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Trust isn't earned in a pitch, rather it's a professional line of credit



By Darren Woolley | 11 March 2026

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All too often agencies parade how they "earn" the client's trust. TrinityP3's Darren Woolley argues this misunderstands the relationship and that the best way to think of it might be as a loan where the interest can accumulate quickly.

Last week, I spent time at a very informative B2B seminar that focused on the "the importance of trust in B2B marketing." A lavish affair, with a presentation filled with diagrams and research data and speakers discussing trust as if it were a tangible KPI on a scorecard. While the theory was sound, it felt a long way from the reality of the pitch rooms I've occupied over the last two decades running TrinityP3. In those rooms, trust isn't a tickbox, it's a much more fluid, commercial commodity.



There is a perennial debate in our industry about the exact moment trust enters the room. I've had fervent discussions with agency heads who insist they "earn" the client's trust through the sheer brilliance of their strategy and oozing authenticity during the pitch process. Conversely, I've met marketers who argue that trust is only "given" the moment the choice is made, simply because no sane professional would appoint an agency they didn't believe in.

After watching hundreds of these relationships begin, I've come to a somewhat different conclusion. Trust in the marketer-agency dynamic is neither fully earned nor freely given during the pitch process. Instead, it is a loan. Agencies would be smarter to think of it as a professional line of credit extended by the marketer to the agency, and the real work of the relationship is paying that loan back with a steady stream of reliability and transparency.

Consider the marketer's perspective for a moment. When a CMO appoints a new agency, they are taking a significant professional risk. They aren't just shifting a budget from column A to column B; they are tethering their internal reputation, potentially their career and the wider health of their brand to a group of people they have likely only known for a few months. This is a very real leap of faith, certainly, but it's a calculated one. They are "loaning" the agency their credibility within the business.

The agency starts the relationship not with a trophy, but with a balance to settle. The pitch process, for all its intensity, is really just the credit check. It's the phase where the agency proves they have the assets, the talent, and the ideas to justify the loan. But the actual "spending" of that trust only begins once the confetti from the win has been swept away and the mundane reality of onboarding starts.

This is where the "interest" begins to accrue. In those first few months, the marketer is looking for signs that their investment was sound. It's rarely the big, flashy creative ideas that settle the debt during onboarding. Rather, it's the small, functional things: does the agency actually listen during the briefing? Are the meeting reports accurate? Do they respect the budget constraints they agreed to during the tender? Each time an agency demonstrates competence in these foundational areas, they are making a repayment on that initial loan of trust.

However, the true test of this financial metaphor occurs when the first crisis arrives. In the advertising world, a crisis is not an anomaly; it is often a standard feature of the landscape. A campaign underperforms, a media buy goes awry, or perhaps the CEO decides they don't like the new "direction" after all. In these moments, many agencies mistakenly believe they should go into defensive mode to protect the trust they think they've "earned."

In reality, these are the moments when the agency needs to show their "liquidity." Earning trust during a crisis isn't about having all the answers or proving you weren't at fault. It's about being transparent enough to show the marketer exactly what happened and how it will be fixed. When an agency takes accountability, they aren't just solving a problem; they are paying back a massive chunk of that initial "trust loan" with interest.

I've had to mediate between marketers, who feel let down, and agencies, who feel they are being micromanaged. The friction usually stems from a misunderstanding of this trust dynamic. The agency feels that because they were appointed, they should be left to get on with it, that the loan should have no oversight. The marketer, meanwhile, feels the weight of the risk they've taken and is looking for the security of constant updates.

The most successful partnerships I've seen are the ones where the agency accepts that they are in a state of perpetual repayment, at least the first year, if not longer. They don't treat the appointment as a finish line. They recognise that the marketer has placed a significant "bet" on them, and they work diligently to ensure that the marketer never regrets the credit they extended.

Last week's seminar was right about one thing: trust is the most valuable currency in B2B relationships. But in our corner of the world, we have to remember that you don't start with

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full bank account. You start with a generous loan of faith, a high-stakes brand, and a marketer's reputation on the line. The goal isn't just to spend that trust, but to invest it so wisely that by the time the first contract renewal comes around, you're finally operating in the black.

Darren Woolley is speaking at [AdNews Live Adelaide](#) on March 24 at the National Wine Centre, Adelaide.

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