

Thought Leaders

We Need To Talk More About Losing Pitches



ABEL
Advertising Agency
Sydney, Australia

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ABEL's strategy partner, Rachael Fraser, writes that a gruelling pitch loss against multinationals might be the best thing to ever happen to the indie



We are an industry obsessed with winning. Open any trade rag and you're met with a constant, curated stream of 'thrilled to announce' wins. But we rarely talk about what happens when we lose. Other than a dirty, tabloid-style exposé of the losers and a brief moment of industry schadenfreude, we never really go deeper.

This silence is killing our collective ambition. If we only ever treat the near miss as a source of shame, rather than intelligence, we'll never grow beyond the safety of our own local pond. It's time we stopped mourning the loss and started talking about the transformative power of a world-class defeat.

At ABEL, we recently came second in a global pitch. Not 'won a slice of the business', not 'retained a project-based relationship'. We lost. It was a gruelling, months-long process where we flew back and forth, ran research to hone local market nuance, and fought the kind of multinational giants that have more receptionists than we have employees. It hurt. Our standard industry response to such a loss is a toxic cocktail of Aperol, bitterness and self-pity, but the truth is, it was the best thing that ever happened to us.

We didn't lose because the system is rigged; we lost because on that specific day, for that specific problem, another room of people on the other side of the world was slightly more right than we were. And that's okay. Because the real opportunity cost of pitching isn't the late nights or lost sleep. It isn't even the money, though the ouch factor was enough to make any CFO weep. The real cost is the risk of never benchmarking yourself beyond your own postcode.

As one of the original indies in Australia and New Zealand, many of us have experienced rapid growth. According to recent TrinityP3 research, we're benefitting from the 'barbell effect', driving the mass polarisation of pitch wins between holding companies and independents.

At ABEL we're lucky enough to have an enviable roster of trans-Tasman partners, from Macquarie Bank and Red Bull NZ, to MilkRun and Cannabis Clinic. But in a nation riddled with tall poppy syndrome, we've come to realise that the best way to avoid the... (text cut off)

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It's easy to benchmark yourself based on where you've come from, versus where you're going.

We end up operating comfortably within a self-imposed ceiling and comparing ourselves to the agency three doors down in Surry Hills, rather than to the world beyond. Which is why it's no surprise that of the total pitches in Australia in 2025, only 1.4% were global.

But we're selling ourselves short.

We have become so accustomed to being the tail on the receiving end of global work that we've forgotten we are perfectly capable of being the head. By accepting a secondary status that says 'global thinking happens elsewhere', we risk settling as mere regional custodians.

Breaking out of that mindset requires more than just ambition; it requires a collision. Pitching against global giants forces a radical reframing of your competitive set. It is a violent, necessary jolt to the system where, suddenly, you aren't just the honest indie from Australia and New Zealand. You are a creative entity being measured against the best in London, New York, and Amsterdam.

Once you step into that arena, the underdog label stops being cute and starts being a strategic weapon.

For us, the heat of that competition forced a realisation: we don't operate as a standard service provider, and we never have. From day one, we've functioned as a high-speed extension of our clients' internal brain trust, a model that turns out to be just as powerful on a global scale as it is a local one.

That is the real win. Even if you lose the pitch, the revelation that you belong in the room is transformative. It strips away the excuses and reminds us that our real enemy is not coming second; it's the atrophy of staying put.

That's not to say we should be pitching all the time. ABEL was built off the back of direct referrals, not pitches, but we'll mindfully consider one pitch a year. Because for us, losing this pitch was the fastest way to realise that our physical size should never limit the scale of our ambition.

So, let's stop the daytime drinking and mourning periods and start planning to lose to people 10 times our size every so often. Because the heartbreak is temporary, but the shift in your horizon is permanent. And while we didn't get the trophy (this time), we found something much more valuable: the absolute certainty that our authentic local approach is a global commodity.



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