



OPINION

How agencies can transform from a vendor into a partner

By **Darren Woolley** - August 10, 2021

Why so often marketers and their agencies start their relationships with such one-sided agreements?

Building trusted partnerships between clients and their agencies take time and effort, says Darren Woolley, the founder and global chief executive of TrinityP3. But the benefit is multiple in performance and efficiency. Unfortunately, it doesn't just happen, or happen very often, but when it does you can feel it.

Yet again, an excited agency announces winning a new client with a quote that says how proud/honoured/humbled/excited they are to be partnering with said client. Remember, this announcement comes as the signatures are clicked on the DocuSign file to seal the deal. You would think it was a Business Partnership Agreement, rather than a Supplier Services Contract.

I have often been accused of calling a spade a spade, and agencies vendors, suppliers and contractors rather than partners. But at a time when client-agency relationship tenure is falling, it is heartening to hear about the ones that go beyond the contractual arrangement to operate in the spirit of a partner.

There are two sides to this relationship, and it is clear the agencies prefer to define it as a partnership. But I thought it worth checking in on those on the other side. How did they define the relationship and more importantly, when and how did an agency transform themselves from a vendor, supplier, or contractor to being a valued partner, and what does it take to make it happen? Here are the insights from five chief marketing officers experienced in managing agency relationships.

Amber Collins, chief marketing officers at Australia Post believes agencies that go beyond providing a service move inside the tent when she shared:

"Partners recognize and respect their position 'in the tent' and think long term. They also bring initiatives to the business and work beyond their scope rather than just following instructions.

There is honest two-way feedback - the good and the bad - which builds a deep level of trust. They really are the first port of call as a sounding board outside the business".

Agreeing with this, Louise Ardagh, head of marketing and engagement at HBF Health Limited, shares that the benefit for a marketer in having a true agency partner is they save time:

"The significant difference of an agency moving from being a supplier and into a true partner relationship can be measured in time. Ultimately if there is a true partnership, the client saves time not having to repeat key business strategies and contextualizing last-minute changes, if they happen"

"When an agency is a partner, they can understand what is needed, and how this translates in the day-to-day requests. Equally, as a partner, the agency can feel confident and trust the partnership enough to challenge and provide provocation to the client on doing things better.

While Anubha Sahasrabuddhe, chief marketing officer at Lion sees achieving a partnership relationship with the agency improving the performance of both client and agency to mutual benefit:

"In my experience, the shift from when an agency goes from supplier to being a real partner is when you move from role-playing what is "expected of you", to be a stake for each other's progress against a common ambition - it's a feeling - and its absence is equally palpable.

The dynamic shifts from playing it safe - to playing to bring out the absolute best in each other in tackling the business challenges.

It's from that position that ideas flourish, bravery is rewarded and momentum is generated to create a culture of possibilities".

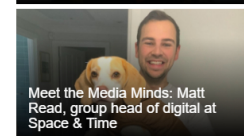
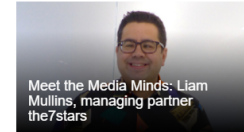
But Melissa Hopkins, chief marketing officer at Optus, more pragmatically believes the transition is

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not as common as many agencies believe:

"A true partnership is a formal arrangement between two or more parties to manage and operate a business and then share in its profits. If I am honest there are very few agencies globally that really deliver against that. A supplier is an agreement between two or more parties that provides a product or service. Most agencies do that.

The magic is when the relationship becomes that of a sidekick or collaborator - this is rare and only happens when you truly have a shared vision and complete honesty about what each partner needs. The moment you no longer talk fees and retainers and focus on talking only about the work - you are there!"

While Joanne Smith, chief marketing and innovation officer at Blackmores Group believes both parties must start with the intention of partnering:

"The best agency relationships are the ones that start out with a genuine intention of partnership on both sides from the outset as opposed to being a supplier who becomes a partner. Going into the relationship with this mindset and making sure there is a shared understanding of the importance of the values and behaviours we want to create from the beginning of the relationship is really key".

The bottom line of all of this marketing wisdom is that building trusted partnerships between clients and their agencies takes time and effort. But the benefit is multiple in performance and efficiency. Unfortunately, it doesn't just happen, or happen very often, but when it does you can feel it.

On that basis, it makes me wonder why so often marketers and their agencies start these relationships with such one-sided agreements? Like, where the agency must be exclusive, but the client is not? Or the client can terminate without fault on a month or two notice, but the agency cannot? Or the agency will be penalised for late delivery, while the client takes all the time in the world to pay?

Take Joanne Smith's advice and "start out with a genuine intention of partnership on both sides". That means creating a level playing field from day one.

Darren Woolley is founder and global chief executive of TrinityP3

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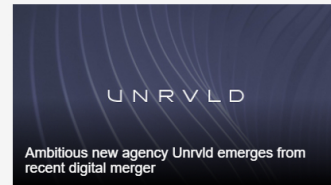
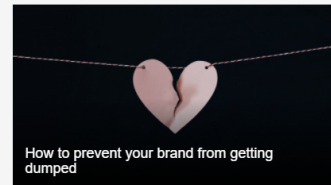
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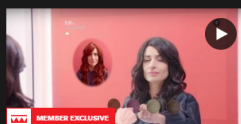
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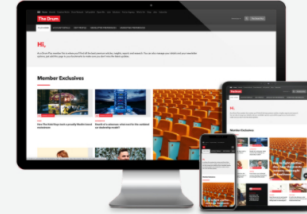
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