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Evaluating the Client-Agency Relationship

by Teresa Todd

What do music students from Juilliard, USC, Cal State Fullerton, UCLA and the San Francisco Conservatory, to name just a few, have in common besides an obvious love for music? A few find each other on Facebook and arrange to meet over their holiday break to present a world-class orchestra concert performance.

David Jang, a 20-something-year-old triple-majoring in the arts, brought together 33 random music students from various schools and disciplines over the New Year's weekend. The result: a concert of classical music that would rival any philharmonic orchestra.

Besides the complete enjoyment of the music and proud parent moment of seeing a child on stage, I couldn't help but draw numerous marketing parallels to this ad hoc group of young professionals and, in particular, what they were able to create.

Marketing your business should be more than placing a few ads and mingling at local business mixers throughout the year. Don't get me wrong – advertising and networking are important components to any marketing plan with the operative word being “plan”.

Equating this to the orchestra analogy, prior to any performance each musician tunes their instrument individually. The resulting sound can be less than pleasing to the ear as each instrument creates sound independent of one another. It is not until the first downbeat of the conductor's baton that each instrument is played together in perfect pitch and synchronization according to the arrangement printed before them.

Just as each instrument is capable of creating sound on its own, the full impact is not realized until they work together to create a unified sound. The same is true for marketing. While various components can stand alone – advertising, public relations, online, direct mail, and more – the effectiveness of any marketing campaign is dependent upon all components working together.

A strategic marketing plan is similar to an orchestra's arrangement. It should be a road map of the various elements of a business's marketing strategy and guide the execution of each individual component.

Agency Reviews

Whether your business has an in-house marketing team or hires an outside agency to handle advertising and public relations, January is an ideal month to evaluate last year's performance and make decisions moving forward into the new year.

Were established goals and objectives accomplished? Did the creative work represent your business the way it was intended? Were deadlines met and budgets adhered to?

AdWeek, an industry trade publication, recently published the results of a new study conducted by Reardon Smith Whittaker consultancy entitled, “A Client’s View of Agency Performance”. The company polled 184 client marketing and brand executives from major corporations to probe how clients view agencies.

Topping the list, clients said “having an understanding of their marketplace” was the most important criteria for selecting an agency. Grasping the company’s strategic direction as well as creative work presented tied for the second-most important factors cited, followed by “offering something fresh and new.”

The study also explored why clients seek new agencies, what they are looking for and how satisfied they are with the results. The top-ranked reasons on a 1-10 scale respondents cited for launching reviews were unhappiness with their agency’s thinking (46 percent), followed by dissatisfaction with creative work (40 percent) and not being proactive enough (38 percent).

“Simply popping out the monthly newsletter or the fun, quirky email blast isn’t going to work anymore,” said Mark Sneider, managing director at Reardon Smith Whittaker. “Given the challenges clients are facing in light of the economy, they need agencies that can get up to speed quickly, add smart value-added thinking and are a trustworthy lot.”

Agencies face key challenges maintaining client relations after the initial “win” of the business. Many marketing clients surveyed felt their agency’s performance simply did not match up with their expectations when first hired. The performance gap could be attributed to over-promising during the pitch phase or just general waning of enthusiasm on the part of the agency and marketer after the “marriage”, according to the survey.

When asked about what growing areas of marketing communication most clients are interested in receiving from their agency, online marketing ranked highest (69 percent), followed by buzz marketing (58 percent), experiential efforts (53 percent), search engine marketing (52 percent), and mobile marketing (25 percent). Trailing the list were such tactics as interactive TV, product placement and advertiser funded programming.

Selecting a New Agency

When it’s time to recruit a new agency, advice or recommendations from marketing insiders or colleagues can be a good source for contacts and referrals. Local trade and business groups are another useful source. The Advertising Professionals Association (ADPROS), an affiliate member of the American Advertising Federation (AAF), has a website with valuable information and a membership directory, which includes local advertising, design, web, public relations, photographers and other creative professionals.

The majority of ADPROS members listed on www.adprosla.com are located in the Santa Clarita Valley. Their work spans a multitude of projects for many high-profile local, regional and national accounts. Each year the organization participates in the ADDY Awards, the world’s largest competition for those involved in advertising, graphic design and related creative fields.

Winners from this year’s competition will be announced during a dinner event on March 15, 2009. The local ADDY competition presents a good opportunity for prospective clients to see first-hand the quality of an agency’s creative and to meet senior personnel. Businesses are encouraged to attend.

One last takeaway on the orchestra concert analogy, where 33 young musicians performed as well as any professional music organization many times their number: size is not an indicator of quality or ability. Likewise, don’t judge an agency by size alone. Many small, boutique agencies can deliver as powerful a punch, if not sometimes better, than their larger counterparts and at a fraction of the cost.

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