

Why are client/agency relation shortening?

By

Dr Sarah Turnbull

University of Portsmouth

In the past many client-agency relationships have been compared to a marriage because of the intensity and longevity of the relationship. While relationships appear to remain intense, in many cases their length seems to be getting shorter. In an environment where most clients are seeking to develop longer term relationships with their consumers, why are their agency relationships moving towards shorter, more transactional style exchange?

A recent cross-industry report from the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) identified the average length of client-agency relationships in the UK has dropped from 7.2 years in 1984 to under 3 years in 2013. Having started my own agency career at Foote, Cone and Belding in London (FCB) who infamously carved their client's names in marble and whose mantra was 'a client is for life', I feel saddened to think client-agency relationships have a life expectancy of less than 3 years. Why so many divorces?

My own research over the last 8 years has identified a number of areas that cause conflict in client-agency relationships. One key area is the client's lack of understanding about agency processes. A better understanding of how creative is developed and production processes helps to reduce conflict and better manage expectations.

Another main cause of conflict is creative. Because of the subjective nature of creative work, clients and agencies often have different views about what makes good creative. One solution to this is greater involvement of clients during the development stages of the creative. Involving the client at earlier stages of creative development can greatly assist in reducing misunderstanding later on.

As well as looking at ways of reducing conflict, agencies and clients need to better manage the conflict itself. Conflict is often an inevitable part of the creative development process. Good creative work requires the client taking risk and this can often be an uncomfortable experience for clients and may lead to tension in the relationship. Arguably good creative

work necessitates conflict. Clients and agencies need to recognise this and manage the tension in a positive way.

Changing agencies is expensive and time consuming for clients. Getting an agency up to speed on a new account can take several months and this can give competitors an advantage. Clients therefore need to consider carefully before they decide to move their accounts. If the relationship is experiencing high levels of tension then perhaps there is a need for better management – but clients should not rush to fire the agency. Instead, clients should expect disagreement with the agency and realise this is an inherent feature of the creative development process. Perhaps clients should be more concerned when there is no conflict.