

Your clients are killing your best ideas, and that's your fault

Getting client approval for your agency's brilliant ideas isn't an obstacle to doing your job. It's your only job.



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We live in a time of great change.

It's not the best of times.

It's not the worst of times.

But it's definitely the changiest of times.

Everywhere you look, there's disruption. Tumult. Eye-widening new shit.

Social influencers.

Content marketing.

A riotous kudzu of sponcon.

That's all new.

Then also: marketing automation, predictive analytics, artificial intelligence, attribution modeling.

Brands have been told to give TLC to PPC.

They've been told to get ROI with SEO.

To GFY with APIs.

Not to mention: to heed the relentless call to migrate to all of their work to a billowy concept called the cloud, a description formerly reserved for things like Sky Yahwehs and the Mario Kart referee.

That's a lot of change.

But while all that change is happening, one thing stays stubbornly the same.

That one thing is undermining your best ideas. It's destroying your strategies. It's putting the kabosh on your best ideas just before launch.

That one thing is your client.

The real, live, bones-and-a-butt person who hired you because of your prior work, but who is now quibbling with your insights.

The person who asked you to solve their problem, but who is now nitpicking your conclusions.

The person who was excited to see your strategy, but who is now looming above you on a video call, furrowing their brow more deeply with each passing slide in your deck.

Why? Because they don't understand what the hell you're telling them to do.

That's a shame. That's a terrible vexation. But guess what.

That's your fault.

Because the client is smart.

The client knows their business. They understand their customer. They're adept at their org's sales motion.

But now they're in a position to judge your marketing. And the more that the world of marketing has evolved, the less likely they're going to understand the paradigms you're working with.

For example, see above: *change, shitload of*.

Unless you truly understand your client's business.

From the client's point of view, it's the agency that doesn't understand the context of the brand.

From the client's point of view, it's the agency that doesn't exactly get how to align workflows, goals, and expertise.

From the client's point of view, it's the agency that's suggesting some *wacky new shit* when all the client wants is *something that works*.

So when confronted with new ideas that *seemingly* aren't appropriate, any client will do the exact same thing: they're going to return to what they know.

Did segmenting the audience and creating a white paper for each audience type work before? They're going to want that again.

Did paid social against influencer videos work before? They're going to want that again.

Did banner ads work before? Yes, they say, that.

Let's do *that* again.

In other words, they're going to over-index on control instead of creativity.

They're going to grind down your handsome idea to the thin edge of non-existence and only approve work that will be mightily, mightily boring.

Which means your job is to be empathetic.

It's your job to understand the client's context. To understand what they really, truly need.

That is, to understand not what you want to give them, but *what will be the most useful for their business*. Then it's your job to help the client want it.

In fact, this job is the most important job you have.

If you fail, you waste time creating strategy the client doesn't understand.

If you fail, you consign yourself to a withering series of rejections.

If you fail, your creative team stops looking for good solutions and just starts reacting to the client's confusion. The work becomes boring. The work becomes mediocre. The work sucks.

But if you get it right ...

... if you succeed in aligning with your client and then keeping that alignment throughout the project ...

... if you can achieve a deep understanding of their knowledge base, their obstacles, and their expectations ...

... and if you can keep that level of understanding throughout the engagement ...

Well then.

Sky Yahweh's the limit.

And so, here are six simple-sounding ways (that actually require a good bit of skill) to keep yourself on the same page as your client:

1. Create a clear strategy brief. Get sign off.

Yes, this is obvious. But, yes, this is also the most common step that's skipped – usually due to the need for speed. But insist upon it. Create a record of your approach and your methodology and ask the client to sign off. The brief becomes the single source of strategic truth. All creative decisions can be traced back to it. And while a brief may not prevent subsequent course shifting, its acknowledged presence forces a more transparent conversation.

2. Create a clear demarcation point between strategy and production.

Once the strategy brief is approved, create a moment that clearly defines the move into "making stuff". Ensure that the client is aware of the import of their approval, and how timelines and budgets can be affected by further strategy changes. This keeps everyone honest.

3. Ask the hard questions.

Client work is a game of appearance poker. The agency wants to appear smart. The client wants to appear smart. Nobody wants to be embarrassed. Nobody wants to be an asshole. But you can't let these well-meaning intentions prevent you from asking your client direct questions. Those questions range from the obvious ("What's driving this timeline pressure?") to delicate queries about how empowered the client is to drive this work through the organization.

4. Insist on the appropriate amount of face time.

Great work is built, not debited. Any surprise to a client is a failure. Insist on maintaining communication with your stakeholders and help them understand the importance of check-ins and sign-offs.

5. Know when to stop pivoting.

Every project plan changes. Most strategies are challenged. Timelines and budgets shift. A good partner agency accommodates these known unknowns. But, at a certain point, constantly changing a project plan creates undue stress on team morale. A client who constantly shifts expectations may not understand the import of their decisions, or the flow of the work. Have that conversation.

6. Maintain multiple relationships with the brand.

Every project needs a single point of contact to manage timeline and tasks. But a healthy, long-term relationship with a brand benefits from nurturing multiple relationships. Those relationships give you context. They help you understand what's going on within the brand building. And when the first project goes well, those relationships will be what you call on for the next one.

Good luck.

With a little empathy, you will surely be successful.



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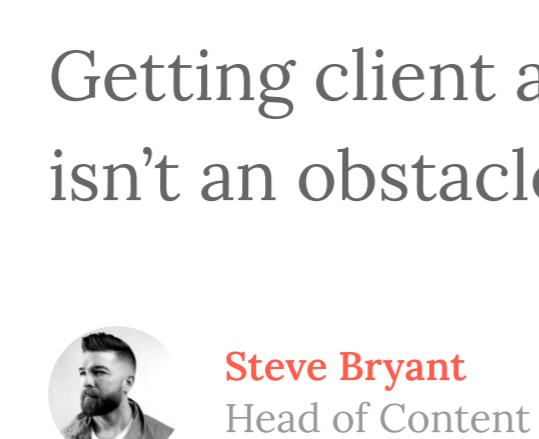


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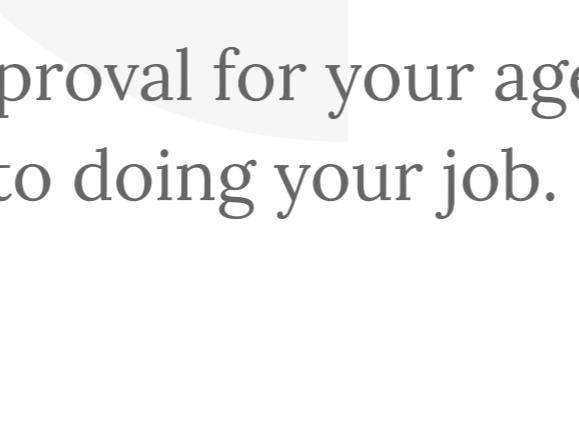


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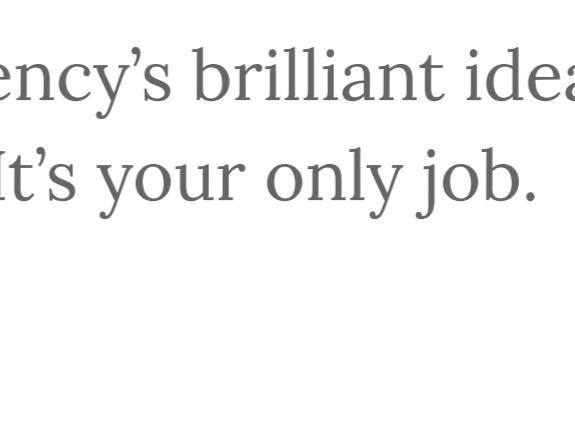


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