

Client-Agency Dynamics: Partnering for Success



By: Addie Palin

Almost a year ago, Jacobs Agency weighed in at CMO.com with 15 things for marketers to consider before engaging an agency.

While this list still acts as a good rule of thumb on the topic, we'd like to delve a bit deeper and share some observations and instruction around ideal client-agency partnerships—how to define them, whether or not your organization is ready for one, and what you can stand to gain if you are.

How We Define the Ideal Client Partner

At Jacobs Agency, we've observed many different versions of the client-agency dynamic. I'm lucky to be the lead account manager on several that define, for us, the ideal version: agency as a valued extension of a client's marketing team.

Agency as a valued extension of a client's marketing team

Who resides at the opposite end of the spectrum? Clients who call us only for last-minute, fast-turnaround projects that they can't handle internally (and then don't call us back for another six months). Clients paralyzed by internal politics who need an agency to play "bad cop" on the long journey toward completing the project...and most often still don't complete the project. Clients who want their agency to execute only their vision and not ask any questions, impart any strategy or add any creativity that may make it better.

Truthfully, most of our clients fall somewhere in between the paragon and the pariah, and we have pretty great partnerships with all of them. But if the relationship isn't perfect? The issue

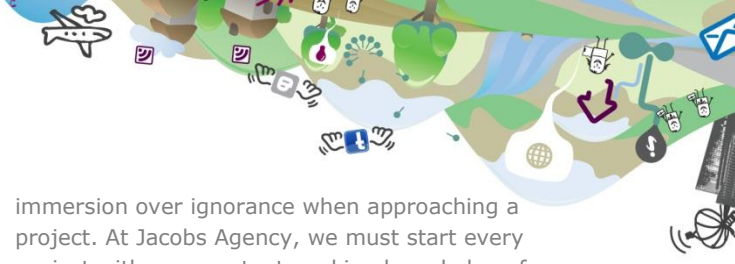
could be a bad account manager or an arrogantly off-strategy creative execution—or there's a chance that the match was bad to begin with. Every agency model is different; our most exhausting client may represent another agency's sweet spot. That's why it's critical for marketers to do their due diligence in researching and selecting agency partners, rather than choosing the first referral because it's easier. Likewise, the agency is responsible for judging whether or not the prospect's project and expectations are aligned with its talents, and resisting the temptation to make the decision a monetary one.

Determining Your Partner Potential

Whether an organization goes the RFP route or a less formal one, one of the most difficult elements to gauge is trust. It is as essential—and invisible—as hydrogen and oxygen. Trust is the foundation of the client-agency partnership, and it's a two-way street that at some points is as simple as a two-lane country road, at others as complex as a six-lane highway and at still others seems as hairpin and unpredictable as a mountain pass.

Trust is the foundation of the client-agency partnership

Certain kinds of trust—that the agency will be responsive, meet deadlines and be good stewards of the client's budget—are table stakes. Then there are kinds of trust that begin to distinguish one agency from another: do I



trust that the agency will understand our business? (This one is made all the more tenuous by its complexity.) Do I trust that the agency understands our customers? Do I trust them to put strategy over sexy? Lastly, there are out-on-a-limb types of trust: Do I trust them with my organization's goals and objectives? Do I trust them to interact professionally and knowledgeably with my sales team or other critical stakeholders in my organization? Do I trust them enough to act on behalf of my business even if some mistakes are made, because no one is the expert and I don't have all the answers either?

If the answers to some of the above questions are "no," then you may want to ask yourself which other qualities you're looking for in an agency partner. It's okay to hold some things close to your vest—and some corporate guidelines downright mandate it. But as an Agency that does our best work when our client trusts us to the greatest extent possible, we would counsel that being upfront about your limitations—and the reasons for them—is important. At which you may be thinking, "but trust isn't just something you hand over." We've already established that trustworthiness is difficult to gauge. Therefore, it must be earned.

Friends with Benefits

At Jacobs Agency, we 100% agree. We would also add that clients must give agencies the opportunities to earn that trust.

Clients must give agencies the opportunities to earn that trust

By way of example, four years ago we approached a sizeable baked goods manufacturer, who agreed to hear a capabilities presentation from the Agency. The prospect liked the questions we asked about their business, and liked our approach to the work—even though they themselves planned to do very little traditional marketing. Their first engagement with us, though unspoken, was a trial-run of sorts: develop a corporate capabilities presentation.

Candidly, small 'trial projects' such as these are risky gambles for agencies like ours who prefer

immersion over ignorance when approaching a project. At Jacobs Agency, we must start every project with a competent working knowledge of the client's business, or our creative is only for creative's sake and doesn't drive results. Therefore, we invest a nearly equal amount of sweat equity to kick off a sell sheet as we do to kick off a website. So why did we take the project? We took it because this client was upfront about their needs, issues and expectations. It was clear they valued the thinking and approach they had seen. And they had a realistic budget for the project. The kernel of trust was already planted. This was our opportunity: build trust, and build this corporate capabilities presentation into something much bigger.

In many ways it was the perfect first project, because it gave the Agency a natural opportunity to learn this client's products, selling process and customers. Our willingness and ability to embrace their world on behalf of what could have been a humble template with some graphics and bullet points, led to the successful partnership that exists today. One of my most nerve-wracking moments was presenting those capabilities back to their senior sales VPs—and being rewarded with a small amount of awe that we might understand their business—and their clients—better than some of their own sales members.

This is the amount of effort you should discern—and build upon—if an agency is trying to earn your trust.

On the subject of trust, Maplehurst Bakeries would answer "yes" to every one of the questions above. It didn't happen overnight, but over the course of four years, Maplehurst has afforded the transparency and visibility for Jacobs Agency to truly become—despite the fact that we are 180 miles apart—a valued extension of their marketing team.

How do they do this? By making time for weekly status meetings with the Agency. By sharing yearly and quarterly financial goals for the organization. By inviting the Agency to annual all-sales meetings and monthly regional sales team meetings. By investing in Agency participation at sales and marketing training workshops, as well as product-focused training sessions. It doesn't hurt us that they desire to be regarded as a trusted partner to their own customers, and are hyper-aware of what they'd

like to receive from those in-store bakery managers and deli-bakery directors that will enable them to be so. These things aren't that different from the things that Jacobs Agency seeks: sales, data, openness to new ideas, sharing of larger corporate objectives beyond the marketing department.

So how did Maplehurst (and its customers) benefit from this investment of resources, time and attention into its Agency partner? We've worked together to build tools and processes that benefit their internal sales team while aligning with the organization's focus on customer service.

Here are just a few:

- **Bakery Market Report**
Published six times a year, this original thought leadership piece covers topics and trends that are relevant to the bakery managers today
- **News You Can Chew**
A biweekly newsletter aggregate of the industry news and trends most relevant to Maplehurst's customers
- **SPIN Hall of Fame**
A bimonthly report detailing a client success story achieved using Maplehurst's selling discipline
- **Best Practices**
Curated from our observations of monthly sales meetings and reported back subsequently to each sales team
- **Day-to-Day Support**
Presentation, sales materials and education to enable the selling process

It is possible for us to accomplish most of the above because Maplehurst has fostered open lines of communication between its sales team and the Agency. Make no mistake; Jacobs Agency is not a replacement for Maplehurst's internal marketing team, which is a smart group of folks that provides an enormous amount of sales support independent from us. But because Maplehurst gives us a direct conduit to its business objectives and financial goals, with the expectation that marketing will contribute to achieving them, we are able (and encouraged) to bring new ideas and attempt Through-the-LinesSM solutions.

The Partner Approach to Retail

Retail solutions often fall into this category. Today's retailers do not have time for cookie-cutter sales presentations. They expect their vendors to come in armed with an intimate understanding of their brand, their consumers and the trends affecting shopper purchase decisions.

They expect that the products or programs presented to them will strategically reflect this knowledge. Furthermore, they expect the solution to be unique to their business and they expect the vendor to demonstrate how it will increase sales.

Read more on the importance of alignment between sales and marketing [here](#)

While this seems like a tall order for CPG manufacturers, it's not an impossible one.

Recently, I interviewed a half-dozen retail buyers and department managers to better understand the buyer-seller relationship.

I learned that:

- All retailers value their vendor partners, *if* the vendor proves their interest in building the business together, sharing risk and sharing cost
- Most will share sales data and other information they feel the vendor needs in order to be successful
- Most retailers also acknowledge they're complex and can be hard to work with

In our experience, many clients say they want to be "wowed" by new thinking but either a) are reluctant to share the insights that enable it to happen or b) are afraid to take advantage of it when it does. Both scenarios rely on trust.

Conclusion: When Roles Are Reversed

Presented with this particular rose-colored scenario, you may be thinking that it's all very easy for Jacobs Agency to say—we're not the ones who have to do the trusting. But I'd like to briefly demonstrate proof that we have been in your shoes when it comes to deciding to trust a partner. For us, the partner wasn't another agency, but a website developer. Because the back end of website development is not a core competency at Jacobs Agency, we've actually worked with several over the years. And we've been burned by our fair share.

We've been burned by our fair share...and then we met "the one"

Needless to say, none of our web partners—until recently—captured our trust. Some could barely deliver on the "table stakes" part of the equation. And then we met "the one."

After their capabilities presentation, we couldn't wait to harness their coding smarts and geeky enthusiasm for one of our clients. When the right opportunity came along, we poured the heart and soul of our client's nascent brand and all of our knowledge of their business over to our partner. We described the client's complex product and market, shared half-finished brand

guidelines and corporate identity pieces and a seven-page kickoff brief and more than a few disclaimers...and then we waited while they worked their magic.

With our first checkpoint, we knew our gut had been right. Our web partner had soaked up everything we'd given to them and embraced the brand exactly the way we had, presenting us with ideas that amplified and animated the direction we provided. When we saw the web designs and wireframes, we were over the moon. Here was a development team that made decisions in the best interest of the client, who truly seemed to operate as an extension of our brains. And who was proactive and on time and also added a ton of value when we needed a little extra information. A partner. Not just in name, but in spirit.

In building relationships like these, input begets output. If the client is willing to open up their organization, and if the agency is willing to go the extra mile to prove their investment in the client's business, beautiful things can happen. Everyone's jobs get a little easier when we work collaboratively to come up with solutions. Your sales team has another resource to reach out to, lightening the load on your internal team. And most importantly, your customers benefit from the new thinking and fresh approaches that a strategic partner can impart. The chain between all of us becomes unbreakable.

About Jacobs Agency

Chicago based Jacobs Agency helps clients untangle their business problems. While their industries vary, the reason clients come to us is the same: they need sharp thinking, superior creative and the ability to reach targets on multiple levels. Today's communications landscape has complexities that can immobilize even the brightest marketers. We are undaunted. Why? With *Through the Lines*SM engagement, our proprietary philosophy and marketing model, we understand and can expertly navigate the landscape's intricacies. How? We start with an Objectives-Based Approach. From Targeted Awareness to Audience Engagement, from Lead Generation & Prospect Nurturing to Sales Enablement and Brand Refinement, we keep a client's objectives as our guide and we produce breakthrough results.

For more information about Jacobs Agency, visit: www.jacobsagency.com

