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OPINION: AGENCIES, BE UNIQUE – STOP USING THE WORD “UNIQUE!”



By B&T MAGAZINE



IN THIS OPINION PIECE, ELLIE ANGELL (PICTURED), TRINITYP3'S BUSINESS DIRECTOR, AFTER SEEING PRESENTATIONS, DECKS AND DOCUMENTS FROM AGENCIES ALL OVER THE WORLD, EXPLAINS WHY AGENCIES NEED TO STOP SAYING THEY'RE UNIQUE AND START SHOWING IT.

Unique

/ju:'ni:k/

ADVERTISING

adjective

- Being the only one of its kind; unlike anything else.
“This discovery was unique in history”

noun

- A unique person or thing



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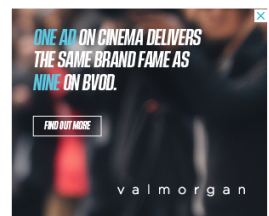
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- A unique person or thing.
“some of Lamb’s writings were so memorably beautiful as to be unique in their class”

In the course of my work, I manage and facilitate agency pitches of many sizes and shapes. I also work directly with agencies, helping them to shape their propositions and pitching credentials.

So I’ve seen a lot of presentations. I’ve seen a lot of decks. I’ve seen a lot of documents. And the one pet peeve I have, every time I see it or hear it, is any use of the word ‘unique’ to describe the agency.

You might not want to hear it, but I’m here to tell you: you aren’t. The single thing you possess that could be claimed as ‘unique’ is the blend of humans in your team, but of course, this can be claimed by any team, in any organisation, in the world. This means that as a sales proposition...no, it’s not unique.

In such a cut-throat market, with marketers confronted in a pitch by six agencies all claiming to be unicorns, I can understand the pressure to apply the U word. Really, I can. But truly unique differentiation, on a scale big enough to carry the weight of an agency proposition, just isn’t there for any agency; the market is too mature and to claim uniqueness generally comes off as fake, puffery, or a ‘bells and whistles’ stance that to most marketers will not cut through.

To illustrate, here are some of the repeated claims I’ve encountered over the years from media and creative agencies.

1. We have a unique positioning in market!
2. We have a unique village structure (with a unique single P&L)!
3. We have a unique agile operating process!
4. We have a unique approach to trading strategy that delivers the biggest discounts!
5. We have a unique level of experience!
6. We have a unique breadth of service offering!
7. We have a unique set of values! (which, amazingly, uniquely match your values!)
8. We have proprietary tools and technology with unique capabilities!
9. We have a unique insight into/understanding of your business/category!
10. We have a unique partnership with Google! (this one is my personal favourite).

Now look. I know many of you, if you’ve read this far, might be irritated at me. It’s bloody hard to sell in an agency. It’s bloody hard to pitch – God knows I’ve lost enough of them in my agency life. It’s bloody annoying when your carefully worded propositions and credentials get chewed up like this. It’s bloody annoying when you get told to be the stand-out agency, and in the same breath be told that ‘unique’ doesn’t work.

But honestly, via my experience of seeing hundreds of agency creds presentations (multiple pitches, six agencies per pitch, it all adds up) I’m trying to help. When I work with agencies on their propositions, often the feedback I get at the end of the project is along the lines of ‘God, we’ve been working in a bit of an echo chamber, haven’t we?’ And believe me, that can really translate in a pitch situation.

I often say to agencies that to stand out, particularly at a creds/chemistry stage of a pitch, you really want to be in one of two positions. Either first of six and loved; or last of six and completely rejected. Why? Because everything in the middle is often...well, a bit ‘meh’.

So what, you might ask, is the answer? Beyond the patently obvious (for example, I really don’t need to explain ‘sell the sizzle, not the steak’, or ‘show, don’t tell’) here are a few of the things I counsel agencies to work on when developing their creds and proposition.

1. **Make the proposition reachable and real.** It won’t be unique in terms of what it says or implies. But it shouldn’t be word-jargon gumbo, either. For it to have any resonance, your proposition needs to be believable and meaningful. It needs to be singular enough to live and breathe because being able to show how you live and breathe it can be very effective – in case studies and via testimonials; in how you talk about yourselves; in your use of language and repetition; in the power of your clearly motivated and aligned people in the room; in the way you demonstrate it in your answer to a pitch brief. A pitch is a journey from rhetoric (proposition, credentials) to substance (how the promises inherent in proposition and credentials come to life in a response to brief). Be the agency that’s able to take the client on that journey, for real.
2. **Be human.** Pull the ‘agency face-mask’ off, and be open as human beings with the potential clients. It’s much more powerful than sticking to a script full of jargon and large words.
3. **Be assertive.** Not aggressive or arrogant – but assertive. Walk the line. You are who you are as people and as an agency. You don’t have to beg for business or turn yourselves inside out in a chemistry meeting to try and ‘make it to the next stage’. If this ends up not being a good fit, don’t tap dance around it but stick to your guns. Yes, you may come 6th of 6 – but the clients will still find you more memorable than the ‘middle meh’s’, and who knows where they’ll be in a year’s time? Somewhere with a much better fit for you? It’s always possible. In addition to which, you’ve saved yourself a heap of work in a pitch that you probably won’t win, with a client you probably wouldn’t like working with anyway.

working with anyway.

4. **Put the client front and centre.** They'll nod and smile politely (well, most of them will); but they're only really going to be leaning forward when you're talking about them, or about their category. Forget the twee 'our values are just the same as yours!' stuff and pivot everything you're talking about around implications for them. What does your proposition mean in terms of the way you'll work together, the kind of things you've noticed about them, the kind of work you'd do together?
5. **Give the client some power.** Either set up a creds meeting with an element of choose your own adventure, or read the room and go off-piste with what, in your proposal or proposition, you can see they find most interesting. Ask them if they want to forget the charts for a minute and just talk something through. The role of the CEO as the 'hand on the rudder' can be extremely valuable here – not presenting the work, but observing the people and gently directing the flow where needed.

These simple techniques (and many more, but I only have so many words in this article) will all help you stand apart from the crowd, without resorting to the U word. And your pitches will be better for it. You may think some or all of them are obvious – but it's amazing how many agencies in pitches fail to truly practice them.

And – when you're developing, refining or rebuilding a proposition for agency, think about how much freer you'll be to express the real agency, without being boxed in by the worry of whether or not what you're defining is 'unique'.



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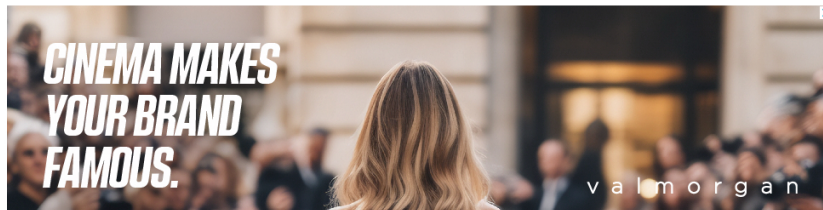
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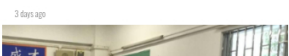
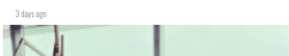
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