

# 'LAYERS ON LAYERS':

A CREATIVE COLLABORATION REPORT

How excessive review and confusing  
technology are undermining  
creative production

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# 01

## Introduction

Whether marketers hail from brands, agencies or publishers, they live and die by the creative assets they produce. These are the images, videos and other rich media files that bring campaigns to life, capture the audience's eyes (or ears) and hold their attention – arguably the single most important currency in the marketing and advertising industry today. Not surprisingly, an immense amount of technology, innovation and organizational restructuring has been poured into making creative production easier and more efficient.

Or at least, that's been the goal.

We surveyed marketers, agencies and publishers about the software tools and organizational practices surrounding their companies' creative asset production. What we found was surprising: By and large, these professionals are approaching creative production and review in ways that are wholly counterproductive. The process is nearly broken, bogged down with too many people, steps and tools.



# 02

## Who responded?

A hefty majority of respondents — 78 percent — said they worked in brand marketing.

And this response trend makes sense. The rigors of creative asset production hit brands the hardest, in terms of damage to the brand, campaigns that don't deliver and stretched deadlines and budgets that can contaminate other projects.

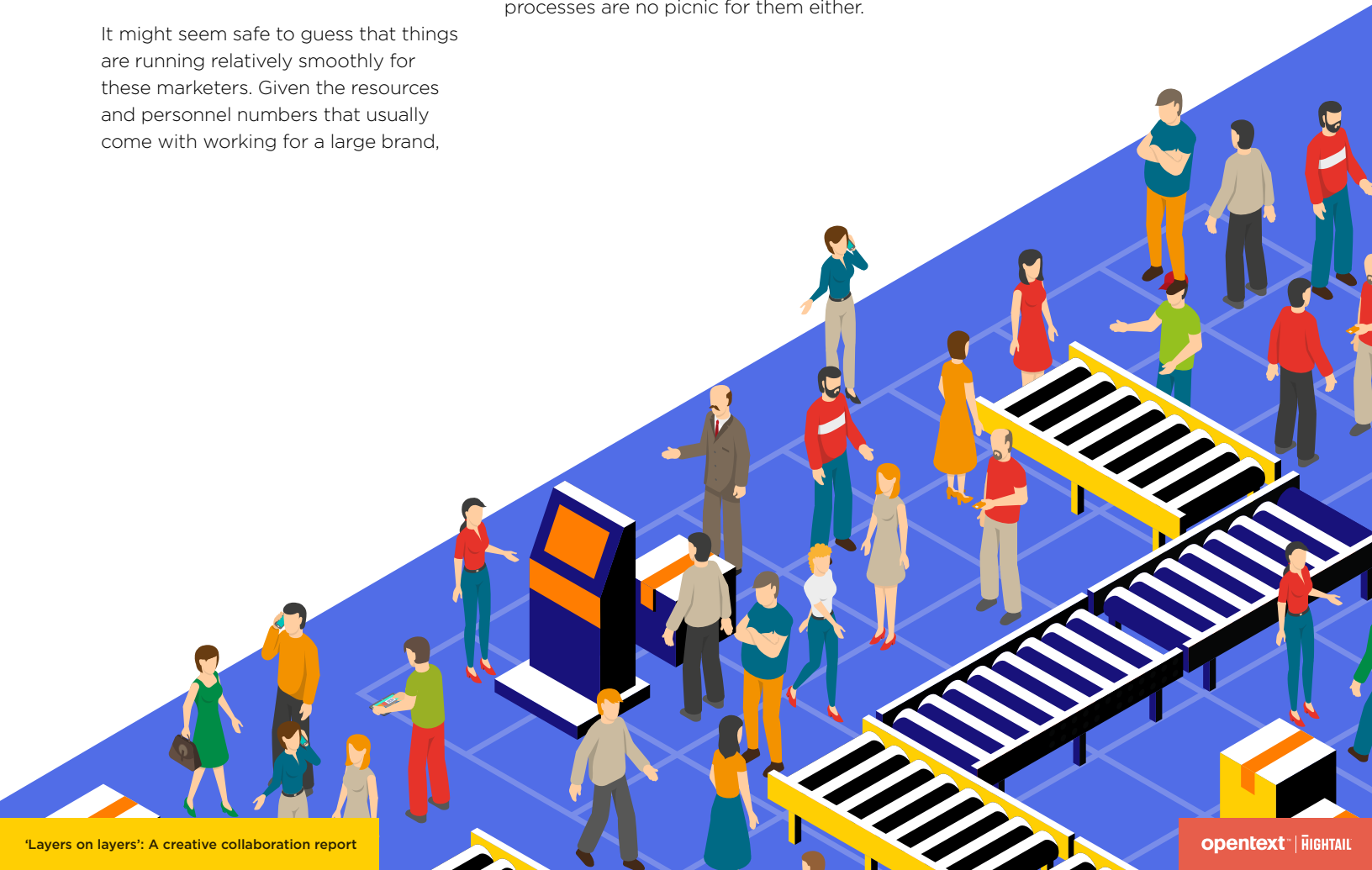
The marketers who responded to our survey didn't hail from just any brands — they came from large brands — they came from large brands. 70 percent of respondents said that their company had between 10,000 and 30,000 employees, while only 29 percent came from smaller companies.

It might seem safe to guess that things are running relatively smoothly for these marketers. Given the resources and personnel numbers that usually come with working for a large brand,

fundamentally crucial marketing tasks like asset production must be handled easily and efficiently — right?

We found quite the opposite. The sheer size and unwieldiness of these organizations seems to be creating inefficiencies and profound frustration. Indeed, larger companies with more production demands and more layers of interdepartmental review seem to be suffering more.

Only seven percent of respondents worked for publishers, while 13 percent came from agencies. And as the survey, as well as our follow-up interviews with several production-and-design-focused agency executives uncovered, creative processes are no picnic for them either.



## There are too many hands on deck

Before we comprehend the true scope of the problem, we need to realize one fundamental fact: Marketers are wearing an immense number of hats. 79 percent of respondents told us that they have a hand in both building and approving creative assets. Only 11 percent said they only manage and approve them, and a mere seven percent said they only build them.

“There are stakeholders on the client’s side, and then the stakeholders’ bosses have to weigh in,” said Kim Cortese, head of production at the digital agency Huge. “And sometimes the CMO and CEO are [involved] and you just think, wow. It’s layers on layers.”

Just as big a problem is that sometimes people involve themselves in creative review without even possessing the right expertise. “Varying degrees of familiarity with how to look at an unfinished piece can be problematic,” said Carissa Ranelycke, head of integrated production for the digital agency 360i. “The untimely feedback at a certain point in the production process can set you back days or even weeks. It’s imperative that the reviewer understands production and what they should be looking for during the process.”

Right away, we see that marketers — even ones that come from large companies — aren’t actually using their sprawling personnel resources to create an effective division of labor. Instead, everyone is just kind of doing everything. So what we found next wasn’t terribly shocking: Marketers and their colleagues are getting in each other’s way.

There are a lot of hands on deck, and the vast majority of respondents are working with numerous departments internally throughout the production and review process. 74 percent said they work with five or more departments while developing creative assets.

All things considered, the routing process is a dense jungle — a morass of sharing, feedback, editing and approvals from countless internal parties. And that’s not including the 32 percent of respondents that also work with external agencies. Digital marketers in today’s landscape are forced to hack their way through layer upon layer of review before their work can actually see the light of day.

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# 04

## Despite the size of their companies, marketers don't have enough resources

A whopping 82 percent of marketers say they have somewhat fewer resources than necessary to meet the demands of creative asset production. Conversely, only six percent said they comfortably had the necessary resources.

At first glance, those numbers are baffling. Didn't most respondents say that they work for organizations with more than 10,000 employees? It's one thing for these marketers to say they're stepping on each other's toes, but how could their companies be strapped for resources?

This leads us to another major problem uncovered by the survey: An overwhelming 88 percent of marketers said that demands for creative assets have increased at least somewhat within the past year.

And, of course, they have. Digital platforms now command the majority

of marketing dollars, and that trend is only growing. From social media to video to publisher sites, there is now a vast (and increasing) array of platforms — not to mention media formats — and creative assets must be precisely tailored to each one.

"Nowadays there is such a need for content," said Cortese. "There's always a need for more and more and more."

Speaking from the agency perspective, Cortese also observed that brands sometimes don't have concrete media plans in place before launching into a project, which can make the production and review process all the more onerous, chaotic and last-second. "On the back end after things are shot, all of a sudden [clients] will say, 'we need X amount more assets, we need more six-second [video ads], we need more social.' That happens more often than not," she said.

So when marketers from big companies with numerous internal departments (and potentially larger budgets) say that they don't have the resources they need, it's safe to say that recent demand increases — many of which are self-imposed — are a big reason. Even with all the tools at their disposal, marketers are still struggling to keep up.

Now there's another logical conclusion to be reached: Even as the industry changes, marketers aren't adapting their organizational structures. Marketers' workloads are being overtaken by an influx of production demands, yet they're still reporting at every step of the way to five or more departments. As marketers have more and more put on their plates, it seems highly unlikely that these cumbersome layers of review and oversight are doing them any favors.



## Marketers are blowing through deadlines

If time is money, then marketers are leaving plenty on the table: 93 percent of respondents said they sometimes run over the original allotted time for creative review and production. Just think about that — almost all of them are blowing deadlines. That combination of recent production increases and excessive internal oversight is dramatically affecting timelines.

It's the latter factor that seems to be doing more damage. 79 percent said that having too many individuals involved in the creative review process was contributing to missed deadlines, and another 18 percent said that having too many rounds of creative reviews was a factor.

"There are so many different layers of people that need to put their stamp on things, or be involved, or review," said Huge's Cortese. "That's going to triple the timeline."

When asked whether she thought cutting certain people out of the review process would have a positive effect, Cortese had a candid response: "Absolutely," she said. "As long as everybody's strategically aligned, and the creative all ladders up to a strategic goal that everyone agrees on."

"I think brands need to have a little more faith in the people they're giving the responsibility to," she added.

The conclusion is inescapable: There are too many cooks in the kitchen. Redundancies and excesses in the oversight process are having negative effects, and one of the worst is missed deadlines.

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## They're also blowing through budgets

Just as time is money, money is money. And marketers are spending more of it than they're supposed to, with 84 percent of respondents saying they run over budget at least sometimes in the production of their creative assets. Only 11 percent said they rarely do, and a mere five percent said they never do.

As we've seen, the majority of these marketers are working at large companies. They have large teams and numerous departments involved in the process. And they likely aren't working with shoestring budgets — yet they're blowing through them anyway. Once again, we see that this plethora of involved parties isn't making the process smoother — and it's certainly not making it less expensive.

One notable fact emerges when we look deeper into the numbers: There's an additional challenge that marketers face, and it's their primary

reason for running over budget. Namely, 79 percent of respondents cited "too many projects occurring simultaneously" as a factor leading to their budget woes. (As a reminder, an identical number cited "too many individuals involved in the creative review process" as a reason for missing deadlines.)

Now the picture is coming into even clearer focus: When it comes to creative asset review, a double whammy of heavy workloads and excessive layers of oversight are leading to budget overruns and blown deadlines.

360i's Ranellycke agreed that the twin problems of workloads and review rounds are "impacting budgets and deadlines."

"This can put several parties in uncomfortable positions," she said.





# 07

## Marketers are spending far too much time on creative review

Whether they attributed it as a reason for missed deadlines, blown budgets or none of the above, there is an overall consensus among all respondents: 84 percent agree that there are too many rounds of creative review.

We also asked respondents to tell us about other problems caused by excessive time spent on creative review, and one issue emerged quite starkly: 81 percent said that, due to the cumbersome creative process, the quality of their creative work suffers because other considerations inevitably wind up being prioritized.

That should be of major concern to brands “You only want to put out content that’s going to either drive a specific KPI or improve brand image,” said Seth Kelly, vp and creative director at the agency Reprise Digital.

“Bad content,” Kelly added, “will just penalize you in the form of throttled reach on Facebook or poor results on paid search. You can’t cut those corners.”

Ironically, by piling on layers of oversight and interdepartmental involvement, organizations are actually weakening their creative output. The quality of the work ultimately becomes secondary to making sure that every internal stakeholder has a hand in every conceivable aspect of a campaign.

Given everything we’ve discussed, it’s not surprising that 78 percent of respondents said that the creative review processes in place at their organizations are somewhat hindering ideation and development. Moreover, a staggering 95 percent of respondents said there was at least some gap between the average level of their organization’s creative output and the desired level. And 72 percent of those said that the gap was a large one.

The review structures in place at most organizations are having a negative impact on deadlines — and therefore budgets, ideation and quality. Marketers are working their tails off, and the payoff is dramatically less than what they’d like it to be.

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## Marketers have plenty of collaboration tools at their disposal. Are they helping?

There are many tools on the market dedicated to addressing all of these problems. File sharing, digital asset management, project management — they come with different names and serve different purposes, but all of them are geared toward helping marketers produce and review creative assets with a greater degree of efficiency.

By and large, companies are making use of at least some of these tools. 81 percent said they use two to three of them, and a further 15 percent said they use four to five. (Only one percent said they use one.)

One data point from our survey stood out clearly: 78 percent of respondents cited “confusing or inefficient use of collaboration tools” as a moderate problem. Moreover, 83 percent said that their organization’s use of such tools makes collaboration and communication more complicated. (In fact, 71 percent said “much” more complicated.)

If you ask marketers directly, many will tell you that the collaboration tools themselves aren’t the problem — it’s how they’re used.

“It depends on the tool and it depends on how people are using it,” said Michael O’Brien, a colleague of Kelly’s who works as svp and head of creative at Reprise Digital. “These tools can be somewhat laborious and cumbersome, but they’re also nice stop-gaps and accountability checkpoints.”

Huge’s Cortese mostly relies on a single creative collaboration tool for video and color correction. Not surprisingly, she thinks a pared-down use of such tools is more effective. “I think that the more simplistic things are, the better,” Cortese said. “People are using tons of different programs to do tons of different things. There’s a program to do schedules, there’s a program to review banners, there’s a program to review videos, a million different programs.”

She added, “Sometimes you just want to scale back on all of those technologies.”

As the survey and our interviews make clear, creative asset production is being complicated by confusing and inefficient digital tools. The fact that organizations are using so many tools at once — many of them with somewhat overlapping yet somewhat separate functionalities — is almost certainly contributing to this phenomenon, creating more redundancies and inefficiencies.



## Where things stand

Next time you see a banner ad on your favorite website, an interstitial on YouTube or anything else that's emerged from the creative minds behind a marketing campaign, think about the painstaking and cumbersome slog that took it from ideation to completion. If our survey is any guide, the process of conceiving and producing that content was beset by unnecessary redundancies and delays. And at every step of the way, the very tools and practices that were designed to make marketers' lives easier actually made creative asset production more difficult and more expensive.

We'll leave you with one final data point from our survey: 80 percent of respondents said they were at least somewhat dissatisfied with their companies' current processes for creative asset production and review. That's a crisis-level problem.

The reasons for this crisis are abundant: There are too many people involved in the review process, there are too many review rounds, there are too many projects going on simultaneously, and organizations are using collaboration

tools ineffectively and inefficiently. The consequences are severe: blown deadlines, budget overruns and diminished creative quality.

Moreover, larger companies don't fare better than smaller ones. In fact, the problem is exacerbated by heavy involvement of numerous departments and reviewers, along with the use of numerous collaboration tools.

All things considered, the outlook seems pretty bleak. But at the same time, this chorus of respondents all expressing the same concerns points the way forward: The key is simplification. This likely means fewer rounds of creative review and fewer layers of suffocating interdepartmental oversight.

Just as importantly, it involves a more streamlined and efficient use of creative collaboration tools. It's overwhelmingly likely that most organizations are using too many of these tools, and that they're simply butting up against one another and causing more confusion, hiccups and delays.

It's not that marketers need to stop using such tools altogether. Indeed, marketing experts are aligned on the fact that, when adopted across an organization, these tools are extremely useful. It's important to look for tools that support an easy onboarding process (and that are simple and intuitive to use). Marketers simply don't have time to adopt a new and complex tool — especially one that requires dependency on yet another department, such as IT.

"Creatives and clients believe learning a new platform will be hard, but once you get over that hurdle process, the platform can be seamless," said Ranelycke.





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