

37 Mistakes This Creative Agency Made in the Last Three Years

A comprehensive list of slip-ups, screwups, and lessons learned spanning every business function: management, creative, business development, strategy, staffing, engagement, and marketing.

Building a creative agency is hard. We've had stumbles and made some dumb mistakes. This list was created as an exercise during our annual leadership meeting — a time when we examine our strategy and make adjustments for the year ahead. We made this list for two big reasons: we're trying to solve a hard problem, and we're trying to grow responsibly.

Too many brands and service agencies sweep problems under the rug. That creates a toxic environment full of overworked and under-appreciated staff, which ultimately leads to poor client service. We want the opposite — to create good culture, take care of our people, grow responsibly, and learn by synthesizing our mistakes.

General Management

1. Crappy meeting culture

At first, not enough meetings. Then too many meetings! Daily scrums are great for 1-10 people. Add more people and the scrum lasts 30 minutes. Solution: meetings by department and once-per-week all-hands.

2. Thought good tools would fix bad habits

Slack will not fix your communication problems. People do what offers the least friction unless given an incentive not to. You've got to enforce cultural standards. Nouns don't solve verb problems.

3. Didn't keep everyone updated on wins

Figured everyone would just know when good stuff happened. Incorrect. Fixed with weekly updates.

4. Didn't have enough one-on-ones

Every management book says to do this. You've got to make time to check in. Otherwise assumptions creep in, causing stress because people don't know how they're performing.

5. Hired jerks

Skills change. People who use the company card to ship their furniture to China don't change.

Creative

6. Assumed everyone thought the same way

I thought everybody was a run-and-gun lone operator. That most good work was the product of a single actor. Super not true. Had to learn to delegate, listen, and scale our processes.

7. Didn't unify our creative functions

Different backgrounds created internal tension. Advertising creatives didn't know what brand creatives did. Solution: integrated the two disciplines. They provide different paths but common destinations.

8. Didn't invest enough in project management at the beginning

As a lone operator, I didn't understand that creative teams thrived with capable PMs.

9. Didn't let go of old ideas quickly enough

Got stuck in an old hiring paradigm. Learned to invest in leaders who can teach systems to other employees.

10. Thought a wonderful culture would just magically manifest itself

We needed to actively work toward the culture we wanted. More off-sites, team lunches, and a Digital Living code that sets expectations for how we work together.

11. No after-action reports

Didn't socialize learnings after projects, making it hard to distribute knowledge.

Business Development

12. Didn't clarify what we were selling

Used mealy-mouth language to describe our offering. Clients would say 'you're the guys who do content, right?' We do so much more but hadn't been explicit about what we sell.

13. Made it too hard to buy our offering

Brands don't have line items for 'creative systems.' We would sell the 'why' without selling the 'what.'

14. Thought a consultant would fix our BD process

Should have pushed back on assumptions more. Needed to put in the hard work ourselves. No magical unicorn hires.

15. Didn't sell strategically

Relied too much on personal network without a strategic approach to targeting companies and work we wanted.

16. Competed for the wrong work

Sometimes competed for tactical work when we do best at innovative marketing systems.

17. Sold the right thing at the wrong altitude

Sometimes sold strategy to somebody who needs tactics. CMOs understand systems thinking; marketing managers need tactical solutions.

18. Didn't ask enough questions about the client's business

Made too many assumptions, which lengthens project times and makes it harder to 'get to useful' faster.

19. Didn't raise our hand

Had seats at tables waiting but didn't ask to sit down. Took too long to say 'include us on stuff.'

20. Undercut our own creatives

Agreed to shortcuts when clients didn't want to pay for necessary steps. Learned to speak up about limits.

Strategy

21. Used too much jargon

Hired talented people from different places without standardizing language. Three staffers using different words for the same thing.

22. Didn't define 'insight' to our clients

Insight isn't just data — it's interpretation. By not explaining this, clients thought great insights come in neat packages without effort.

23. Didn't include strategists early enough

Strategists thrive on context. Include them early and often.

Staffing

24. Hired smart people thinking we'd figure out their role later

Hired against undefined needs and processes. Had to let good people go because they didn't fit. Better to freelance archetypes first.

25. Didn't create a predictable hiring pipeline

Didn't make clear guidelines for who to hire and when.

26. Didn't hire quickly enough

Chronically understaffed. Team was so productive we didn't realize how worn down they were until everybody crashed.

27. Should have made employees into owners sooner

Took almost a year to implement ESOP. Said it was coming but delays hurt morale.

28. Didn't have an onboarding process

Would hire people and just throw them off the high dive. Just an email about benefits and a Slack login.

Engagement / Project Management

29. Didn't productize processes for staff

Thought we could PM ourselves. Could not. Didn't create repeatable processes, causing confusion.

30. Didn't transition elegantly between BD and Engagement

The person with the best relationship isn't the day-to-day manager. Needed an elegant hand-off process.

31. Didn't always have the hard conversations with clients

Scope changes affect timing, which affects cost. Must have open conversations about how changes affect deliverability.

32. Didn't 'get to useful' quickly enough

Useful is the point where clients can put work into market and see positive change. Didn't structure engagements for this early on.

33. Didn't maintain the right relationship throughout the engagement

Started with CEO support, but CEO disappeared during work. Without their involvement, work landed with a thud.

Marketing

34. Took too long to define a cohesive message

If a client wanted to suggest us to another group, they had difficulty explaining what we could do.

35. Kept an ugly website

First iteration fell off the ugly tree. Wasn't a big deal with word of mouth, but sucked for marketing.

36. Didn't tell people about ourselves in the right way

Best content doesn't sell the reader on your value — it gives value to the reader. Helps them be better versions of themselves.

37. Didn't create fun side projects

A big part of agency fun is being surrounded by creative people who love creative projects. Institutionalized making fun projects.