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Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

FIVE PRACTICES TO BECOMING YOUR AGENCY'S “PREFERRED” CLIENT

Over the past several weeks (since the lead-up to the Super Bowl), I've been sharing proven principles, best practices, and quality processes for making your advertising more effective. This article gets at a critically important but overlooked element, the client-agency relationship.

We want customers to perceive our company and brand as the preferred “one” in their evoked set. It's smart business. The preferred client enjoys higher margins, increased profitability, and enhanced customer loyalty.

Yet while we strive to become the preferred customer, we do nothing to win our suppliers, including the ad agency, who provide value-added services to help us achieve a preferred relationship with customers. Instead, the client can be somewhat "difficult" (versus demanding), treating the agency as common "VEN-DUHS." Consequently, key agency personnel (including creatives) give us less than their best thinking and work, undermining our ability to gain a preferred relationship with customers.

Perhaps, it's time to look both ways. To look not just to achieving “preferred” status with our customers but, at the same time, achieving “preferred” status with our suppliers – including our advertising agency. In this way, we might expect to gain the following in return:

- the best personnel the agency has to offer;
- highly motivated team members who dedicate themselves to the success not just of the agency but your business too;
- professionals who will demonstrate initiative and tirelessly search for big ideas on behalf of your brand; and
- high-impact advertising.

The aforementioned help us achieve preferred status with our customers to create brand loyalty.

We can demand “preferred” status from our agencies, but they will not likely grant it to us. Perhaps, in word but not in deed. Instead, we must earn it – just as we have to earn it from our customers. It takes extra work, but, like all good things, it's worth it!

Here are some of the practices to assist us in realizing a “preferred” client relationship:

1. **Be a leader** – The agency will find it difficult to do good work unless you, the client, take the lead in creating a vision and providing strategically sound direction for the development of the brand’s advertising. Leadership includes securing the commitment of your management team (i.e., those responsible for approving the final creative) to achieving the communication strategy. Leaders also create an environment within which the agency can succeed. This means providing essential information (i.e., about the customer, product, competition, etc.) and removing barriers to success. Also, effective leaders share successes with their agencies and accept the blame for failures.
2. **Create an inter-relationship** – An inter-relationship is more than a transaction delegating responsibilities and tasks. It's a bond, a kinship, not of blood but shared goals. In an inter-relationship, the success of each member is dependent on the contributions of all. Ideally, it is a seamless circle, free of borders. The client must view the agency as part of the same (internal) team, not a separate entity. Also, the client needs to bond with agency teammates. This means frequent contact, including informal ones like socializing with each other.
3. **Become part of the solution, not the problem** – We tend to act like bosses - in the pejorative sense. We speak of our concerns, feel justified in identifying perceived problems and dictate creative solutions to the agency's work. These practices are destructive! They sap morale and undermine creativity. No one wants to work for or can give their best to this kind of boss. Instead, we must put on our creative hats and recognize the inherent ideas in the agency's submissions. If an idea has merit, we need to find ways to provide clear direction to direct its fulfillment. Also, we need to be open to new ideas, even those that may frighten us.
4. **Treat them with respect** – There’s nothing like the golden rule – treat others as you would like them to treat you. Be aware of the little things, like being considerate of the agency’s time. Be on time for agency meetings. Meet with them on their turf (i.e., their offices) versus yours. Schedule meetings for times and places that are mutually convenient (i.e., not late Friday afternoon at the client’s offices). Also, respect the agency’s need to make a fair profit. Don’t overburden them with time-consuming, menial tasks. Promptly pay their invoices. Finally, provide them with feedback on a real-time basis. And don’t be afraid to be generous with praise whenever it is merited.
5. **Trust the agency** – This word trust is often misinterpreted. Trust does not mean letting them make the final decision or adopting something you feel is

inappropriate. It means that your first reaction should not be a knee-jerk one of immediate concern. It also means we should have a positive attitude, free of negative baggage, as we entertain each copy meeting. As a senior manager with significant successes once told his marketing managers, “With all these talented agency people working on my business, I know there must be a good idea in the work they submit.”

Application

To become the "preferred" client with your agency, try applying the following:

- Conduct an audit to ensure you have created a vision and provided strategically sound direction (i.e., communication strategy) for creative development.
- Check with your agency counterparts to ensure you are providing essential information and removing real and perceived barriers to success.
- Give credit where credit is due. Share successes with the agency – big and little!
- Make it your business to create an inter-relationship with agency team members. Make them feel they are part of your company's internal team—bond with them. Make plans to do something socially with them (and pick up the tab!).
- Make sure you understand the ideas inherent in the agency's creative submissions. If you don't, ask! If it can benefit from further development, fill the cup to help realize its full potential.
- Explore, with customers, an idea presented by the agency that they're sanguine about or frightens you.
- Ensure you are on time and fully present (i.e., not engaged in answering mail, reading memos, etc.) for agency meetings.
- Provide the agency with favorable and unfavorable feedback on a real-time (i.e., immediate) basis.
- Be generous with praise, when deserved.
- Conduct the next copy meeting at the agency's offices.
- Free yourself of any negative feelings about the agency or its members before engaging in a meeting with them.
- Get to know everyone on the agency team. Appreciate and honor the talent inherent in agency team members.

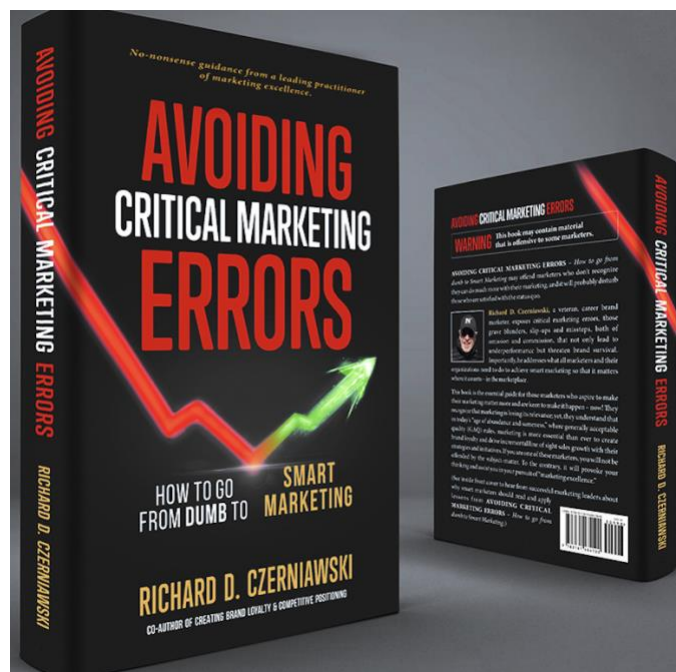
- Don't nickel and dime the agency. Don't overload them with demands for menial services. Do pay on time.
- Be a coach, not an evaluator, of the agency's creative submissions.
- Be humble. Recognize that you don't have all the answers!

Becoming the “preferred” client will not happen overnight (particularly where feelings of distrust and/or animosity are present). It is more than employing tactical measures. As with the customer, it is a campaign of intent, attitude, consistent actions, and genuine respect.

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Thanks for your interest.

Peace and best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Czerniawski". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Richard" and last name "Czerniawski" clearly legible.

Richard Czerniawski

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