

No matter how many call to 'ditch the pitch', they are not going away



By **Darren Woolley** | 16 May 2023

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From [Matt Baxter's call to Ditch the Pitch](#) four years ago, to the most recent by [Forrester](#), there is a long list of industry players calling for the end of pitching.

Those doing the shouting often propose a solution.

Some suggest that advertisers pay agencies to pitch – and some advertisers do, although many do not. And when they do, they offer pocket money, which is insulting compared to the hours of the work undertaken.

Others suggest that clients engage in paid projects with the agency – the fairy tale where the clients need to kiss a lot of frogs to find their match.

The real issue that many overlook is that pitching, like everything, is complex. A simple rallying cry to ditch the pitch is a flawed solution.

So, let's look at the facts and the flaws around pitching today, before offering three principles that could offer a basis for potential industry solutions.



The Facts

1. Pitching has become more complex
Many critics claim that the 'pitch' is unchanged from the Mad Men era of last century. As you will read further on, this is largely true. The common form of the pitch – the speculative creative and media pitch - is old school and doesn't meet the complex needs of most marketers today. The trouble is the 'pitch' is still used as a default in selecting every type of marketing supplier, in situation, for every type and size of project. And while there are plenty of alternatives available, if only people went looking, they don't.

2. Pitching is time consuming and demanding
Pitching eats the time of everyone involved. For marketers. For agencies. Particularly the incumbent who is also burdened with maintaining the day-to-day marketing requirements. It is disruptive to the business and to the other agencies on the client roster. So, when a marketer decides to take their business to tender, it is important that they consider the impact it will have on their schedule and the impact it will have on their marketing plans. It is never a decision to be taken lightly.

3. Pitching is too important to be another thing on the to-do list
Selecting a new agency is an important decision. The selection of a creative agency is placing the visible expression of a brand through paid advertising in the hands of a supplier and potentially putting at risk the market value of that brand. Media is just as financially important, with potentially millions of dollars in paid media at risk. Not to mention the impact on business results and marketer reputations if you get it wrong. These are important decisions, not to be treated lightly and certainly not to be relegated to just another item on the list of things to do.

The Flaws

1. Not all pitches are the same
The discussion on the pitch process appears to treat all pitches as if they are the same. But is a pitch for a \$50,000 project for a medium size brand the same as the 2021 pitch for the global Coca Cola account? Likewise, a pitch for a new agency to launch an exciting new brand is not the same as one of these end of contract pitches undertaken to test the well-performing incumbent against the market. Believe me, most are complaining about the wasted time and effort, not for the big win, but the increased number of time-wasting wins (and losses) that plague the pitch process.

2. Some type of competitive process is required.
While it is catchy to say, 'ditch the pitch', there is not a CFO alive that feels comfortable with the appointment of any supplier without some way to ensure a competitive outcome. This is usually a competitive process of some sort - a tender or pitch or a closed review. The commitment of any significant spend requires due diligence and suitable governance. Some will point to various appointments of agencies without this apparent process. But firstly, it is rare and secondly it comes with a significant assessment of risk before it is processed.

3. The real cost of the pitching is peoples' health
While many calling for the ditch the pitch point to the cost and waste, the real cost is in the mental and physical health of the agency staff involved. This is highlighted in the Pitch Positive Pledge, for which TrinityP3 is a foundation signatory. Yes, agencies have out of pocket expenses pitching, but there is also a huge amount of unpaid overtime expected of agency staff in participating in the pitch process. The irony is the paying of pitch fees would simply go to the agency bottom line to offset the hard costs without solving the time demands placed on agency staff.

Principles

So, three facts about pitching followed by three flaws about ditching the pitch. Now for the three suggested principles that would address the issues that ditching the pitch will not.

- The pitch process should match the size of the project or account.
If it is a small project-only appointment, then perhaps a process of meetings with three agencies and appointing one to the paid project is ideal. If it is a multi-billion-dollar contract over three or more years then a more detailed and rigorous process will be required. There are more than a dozen ways we have run pitches that fit into the continuum between these two points, none of which is a Mad Men style pitch.
- Pitching is ideal for selecting a new agency, but hopeless at testing the incumbent

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Stop using pitches to test the incumbent if the incumbent is doing a good job. The chance of an incumbent winning is around one in four, so it is highly likely you will end up with a new agency. Pitching is designed to select a new agency. It is not designed to assess the market competitiveness of the incumbent. In 2019 we developed the Commercial Review as an alternative, and already many clients thinking they had to pitch have reappointed their incumbent for another contract period with the blessing of finance, procurement and legal.

3. There are many ways to manage a pitch – and the most common way is not the best. Just because something is common practice, does not make it best practice. The tired, outdated, and traditional pitch process from the 1950s and 60s is still alive today because marketers don't know what they don't know when it comes to pitching. There are so many ways to manage a pitch or selection process to deliver the best outcomes for all involved. All you need to do is ask.

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