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Darren Woolley | Added 14 hours ago

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'Your company has a reputation for being an absolute nightmare'

Agencies avoid pitching to clients with poor reputations within the industry, often with polite lies about being 'too busy', writes Darren Woolley.



Illustration: Dennis Flad

There is an invisible ledger in our industry, a silent credit rating that has absolutely nothing to do with a company's share price, its quarterly earnings, or the size of its media budget. It is the corporate reputation an organisation holds within the creative and advertising agency community.

For a long time, corporate giants could operate under the assumption that bad behaviour behind closed doors carried no real consequence, secure in the belief that the promise of a massive fee would always make the telephone ring. But the dynamics of the market have shifted, and a fascinating, albeit painful, scenario recently came across my desk that perfectly illustrates how the corporate sins of an organisation's past can come back to haunt an entirely innocent present.

A brand-new marketing leadership team had just taken the reins at a well-known organisation. They were talented, highly ambitious, and eager to make an immediate impact. However, upon reviewing the inherited agencies on their current roster, they felt distinctly underwhelmed. The creative work was uninspired, the strategic energy was flat, and the relationship felt entirely transactional. Wanting to recreate the magic of the high-performing client-agency teams they had successfully enjoyed in their previous roles, they decided the best path forward was to go to market.

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They meticulously drew up a flawless wish list of the region's finest creative and strategic agencies – a precise mix of celebrated independents and formidable network powerhouses. They hit send on the invitations to pitch, fully expecting the industry's best talent to jump at the opportunity to work with them.

What this new team did not realise was that they had just stepped into a corporate haunted house. While they were fresh faces with entirely clean slates, the organisation itself possessed a deeply toxic, systemic reputation within the agency ecosystem.

Over several years, the previous company culture had become notorious for an absolute lack of strategic focus. The previous marketing regime had treated the creative process not as an expert discipline to be nurtured, but as something to be aggressively micromanaged down to the smallest detail. Agencies that had previously interacted with the brand recounted weary tales of endless revision loops, ignored consumer insights, and a soul-crushing environment that systematically drained agency morale and ultimately sabotaged the final output.

To make matters worse, the corporate procurement department had completely weaponised the engagement process. Driven by a strict internal mandate for short-term savings rather than long-term value, they had successfully transformed what should have been a strategic partnership into a hostile, transactional battleground. They insisted on crippling long payment terms, subjected external suppliers to relentless, heavy-handed performance audits, and treated agency staff like commoditised line items. The well had been thoroughly poisoned, and the agency ecosystem had collectively blacklisted the client.



When the new team's invitations to pitch landed in agency inboxes, the rejections were swift, polite, and uniform. The top half of their dream wish list simply declined to participate. The excuses offered were standard industry boilerplate: they were currently facing capacity constraints, they had a sudden conflict of interest, or, in a slightly more candid twist, it simply was not the right cultural fit for their business at this time.

Not a single agency was honest enough to tell the new leaders the unvarnished truth: your company has a reputation for being an absolute nightmare to work with, and no amount of revenue is worth the damage to our staff's mental health and our creative track record.

The new marketing team was left utterly bewildered, forced to select their next strategic partner from the bottom half of their original list – the tenth, eleventh, or twelfth choices who were simply desperate enough for the revenue to overlook the corporate red flags. It is a profound dilemma for modern marketing leaders. These new executives are paying a devastating tax for an organisational reputation they had absolutely no hand in building. They are trapped by a legacy of bad historical behaviour, unable to access the premium talent required to drive the very business growth senior management is now demanding of them.

This scenario exposes a major, systemic flaw in how our industry communicates. Agencies rarely feel they have the psychological safety to be completely honest with prospective clients. The advertising world is small, gossip travels fast, and no agency boss wants to risk being labelled as difficult, arrogant, or vindictive, especially when dealing with a massive corporate brand.

So instead, they smile, offer a polite lie about being too busy, and walk away, leaving a well-meaning marketing team entirely in the dark.

If we want to solve this dilemma, the way forward requires a radical shift from both sides. For new marketing leaders entering an organisation, the very first step must be a rigorous internal and external reputation audit. Before you even think about putting out a tender, you need to ask the uncomfortable questions about how your company has historically treated its suppliers. You must sit down with procurement and establish new, mutually beneficial rules of engagement, because you cannot build a first-class creative partnership on third-class payment terms and aggressive audits.

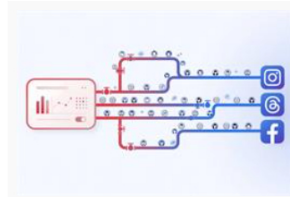
If the reputation is broken, you must openly acknowledge it to the market, signal a real change in culture, and perhaps use independent intermediaries to assure the agency world that the old ways are truly dead. For agencies, while total honesty is risky, finding a professional, constructive way to deliver feedback is vital. If we want the client-agency dynamic to evolve, we must stop hiding behind polite excuses and start talking about the invisible ledger before it bankrupts our ability to do great work.

Darren Woolley is founder and global chief executive of Trinity P3 Marketing Management Consultancy

A version of this article first appeared on [Campaign Asia](#)

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