



Agency Search Consultants Advice for Agencies
"One Piece of Advice" for Agencies
January 2018

"One Piece of Advice"

4A's asked industry leading agency search consultants to provide "One Piece of Advice" that the association could share with members as they begin thinking about their 2018 new business plans.

The 4A's consultant request noted, "Based on your knowledge of client marketer needs/wants and industry dynamics, what is the one thing that you would recommend that an agency either do or not do that can help the effectiveness of their new business efforts? We welcome your advice in any area of the agency search and selection process (prospecting, RFI/RFP submissions, creds, chemistry, presentations, etc.)"

Search Consultant Advice

The advice shared by industry leading agency search consultants follows. The pieces are arranged by subject matter.

Opportunity Assessment

Joanne Davis Consulting

"It's not about you; it's never been about you; it's never going to be about you. It's about the client."

Clients would not be having reviews if everything was great. They have a problem, are under pressure, fearful of making a mistake. Serve up everything in the context of client issues. A capability relevant to the client is hands down more powerful than a credential."

Joanne Davis

Mercer Island Group

"Something the consultants understand better than most agencies is that you can't offer a prospect relevant value until you have identified the prospect's true business needs."

The basic idea of the elevator speech is inherently flawed — as are most agency pitches; if you're talking about things the prospect has no interest in, they will stop listening. Prospects don't want to buy marketing — they have business problems they need solved."

Steve Boehler, Partner

Drexler/Fajen & Partners

"Agencies could spend more time really understanding as much as possible about the prospect's business and their people and be prepared to demonstrate that in a natural way."

Too often the emphasis is on the agency as opposed to HOW the agency can help the prospect grow. That kind of preparation certainly helps an agency answer the challenge that is sure to be thrown at them for the finals pitch."

Steve Fajen

Agency Positioning & Credentials

External View Consulting Group

"Today, many agencies identify themselves as 'integrated marketing agencies.' However, credentials decks from these agencies are often too high level on integration theory, and lack detail about the agency's core areas of expertise.

After reading extensive capabilities lists and looking at disparate work samples, I often wonder if these agencies do anything particularly well — or if they are simply a jack-of-all trades.

'Integrated marketing agency' is a generic positioning that requires additional distinction. Is there some capability that marketers come to you for more often? Is your true expertise serving as lead agency ensuring strategic and executional continuity? Are you a master at helping marketers determine the right message for the right channel? If you are digital-at-the-core, what kinds of digital media do you primarily create?

Just like I don't trust restaurants that tell me that everything on the menu is great, I don't trust agencies that tell me they are great at everything."

Russel Wohlwerth

Roth Ryan Hayes

"With so many new and evolving competitors; standing out in the field for something is more important than being a 'good' generalist."

Matt Ryan

Pile & Company

"Be focused and honest. Focus on what the agency does well and what clients will be the right fit for the agency.

Be honest about what the agency doesn't do well and what clients aren't right for the agency. This focus and honesty will help pursue business that works for the agency."

Meghan McDonnell

Mzyme Marketing

"Be transparent, honest and straightforward.

Provide clarity with credible examples of what you do well and be honest and direct about those capabilities that you do not do or do not do well. You will be appreciated for this in the short term and rewarded for it in the long term."

Janet Bustin

Mercer Island Partners

"Many agencies realize that a finely tuned new business development program is key to new business efforts. However, agencies often forget to factor their online presence into their new business development program.

Key information for prospects is often difficult to find. A simple list of capabilities, case studies, awards experience, creative examples, and leadership bios should be available and easy to find not to mention key contact information. If I don't have an address, phone number, and email, I won't be reaching out."

Lindsay O'Neil, Consultant

Rojek Consulting

"Agencies will benefit and elevate their profile by making sure their digital presence, particularly in LinkedIn, works to their advantage.

Our clients evaluate agencies on a total company-wide level; they also love to vet individual agency team members online.

When an agency is clearly positioned in market and its digital footprint supports its positioning, and its employees and leaders are 'singing the same song', clients gain increased confidence in engaging in a conversation with them. Conversely, if there are disconnects between agency capability claims and its online presence, it raises questions. Take the time to check out how your agency company profile, and your employees, present themselves online; give your employees the on-brand content and creative assets to build your agency brand position, in particular within the LinkedIn channel where marketers seek information."

Lorraine Stewart

Ark Advisors

“Don’t be afraid to disagree with a prospective client in a pitch or to challenge their fundamental thinking. They actually like it. A little push back can go a long way toward building their trust.”

Ken Robinson

The Bedford Group

“Through the pitch process, demonstrate your ability to think about the whole business, not just the corner of it that’s included in your scope.

This will show that you can be a valuable participant at the planning table. Also, share examples of how you partner with other agency partners, which is sometimes overlooked as a powerful differentiator. Show the team how your skill in working collaboratively can help a marketing team that is time deprived and burdened with the crush of new channels and long lists of vendor partners.”

Kerry Kielb

Mercer Island Group

“Teaching new business development folks in agencies to sound just like everyone else in the industry is the quickest way to commoditize your agency’s value proposition and forfeit any competitive advantage you might otherwise enjoy.

In an increasingly competitive agency environment, clients and prospective clients are looking for something different — to energize their business and increase the return on their marketing dollars. Learning how to identify the triggers that cause prospects to want to engage in more in-depth conversations about their needs and your value is the place to spend your efforts.”

Robin Boehler, Partner

Bajkowski + Partners

“When selecting your case studies, make sure they are relevant to the client’s situation in some way — client’s business challenges and goals, core target audience, etc. — don’t just pick your agency’s favorites or ones that you already have on hand. If they’re not relevant, then it’s likely to get your agency cut.”

Laura Bajkowski

Mercer Island Group

"When pitching, the most successful agencies are the ones that find ways to bond over a prospect's business, not their own services or experience.

Every part of your response, written and verbal, should tie directly back to a prospect's business. The easiest way to do this is to always ask yourself, 'Is each section of our response clearly linked to their business issues?' For example, do you provide standard bios, or do you take the time to highlight how each person's experience makes them the best fit?

A response needs to do more than communicate who you are and what you do; it needs to demonstrate how you are best positioned to advance their business."

Matt Driscoll, Senior Consultant

AAR

"It's not just the pitch meetings that count; it's what you do/offer between meetings that give you an edge.

CMOs are juggling much more than just their agency relationships and when a review is called, it's almost like the straw that broke the camel's back. They're no more thrilled with the search than agencies are and the more you can help make the process smooth, easy and less chaotic, the better it is for both sides.

I recently managed a pitch where the winning agency not only won because of their smart thinking but because they also offered the little extras throughout the pitch process such as call reports, travel agendas, executive summaries for in-person meetings and much more. The extra details helped the client to keep meetings/conversations memorable and the agency front and center from beginning to end."

Lisa Colantuono

Mercer Island Group

"The best interactions are always the most conversational.

We've worked with many agencies on making their pitches more engaging and interactive, but even in something as simple as a phone call, a surprising number of agencies merely roll out experience and accolades, rather than listen and react.

The most impressive agencies show they can think on their feet by playing off the other party — any call should be a microcosm of how you'll work together.”
Barry O'Neil, Senior Consultant

Bajkowski + Partners

“If you're going to completely change direction from a pre-pitch strategy or tissue session, you must spend time during the pitch explaining what data and insights led you to the new strategy/direction. Connect the dots for the client and don't rush into creative because you think that will wow them.”

Laura Bajkowski

JLB+Partners

“Every client wants to know the breadth and depth of what an agency can do for their business. Both what you can do to deliver today's immediate scope of work requirements....and how you can help them up their marketing game further down the road.

But they also want and need to very clearly understand what you will do for their business for their current budget and under the terms of your approved compensation agreement if you win the business. Big "stretch ideas" presented during pitches can be a double edge sword for agencies and clients alike. Often these are the things that distinguish one agency from the next, turn a client's head, and help agencies to win business. But if The Big Idea can't be delivered for the agreed upon budgeted compensation, then there is a sense of bait and switch at the very critical start of a new client-agency relationship.

Our advice: avoid this confusion at all cost. Make sure you have the unglamorous discussion about what are in-scope versus out-of-scope deliverables for your agreed upon compensation during final negotiations and prior to engagement. Your clients will respect your transparency.”

Mary Conrad

The Burnett Collective

“Keep it simple! It's not new or groundbreaking advice, but over-complicating and over-building things is something that we see ruin new business meetings and client presentations time and time again.

So whether it's managing existing clients or pitching new ones, there are so many objectives, so many ideas and the landscape is ever changing. It's

impossible to try to cover everything or be the experts in every area, so stay focused. Distill your thoughts, be clear in your presentation, and curate your content.

A brilliant CEO once said to an agency, "What is the single piece of information I'm supposed to take away from this slide?" And no one from the agency could answer his question. Make sure your intent and message is clear and organized."

Casey Burnett

Ark Advisors

"Remember that while the consultant managing search is paid by the client, it is in their best interest — and everyone's best interest — to have your agency do the best possible job in the pitch.

So don't hesitate to speak with the consultants frequently — ask questions, share your thinking about your approach to each aspect of the pitch and ask for their opinion. The consultant has the client's ear and can give you valuable advice and feedback. Seek it out. Don't be shy."

Ann Billock

JLB+Partners

“Marketers have more options than ever before in terms of marketing communications agencies and services.

Everyone is well aware of the large consulting firms acquiring agencies and getting into the space. And, of the numerous specialists that have cropped up in areas like social media and content creation/management. And, more clients are looking harder at taking certain services in house. This suggests that communicating your core competencies and how you can leverage those competencies to your prospective clients’ benefit will be more important than ever in a competitive pitch.

But, with all of this in mind, an agency’s best new business strategy might be re-committing to your current clients. Make sure you maintain a seat at their table by focusing on what you do best and investing in the relationship. We understand the cost pressures that most every agency is dealing with, but your clients are dealing with them too, due to global competition and disruptive new technologies. Even those clients who value their agency partnerships will not have much sympathy for any “woe is us, Madison Avenue Manslaughter” complaining.

If you are not investing time and resources in your good client relationships (even when your margins are tight), you might well end up losing out to any number of outside agencies knocking on your client’s door or to other incumbent agencies winning an internal agency consolidation.”

Dave Beals

Juel Consulting

“Think through what your new ‘contract’ with client partners looks like in the new world order.

We all know that the shift towards earned and owned media is forcing shifts in budgets and alignment of resources. As clients migrate more capabilities in house, they still need agency partners, especially strategic partners. But clients need to work with agencies in a new way.

Can agencies work with clients who are more involved in the development process? Think through how you will operate as “co-creators”. Will you resist the change or will you embrace it in a collaborative way?”

June Blocklin

Bob Wolf Partners/TPG

“Too many reviews seem to be initiated due to management changes, KPI’s not meeting expectations and/or a lack of scrutiny as to what Client issues may have resulted to poor advertising/marcom campaign results.

Before a review decision is made, I would suggest a careful 360 performance review of both Agency (incumbent) and Client teams to see if the key elements of the relationship...culture, lines of communication, values, insights/creativity, briefing/feedback mechanisms and personnel ‘fit’ are optimized against brand goals.

This kind of initial Client/Agency performance audit may lay the groundwork for improved future results with the incumbent agency...or, at the very least, provide the foundation for a new review and a successful long-term relationship with the winning agency. The Performance Audit also is useful as the basis for agency compensation negotiation/renegotiation. As you might expect, self-serving as it may seem, this kind of 360-Performance Audit is best conducted with the assistance of an outside consultant to ensure objectivity and ease in handling any delicate personnel/turf issues.”

Dan Pearlman

Select Resources, Inc.

“We are experiencing tremendous change in our business. So much so clients are asking us to evaluate taking certain work streams traditionally managed by agency partners in-house.

This speaks to a fundamental miss on the part of shops to either innovate or be the trust worthy transparent business partners clients are seeking. Clients not only have to manage the change in consumer behavior and brand engagement they have to figure out how to continue to drive business growth often in very commoditized and competitive categories. It’s no longer about raw creativity and how to deliver the best differentiating and breakthrough creative; it’s more importantly also about the most innovative and future-facing ways of working for both cost efficiency and business effectiveness.

Embrace change. Whether it's data management, e.g. for better insights, for targeted personalized and contextual messages, always on distribution, results optimization, etc. or a new production model for handling real time snackable inexpensive content creation, clients are seeking the most innovative practitioners to help them leverage these new and innovative ways of working.

The role of an agency as well as its corresponding business model needs to evolve to stay relevant. This is not about being digital or traditional. We already live in a digital world. The need to speak to capabilities in this context is no longer the point. It's demonstrating that you are ahead of the class in offering potential clients a future facing capability to drive business growth and brand love."

Catherine Bension
