

TRENDING: CAMPAIGN SAVVY FEMALE FRONTIER AWARDS AGENCY OF THE YEAR AWARDS 40 OVER 40  
POWER OF PURPOSE AWARDS

# No, I can't list the 'best' agencies. Sincerely, a pitch consultant.

by Darren Woolley, founder and CEO, TrinityP3.  
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Why your tender process should be about looking for the right agency, not the best agency.



Yet again, I took a call from a client wanting to discuss running a tender for a new agency. During the conversation, they asked me which agencies I would recommend. Sounding a lot like a consultant, I replied—as always—that it depends.

Why does it depend? Why can I not just rattle off the names of half a dozen agencies off the top of my head? After all, as a pitch consultant, aren't I supposed to know the agencies?

I can, but it would not be right. You see, those agencies would be just that: top of mind. There are many reasons why they may be top of mind. But there will be many more reasons why they will not be right.

Let me explain.

When I started, at the end of the last century, there were several, let's say, more mature, pitch consultants, reputed to have a handful of agencies they would recommend. A bit like that old quote about IBM, they would never get fired suggesting these agencies. But those were simpler times, and having a handful of agencies was likely enough.

Today, with agency specialisation, the number of agencies available is exponentially larger. We have details on several thousand agencies of all different types, sizes and locations. The core responsibility as a consultant is to match the advertisers' needs to the agencies that provide the right fit.

But you may think that the right fit is the 'best' agency. The fact is some agencies are often considered the best—best based on new business wins, award wins, their last campaign or simply market spin—but that does not make them the right fit.

Let's just pick apart this idea of 'best'. It is often implicit in the question about recommending agencies. Sometimes it is 'Who are the hot agencies?' or 'Who are the top agencies?' Interestingly the answer to this changes quite regularly. The hot agency today—whether for winning awards, launching an outstanding campaign or landing a big account—will be tomorrow's afterthought. Such is the fickle nature of the industry.

Of course, there are a handful of agencies regularly in consideration because they have managed to maintain a longer-term and consistent profile. But part of the problem is when agencies run hot, they will pick up a lot of new business, expand rapidly and have issues recruiting the talent they need. And suddenly the shine on the agency is tarnished.

There is also the fact that these shining stars of the agency world also suffer from inflated expectations from clients; sometimes they expect some secret recipe or a magical ingredient, only to be disappointed, not by the agency per se, but by the impossible expectation the client brought to the relationship.

So, if it is not the 'best' agency, what is the 'right' agency? That is a complicated question. But

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by, it's not the best agency, that's the right agency? That's a complex question and basically, it comes down to four Cs: capabilities, chemistry, creativity and the commercial arrangements.

Having the capabilities needed to meet the advertiser's needs is table stakes. If the agency is not up to the task, there is no point even considering it. But even then, assessing capabilities is increasingly complex. Having the skill set and being able to apply it to a particular category or a specific problem can be very different considerations.

Next is chemistry. Vitally important. This process starts with matching company cultures and extends down to the chemistry between individuals on both sides. Contrary to some naysayers, chemistry doesn't require in-person meetings, being regularly assessed these days by videoconferencing.

Of course, creativity. But not creativity in which the agency comes up with the best idea. This is way too hit-and-miss. Instead, we are focused on the agency's strategic and creative thinking. And across all disciplines. Not surprisingly, the agency that wins all of the creative awards is not always the one that wins on creativity. It is about matching the definition of what is creative to get the right fit.

Finally, it is the commercial arrangements. We are not referring to just fees here, but the whole commercial structure, including workload, contracting and scope. The right agency for AOR (agency of record) can be very different from the one for an important project. An advertiser with a massive seasonal scope of work will require a different agency than a client whose marketing is always on.

So, when you ask which agency I would recommend, I hope you understand if I answer "It depends". Sure, I could just start listing agency names of the top of my head. It may include the last agency I met. Or the previous agency we had to terminate. It could be the one just written up in Campaign. Or the last one I saw pitch.

But what is going through my mind is that I would need to consider at least all of the 4Cs, in relation to your needs, before I can answer that question correctly. Assuming you want the right agency and not just the ones that are top of mind. Thank you for understanding.

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