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# Creative is complicated: Advice for better client and agency collaboration.

As a client or agency, have you ever thought the creative process was going well only to have it fall apart as the project neared deadline? You might have looked back and wondered what could have been done differently for a better outcome.

The relationship between client and agency is inherently stressful. An agency's creative process doesn't automatically conform to the needs of their client's marketing department. Knowing the pitfalls in the process and how to avoid them results in less frustration throughout the creative process and a more successful campaign.

This white paper provides tips for agencies and clients who would like to improve the brand/agency relationship. It is based on a webcast from Digital Marketing Depot and Hightail called **Creative is Complicated: Tips for Better Brand/Agency Collaboration**.

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## Introduction

Getting the best results when collaborating on projects requires work, self-awareness and open communication from both the client and agency.

Clients must understand how and when it is valuable to be involved in creative development, helping agencies get beyond simply pleasing them and moving toward the transparency and candor that produces great creative work. For example, a scientifically minded client may benefit from working with an intuitive creative team but creative clients working with an agency must remember their role is to give direction, not do the creative work.

Agencies must get comfortable challenging the client's thinking, pushing them creatively yet knowing when to compromise, demonstrating agency value and core competencies and enabling the entire team, from junior to executive level, to build a rapport with the clients.

Clients and agencies are in the creative process together and can get the best results by applying the tips in this white paper to three collaboration areas: the creative brief, creative relationships and creative communication.

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## Creative brief

### Advice for clients: Show the big picture

Start your relationship with the agency by providing the broader context for the work, not by focusing on a specific assignment. Ensure the agency understands where a specific campaign or piece of content fits with your business goals. Agencies are in the business of problem solving and can bring a fresh perspective if you engage them in the whole conversation instead of just need-to-know information. It can also help to bounce around high-level strategic business ideas with a good planner on the agency side.

### Advice for agencies: Get involved in defining the brief

Clients often think of the creative brief as a rulebook for their agency to follow. Try to help your client see it as a living document that works best with an iterative process. As a starting point, ask your client to boil the brief down to just a few words, seven or ten, that really matter. Remember to be patient as this can take longer than you might imagine. Next, brainstorm and develop several versions of the brief over time.

### Advice for clients and agencies: Keep the project moving forward

An unfinalized creative brief is no excuse for losing momentum. Build a library of ideas and create mood boards to give structure to these ideas. Creative work is subjective, so putting images and inspirations in a shared space where both sides can view them helps everyone develop a common language. As ideas progress, the project should become more clearly defined, including the purpose, goals, success metrics and the creative approach.

## Creative relationships

### Advice for clients: Trust your agency with creative decisions

You may have strong opinions and preferences about the creative elements of your project but keep an open mind. Your agency has likely worked on many campaigns and has a wealth of knowledge about what works and why. Remain focused on the needle-moving aspects of the work and only intervene when something specific is simply not appropriate for your brand.

### Advice for agencies: Get to know the CMO

Though your agency will primarily deal with a marketing manager during the creative process, in many cases there is an ultimate project approver above the marketing manager. It helps to establish a personal relationship with this person, whether the CMO or head of marketing, so they get an early appreciation of your agency's value and style. Have junior-level team members participate in client relationship building activities and foster an environment that encourages expression at all levels.

### Advice for clients and agencies: Treat each other as a team

The best client/agency relationships have a long-term outlook, stemming from a unity of purpose and strong personal bonds. Rather than looking at it as a vendor-customer transaction, develop relationships across the organizations and aim for continuously close collaboration on ideas. This creates a culture of trust-based risk tolerance that prevents good ideas from being shut down and challenges both parties to produce their best work.

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## Creative communication

### Advice for clients: Be clear and candid when giving feedback

Deadlines are most likely to be delayed during the creative review process because of unclear or confusing feedback. Successful creative reviews require two things: honesty and clarity. Give your honest feedback; if you don't like something, say so. Gut feelings are great, but reviewers must articulate their thoughts to provide meaningful and actionable feedback. Be specific about what works and what does not. You are not obliged to provide solutions but giving clear and candid feedback ensures your agency has a definitive direction for the next round.

### Advice for agencies: Make it easy for your clients to give precise feedback in context

The creative review process is difficult and frustrating when it involves a slew of emails from multiple reviewers featuring duplicate and contradictory feedback, removed from the visual work itself. Instead, use a creative collaboration service for collecting and managing feedback directly on the creative asset to cut hours from the review process and get to the final approval faster. For best results, make sure it is easy for all stakeholders to use, including clients who are on the road.

### Advice for clients and agencies: Close the loop on all communications

Never leave the other party wondering. When agencies send ideas or revisions, they immediately start worrying whether the client will like it. Clients should let them know when to expect feedback so they are not left waiting. And, make sure final approval is clear. There is a big difference between "*I love this,*" and "*Ready to ship.*"

Clients often feel like their feedback goes into the ether. Agencies need to respond to every client comment and, if you do not go with a client's suggestion, explain why.

Clear, timely and honest communications help build strong client/agency relationships.

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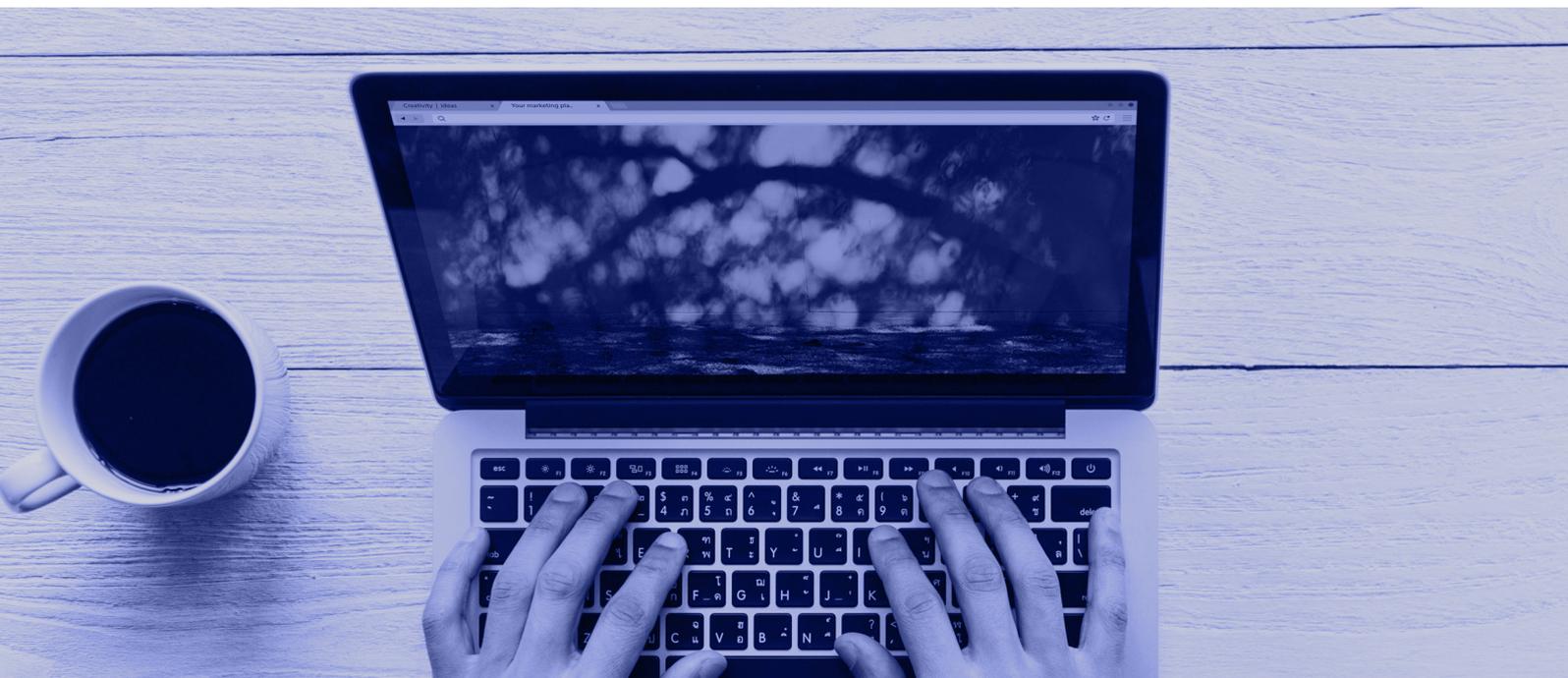
| Common problems and how to solve them | |
|---|---|
| *"We gave our agency lots of concepts and ideas but were disappointed that they only gave us one back."* | When a client contributes campaign ideas, the agency is in an awkward position. It is only natural that a client is biased towards their own suggestion. If the direction is preordained, it is likely unproductive for the agency to come up with too many other ideas. In addition, many agencies are reluctant to share half-formed ideas and may only present their most fleshed out concepts.

Clients can focus on the creative brief, help the agency understand the objectives of the project and tell the agency you are happy to consider partial ideas in the first round. |
| *"Our client keeps pushing for really out-dated ideas and is not engaging with our creative process."* | Steering a client away from outdated ideas is in an agency's best interest. No agency wants to be responsible for a failed campaign but simply disagreeing with client opinion is not enough.

Agencies can use the latest data and examples of their thought leadership in this area to show clients why their idea may not best achieve their goal. To improve engagement, outline the creative process early on and show how it led to success on other projects. |
| *"Our relationship feels on the edge and we do not know how to fix it."* | When the agency and client are deep in the weeds producing a campaign, with team communication focused on project deliverables, it is easy to forget the importance of managing the relationship.

Agencies should set up a monthly one-on-one meeting between the agency account manager and the marketing leaders on the client side to take the temperature of the overall working relationship and discover if there are any issues that need resolving. |

## Conclusion

A broken creative process is stressful to everyone. The value of a campaign or piece of content is subjective, with no right or wrong answers. It often comes down to trust between agency and client. Add in a looming deadline and the expectation to deliver concrete business results and it is easy to see the stress on both parties.

The last thing anyone needs is additional agony caused by poor project management and unclear client feedback. Yet, according to a recent survey, these are the two leading reasons why creative projects run over budget and past deadline. 75% of marketers feel they do not have an effective creative process and only 27% have a solution in place to aggregate, organize and manage their visual assets. This lack of process leads to a slow, painful and unclear feedback stage, which increases frustration and causes delays.

Digital collaboration tools that allow teams to consolidate content and comments enable open communication, honest and precise feedback, a clear understanding of tasks and an established system for approvals. Combining purpose-built technology with a better understanding of client and agency roles in managing creative briefs, relationships and communication leads to stronger relationships and business results.

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