

Thought Leaders

I'm Loving The Ink, SKINGRAPHICA – But Mat Baxter Pitched For Agencies

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TrinityP3's Ellie Angell writes, "Mat, if you're reading ... I have enough fingers on one hand to count the number of marketers who know the agency landscape as well as you do." But, "I'm sorry, he ran a pitch"



True story. A few weeks back, I attended a 'Founders and Freelancers' event held by The Aunties.

The room was full of 80-100 founders and freelancers. Creatives, agency leads and the like.

Eventually, talk turned to pitching. Unsurprisingly, the room was filled with complaints.

I stood up. I was nervous, because I was the only trans woman I knew of in a room full of women. And I was nervous because I was the only pitch consultant in the room. I announced myself as such, and felt people stiffening.

I talked for a bit. I applauded them for taking a stand against shitty pitches. I admired their courage and integrity in saying no when as small, cashflow-based, maybe bootstrapped businesses, the financial pressure to say yes must be intense.

I said pitching dynamics can only change if everyone, agencies included, are complicit in making that change.

I said that in the work I do with agencies directly, I tell them the more business they can win from existing clients that doesn't require a strenuous pitch, the better. That they should say no more often.

I got a round of applause, and people said nice things to me at the end.

I tell you this story upfront to make my position clear. I'm not 'anti-pitch'. In fact, I think pitching is essential in our industry. But I am, and have always been, against shitty pitching.

My definition of shitty pitching is a pitch that treats agencies disrespectfully, in a process in which the effort in is disproportionate to the reward out.

Many of the small agencies in the room that night were certainly

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Many of the small agencies in the room that night were certainly victims of shitty pitching. But some pitching being shitty doesn't mean that pitching is unnecessary or irrelevant.

Which brings me to Mat Baxter, SKINGRAPHICA, and his renewed ditch the pitch noise.

I read the recent article in LBB with great interest. I can't say I agreed with much of it, but it was certainly interesting. In fact, it was so interesting, it prompted me to write a response.



The first thing is that to say SKINGRAPHICA "appointed agencies without a pitch" is simply wrong.

Mat met agencies, had a conversation with them to test strategic capability, examined work, and hired agencies on a fee plus an uncapped incentive.

All of which is great. I love what Mat says about wanting to be the most profitable client for his agencies. But – I'm sorry, he ran a pitch. He just did it his way.

Do we think that the agencies hired were the only ones approached? Do we think there was no negotiation, or at least explanatory discussion, about financial terms, the commercial model, the contract?

Of course it was a pitch. It just wasn't a shitty pitch because the impost on the agencies wasn't at odds with the size of prize or task. On the face of it, the agencies have a great opportunity.

Can all pitches be run like that? No, I don't think so. SKINGRAPHICA, and Mat Baxter, are huge outliers. Again, Mat, if you're reading, this is a compliment. I have enough fingers on one hand to count the number of marketers who know the agency landscape as well as you do. Who know what they want from an agency and will be able to manage an agency relationship as well as you.

As a start-up, you're in complete control; you can make decisions without compliance, procurement, large matrix teams with competing interests, multiple brands, huge expenditure and the rest of it. The only thing that comes back to bite you if you hire the wrong agency is yourself.

It's great that this context has been used to the advantage of agencies (although I bet there are some thinking, 'Why the hell weren't we approached?'). But it's simply not the reality for the majority of organisations who do need a competitive tender of some kind to ascertain the best-fit partner.

On that, I think the term "ego-stroke" – as in, pitching is an ego-stroke for marketers – is a bit harsh.

I can't think of a single pitch I've run where marketers are primarily ego-stroking or using it as a busy-shield. Marketers are bloody busy. How much of that is busy-work is beside the point.

All I know is that convincing marketers to fully commit to being in the room for milestone sessions in a pitch is hardly ever easy. They're constantly in other meetings. Maybe I'm being too blinkered here; maybe the reason they've hired a consultant is because they're too busy, so I'm seeing a skewed sample. Either way, I don't think that using a pitch as an excuse to do nothing is really what's happening for the majority.

Another point raised was that in other industries (for example, architecture) there's no requirement to give the client the entire solution.

Well – true, up to a point. But also, not true. When I got my kitchen rebuilt a few years ago, I saw three kitchen architects, each of which provided me with drawings, fairly detailed quotes, and all the rest of it. Granted, they didn't build a life size replica for me to inspect, but they still put in a fair bit of work. It was a competitive tender. And that was just little old me, and my kitchen.

In many other industries, hugely detailed tenders are required. One of the things baffling procurement people is that across most of our

the things bannig procurement people is that across most of our industry, they can't ask for technical plans, they can't view facilities or manufacturing plants, they can't sample physical product, and they can't mathematically quantify or gain concrete assurance regarding efficiency and speed of production in the same way. The value equation when dealing with agencies is completely different. This can be a lead cause of shitty pitching.

And when there are hundreds of established agencies, the choice can be perplexing. Just narrowing them down to a reasonable shortlist is hard enough. But then, how do you truly assess the truth behind the claims? The work is table-stakes (providing the people who did the work are still at the agency).

What I'm forever banging on about to clients is agencies are at their best when there's a clear proposition, made real by its application via strong leadership and a talented, empowered team. A pitch is a journey – ideally, as short and effective as possible – from rhetoric to substance, in order to test those balances.

It can be done without ridiculous, overbearing or opaque imposts on the agency. Ultimately, the 'response to brief' in a pitch should represent a sample of what the agency is capable of.

It shouldn't be assessed as a 'silver bullet' answer. Any response should be assessed in context of the pitch environment, and with all the other elements we're thinking about: Are they good people, are they strategic, can they think on their feet, can we work with them day to day and with C-Suite?

It shouldn't be asking them to boil the ocean. But it needs to test them.

It shouldn't be turned around in a week, unless we're testing dummy 'real-life' scenarios, in which case the level of response we ask for, or how it's delivered (via a meeting without charts, via a hack, whatever) should also be real-life appropriate.

I, and TrinityP3, consistently advocate against produced creative being included in a pitch. We advocate against outdated, convoluted media agency inventory cost 'audits'. We advocate for and against all sorts of things that we believe helps to deliver a greater level of integrity and respect in a pitch. We do some of this in public, a lot of it behind scenes.

And guess what: We win some, we lose some. Not every pitch I run adheres to all my idealistic talk. It's a work-in-progress, pushing against norms that have been established by both clients and agencies.

When we lose some battles, we do what we can to make the overall process easier than it would have been, had we not been there.

And we've occasionally walked away from organisations with a pronounced lack of alignment with our views on how to pitch.

Anyway. As Mat says, it isn't rocket science. That, I do agree with. And I'm glad of it, because I'd be out of a job if it was.

Having said that, I think it's not as simple as 'ditch the pitch', either.

'Ditch the shitty pitch', on the other hand, I can get behind.

And because I admire people who do what I can't do, and I'm all for agencies profiting and new businesses flourishing, when I get my first tattoo, I'll be on the SKINGRAPHICA website for my aftercare products. However he runs his pitches, the PR is working on me!



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