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## Are agency people embarrassed about how they make their living?

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By *Jeremy Taylor*

Source: [TrinityP3](#)

A general impression from almost every agency credentials presentation is the defensive position taken up by the **agencies** in the way they present themselves. Why should this be?

### Assume the defensive position

Agencies presenting their credentials have a universal tendency that gets more noticeable when you see several of them in close sequence. It goes like this. After they have told you something factual about themselves, they then feel the need to spend the next few minutes telling you all the things you won't miss out on because of this fact.

So – the agency that won a huge number of awards last year wants to reassure you that this means nothing to them and it's purely the effectiveness of the work that matters to them. The new CEO of a **big agency network** has been hired from a management consultancy; this sounds fascinating, but the team is keen to reassure you that it's OK because it turns out he always wanted to work in a creative environment.

A network has offices in every major national market, but that doesn't mean you won't get personal service just like a small independent. Another network has invested in a state-of-the-art platform to produce hundreds of variations of content tailored for every market and sector, but the thing they are keenest to tell you about is that they still believe above all in the power of the big creative idea.

Some of it is clearly driven by hostile audience questions and the anticipation of them. At the AdForum conference, Mark Read, the CEO of the **WPP group**, was asked question after question about how the ongoing restructuring of his huge organisation was affecting client servicing capabilities. Eventually, he had to ask if he could take some questions about the benefits of being the world's biggest advertising company rather than how to overcome the drawbacks. But audience questions can't be the only explanation.

Advertising agencies as an industry sector are defined by this very defensive approach to selling their services. It's not a new phenomenon, they've been doing this for years. But why is it that agencies of all sizes and life-stages adopt this attitude?

### Is this approach common to professional services companies?

A look at the way other professional services companies sell their services is interesting as a comparison.

Management consultancies, law firms and accountancy firms also come in many different sizes and formats, from huge multinationals to small local practices. They also have specialised skills, often with a focus on different market sectors and skillsets.

Having seen a number of these companies presenting their credentials over the years, they very rarely adopt a defensive attitude. Their focus tends to be purely on the positives of working with them. They play to their strengths and appear to feel no need to apologise for any weaknesses.

In fact, they go much further with the non-defensive approach. They like to point out the potential dangers awaiting a client who does not choose to work with them – changes to corporate law, or tax updates, or commercial threats from new market sectors and players which are likely to trip up the unwary client. The 'burning platform' is established, and the pitch then is to reassure the client that the perfect solution is available only from the consultancy, so you'd better use them.

It's a very different sales pitch from the vague promises of greener pastures ahead that agencies have traditionally relied on.

### What's behind the defensive agency approach?

There is no one simple answer to the reasons for agency management teams feeling that they need to defend their position rather than play to their strengths. But, here are some contributing factors based on decades of personal experience working with and within agencies.

First up, here is a widely-quoted damnation of advertising from the influential late American stand-up

comedian, Bill Hicks: *"By the way, if anyone here is in advertising or marketing... Kill yourself. There's no rationalisation for what you do and you are Satan's little helpers. Okay - kill yourself. Seriously. You are the ruiner of all things good."*

Maybe far-fetched, but I think as a sentiment that it touches a nerve with many agency people. There is an element of embarrassment and discomfort about what they do for a living and uncertainty that what they are doing is really good for the world.

Why? Advertising people are rarely found on the right-wing of the political spectrum, and often feel uneasy about naked capitalism. This immediately puts them on the defensive about what they do for a living. Perhaps it even helps explain the rise in the focus on corporate and brand purpose, which has the effect of diluting the raw sales function of advertising?

Survey results are important to anyone who works in advertising and marketing. Advertising consistently scores very poorly as a 'trustworthy' profession in surveys, along with people such as journalists and politicians. This is perhaps another reason for advertising professionals to feel slightly unworthy. But then again, lawyers also appear near the bottom of those surveys, and as noted above it never seems to worry the big legal partnerships and corporations.

One final thought. Unlike most other professions, advertising requires no formal training to enter the industry. You don't need letters after your name and membership of a professional body to be qualified to work in the industry. Although this is changing and there are degree courses and training from industry bodies available, there is no obligation to use them and many in the business do not. Does this contribute some underlying feeling of inferiority?

## Is a defensive stance for the industry justified?

TrinityP3 has a strong belief in the vital role of marketing as the engine of business growth. Advertising is the visible product of marketing, and it is a fact that without it growth would be severely restricted and the future of the commercial world put into severe doubt.

So it follows that advertising is an important industry that needs to be confident in its role and abilities, for the good of the commercial world. Of course, it's important for the industry to think deeply about its role and to act ethically and responsibly, and by doing so it can continue to attract the talent it needs in order to carry out its role effectively. But that does not mean that it needs to be embarrassed about what it does.

It's time for the agencies to move on from apologising for what they do and to focus more strongly on the skills and benefits that they bring to the market.

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