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TRENDING: CAMPAIGN MEDIA AWARDS SCHOOL REPORTS 2020 PODCASTS & VIDEOS CORONAVIRUS

Darren Woolley | September 25, 2020

How long? | 2-3 minutes

How remote pitching is showing up the agency showmen

With the pandemic stalling the traditional pitch process and the rise of the remote or virtual pitch, what is known is showmanship is no longer winning the day.



The idea of the pitch being a bit of theatre or showmanship is as old as the advertising industry itself. Agencies get to present themselves in a beauty parade before the potential client. The one who makes the best impression wins. But the uncertain component was always what made the best impression.

With the global Covid pandemic stalling the traditional pitch process and the rise of the remote or virtual pitch, what is known is showmanship is no longer winning the day. Instead, communicating via videoconference from multiple locations is testing agencies and their clients. New winning criteria are coming to the fore, while old-school practices are often falling flat or left wanting.

The transition from the traditional face-to-face pitch presentation to taking these meetings online was met with the usual angst caused by any change. The traditionalists took to the trade media to bemoan the limitations of the technology and made claims that relationships could not be tested or formed by remote or virtual pitching.



"How do you build chemistry and rapport when you're not meeting face to face?" or "It's a lot harder—if not impossible—to read the room and gauge body language and levels of engagement" were the complaints of the day.

It is true that reading the room is more difficult. After all, it can now be many rooms. But it is completely possible to test chemistry and build rapport via videoconference meetings. Believe it not, you can also do this by phone and even in writing.

What has changed is that videoconferencing does not seem easily to lend itself to the theatrics or showmanship of the live presentation. Not without the extensive production planning it takes to mount a live television event. Even then, the limitations of the screen often reduce the impact significantly.

Showmanship, like the big reveal of the magician or having a celebrity musician perform the new jingle, is a lot less impressive than when performed live.

Instead, clients are finding a more authentic interaction is occurring. At least with those agencies that have it together. Replacing the showmanship are more meaningful interactions and discussions about the problem or opportunity at hand. The move from face-to-face to virtual has moved the event from a 'presentation' or 'show' to an 'interaction' or a 'meeting of minds'. The

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format means that rather than the one-way agency performance, with the client sitting stony-faced, there is opportunity for interaction to build rapport and test the chemistry. This also explains why rather than relying on 'reading the room', feedback is coming in words, actions and facial expressions.

My other observation is that the virtual or remote pitch is highlighting the benefit of the champion team over the team of champions. Testing the concept, it is better to put forward a team of champion players, rather than a team that won the championship. In the past, agencies were known for having a global or regional pitch team that could be assembled and dropped into any market to win the day. But the nature of the virtual pitch and the interactions across the videoconference platform mean it's a champion team that will win the day.



This was proven yet again during a recent holding-company pitch. One agency group placed all the top players across the various disciplines into the pitch. But it was clear at every meeting they were not working to the same playbook. Often contradicting or conflicting with each other. More nuanced was the fact it did just not feel like a team. And it stood out clearly in the 'Brady Bunch' matrix format of the screen. Especially when compared to the other holding company team, whose members were clearly not only all aligned in purpose but also—and more importantly—interacted like a real team.

Who knows what will happen post-pandemic, when and if a vaccine is found and the borders open to us? Will the industry go back to jetting around the world for face-to-face pitch presentations? Or will advertisers prefer this new way of working? It is not just more time- and resource-efficient. It has fundamentally changed not only the way we pitch, but also the way agencies are being assessed. Instead of showmanship, the focus is more on substance. Instead of having a team of agency pitch champions, the focus is more on fielding a champion team that will do the job.

Until then, it appears from any number of pitches that the showman needs to drop the act and start working on a more compelling and authentic way to engage the client team. And clients need to embrace the opportunity to engage the agencies in an interactive meeting of minds, rather than simply turning up to be entertained.

Darren Woolley is the founder and CEO of marketing consultancy TrinityP3.

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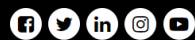
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