Clow. It's easy to forget this now, but in the intervening decade between those two campaigns Apple fell on very hard times. Steve Jobs had been pushed out of the company he co-founded and Apple struggled as a result. When Jobs finally returned in 1997 he found a company that was, in his own words, "haemorrhaging" money.

One of Job's first decisions when he was back in charge was to hire a new ad agency. Given the quality and impact of Clow's work for the company in the past, it was no surprise TBWA/Chiat/Day got the call. Or that Clow, and his young creative director Rob Siltanen, immediately flew to Cupertino to meet Jobs and discuss the new work.

But when Jobs showed up that morning, in trademark black roll-top and flip-flops, things did not go as planned. Despite everything Clow and his agency had done for Apple, there was no salutation or warmth from Jobs. Not even a pat on the back.

Instead Jobs went straight to business. He explained he was reviewing a bunch of agencies in an attempt to weed out the ones that understood Apple and the challenge. Jobs explained that he had already met with several great agencies and he was asking each to pitch for the Apple business in a few weeks. He would also include Clow and his agency on that list if they wanted to try to win the business.

In the cab back to the airport young Siltanen was apoplectic at the way Jobs had handled them. He knew that Clow, who steadfastly opposed the huge amount of money and time that agencies spent pitching for new business, would turn Apple's invitation down. But Clow shook his head and said: "We will pitch." Siltanen was surprised and said so. Clow looked out of the taxi's window and just said: "I changed my mind. If we win this thing, we'll have a great story to tell. I want to get it back."

It's a legendary agency story because, of course, Clow did pitch for and then win the Apple account. His agency has held it ever since, producing some of the most powerful and iconic ads of all time. But it is also an important story because it illustrates the eternal imbalance between clients and agencies.

Every ad agency is a long-term lover looking for that ring that will seal the deal. They yearn for loyal, dedicated clients that commit to a long-term marriage of equals.

And every client, even those that handle their agency with respect, is always looking for new ideas and new partners with the impatience and disregard of a randy teenager.

In the past few weeks that contrast has been apparent. In the US, General Mills, one of the largest of the consumer goods manufacturers, hit the headlines with a new RFP (request for proposal) sent to several leading advertising

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agencies. The proposal asks agencies to pitch for an unknown amount of work with no clarity about how long the contract will be. The companies will be expected to pitch to General Mills but will not be compensated for the time and effort they invest.

Worse still, the company's proposal includes a 120-day payment period. An agency might send General Mills the finished ad in April and not see a dollar until August. According to *Advertising Age*, several agency executives who had received requests from General Mills reached out to others in the industry to express disbelief. One described the conditions as "insane".

And there is another facet of the General Mills requirements that has agency people shaking their heads. The client has also stipulated that, even though it will not be paying for the time and effort of the agency to come up with the pitch ideas, it will retain the intellectual property rights to them even if the agency is not recruited.

Clients usually have the impatience and disregard of a randy teenager

That's a particular sore spot because all too often an agency comes up with a clever new approach, the client rejects it, only for that concept to emerge as the company's new ad campaign a few months later executed by another agency or an in-house team.

That's exactly what happened in Britain this month when independent brewery company BrewDog launched its new alcohol-free beer — BrewDog AF. Within days of the launch its ex-agency, Manifest, made it clear that the idea, initial branding and overall approach had been its idea and had been proposed in an earlier pitch. BrewDog had rejected the idea and told the agency it was "going in a different direction", only to launch the campaign a few months later.

The dispute was resolved "amicably" last week but it once again demonstrates the danger of agencies being forced to give up their most precious resource: creative ideas, usually for free and often with little assurance of any reward even if their ideas are ultimately used.

And it also illustrates the eternal asymmetry between agencies and clients. As Darren Wooley, the managing director of TrinityP3, put it: "When an agency wins a new piece of business here in Australia the honeymoon period is a passionate one for both parties. But soon the agency is stretched thin because of the financial deal it accepted and the client grows restless for a new agency."

It's a recurring pattern in adland. The agency trying to please, wanting to be loved forever. The client looking for a one-night stand with no thought to what might happen the morning after.