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Optimizing the Client-Agency Relationship

Posted on: July 16th, 2013

The rise of digital, social media and mobile has not only changed how pharma communicates with its customers, but also how pharma works with its agency—or rather agencies. Pharma now has to choose whether to have several agencies, each specializing in a different medium (traditional and digital) or even its own channel (social, mobile, print, etc.), or to work with an agency that can handle it all. *PM360* asked marketers on both sides of the aisle (clients and agencies) to describe the key to a strong relationship? How to set up a relationship that keeps both parties' goals clearly in focus and what it takes to ensure those goals are reached? And finally, how has the digital world impacted the client-agency relationship and is it better to take the siloed approach or go all-in-one?

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A good client-agency relationship starts by making sure it is a good fit, both culturally and personally. The needs of a smaller entrepreneurial pharmaceutical company may be different from those of a larger one. Agencies must understand their clients' needs as well as they understand their brands. This extends to everything from delivering budget-realistic ideas to stewarding projects through promotional review.

Not long ago, one needed to know simply the market and the medicine, but today that market has exploded across an ever-growing sea of channels which has forced us to change how we foster strong relationships. We now have more clients on a brand team and multiple agency partners, each with their own specific expertise. Nevertheless, agencies must stay at the forefront of all these channels so we can remain a resource and brand champion for our clients and their other partners.

So is it "jack of all trades, master of none"? Of course, we challenge ourselves to become masters, because we want our clients to continue to be able to turn to us for advice. This means attending industry conferences, meeting regularly with channel-specific vendors and embracing social media—my Pinterest boards, for example, are a mindboggling mix of marketing trend infographics and yummy desserts.

When companies work with several agencies, collaboration is most effective when each has a specific, clearly defined responsibility. Expectations are best established when the client sets the tone for collaboration, not competition. It's also helpful to have one agency of record responsible for content to ensure consistency across partners. Holding monthly in-person meetings and proactively sharing projects among agencies go a long way to efficiently delivering great work. And who doesn't love Google Docs?

In the end, I believe the sign of a really good relationship is one in which the words "agency" and "client" are never uttered. And we go by first names only.