

# Pharmaceutical Executive

FOR GLOBAL BUSINESS AND MARKETING LEADERS

## Choosing an Agency

From courtship to marriage,  
agency selection dos and don'ts guide  
the way to a perfect match.

**by Risa Bernstein**

President, Accel Healthcare Communications

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AN ADVANSTAR ★ PUBLICATION

Printed in U.S.A.

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**From courtship to marriage,** agency selection dos and don'ts guide the way to a perfect match.



**Risa Bernstein**

**Risa Bernstein** is president of Accel Healthcare Communications in New York City.

**C**hoosing an agency is one of the most important decisions a product manager will make. Even if the final decision lies mainly in the hands of senior management, participation in a successful selection process reflects well on PMs' professional images and, more important, contributes to their personal satisfaction through the demanding launch process and beyond. After all, the PM, probably more than any one else on the marketing team, will "live" with that agency nearly every day, sometimes around the clock, for two or more years.

## **Cruising**

The product is in Phase III clinical trials. The studies are going well, and it looks like the new drug application will be filed in

six to eight months. Management anticipates approval in 18 months to two years. It's time to think about the names, positions, and messages that will set the brand apart in a crowded market. It's time to think about finding a partner that can help realize your hopes and dreams for the brand—and for your career. It's time to think about hiring an agency.

It sounds easy, but choosing an agency based on the traditional dog-and-pony-show is a little like selecting a spouse in a bar: the agency that delivers the most sizzling first impression may not be the partner that will share your values and stand by you for the long haul. What initially attracts you to an agency may fall short of what is needed to foster a mutually rewarding, lasting relationship.

*Small Business Reports* put together an excellent list of questions for evaluating whether an agency is right for you:

- Does it understand and address your company's objectives?
- Does it have the necessary credentials and experience?
- Is it familiar with the company's business?
- Is it interested in the company's business?
- Does it understand the competitive product situation?
- Does it suggest sound marketing strategies?
- Does it present clear, creative solutions?
- Does it have good internal resources?
- Does it have a strong management team?
- Can you and the agency work together?

Those questions offer an objective basis for comparing agency presentations. But



**DO talk with a few people at the agency who don't work on your account.** Ask them if they like working there and why. Probe for specifics. The details they offer can reveal what that agency is all about. Find out if they feel stimulated and professionally nurtured in the environment, because that is a strong indicator of how much longevity you can expect from the staff assigned to your account.

When employees are asked what is most important in a work environment, compensation and responsibilities often fall far below the employer's commitment to their career paths and growth. Ask if the agency provides training and mentoring opportunities, because that will reveal a great deal about the culture of the agency partner you may be hiring and how likely it is to retain its talent.

**DO request client references and, after receiving them, ask for one more.** That is a good way to assess existing client satisfaction with the agency. Asking for one additional reference will ensure the agency has released more names than just those on its "happy clients" list. Such a request may come as a surprise, but the agency should be willing to oblige if it has nothing to hide. References from its clients' junior, middle, and upper management can tell you how well the agency manages the client side at all levels. That's how to learn, for example, if the agency's relationship with a particular client is based on an untouchable friendship with its vice-president of marketing and the rest of the product team is dissatisfied.

**DO ask about the length of the agency's relationships with existing clients and the growth of their accounts.** The best testimonial to an agency's strength is its ability to grow existing clients' businesses. When a client is happy with an agency, the best way to show that satisfaction is to reward it with more business. The strongest gauge of client satisfaction with an agency is the duration and volume of its business.

**DO ask the agency president for a history of any accounts resigned.** Is the agency a fair-weather friend? One test of loyalty is whether it has a history of resigning accounts whenever the next big opportunity in the category comes along. That happens often and says a lot about an agency's ethics. If an agency considers it a good business decision to resign accounts in favor of larger, potential blockbuster opportunities, it helps to know that ahead of time. Your account could be next.

**DO request one purely social meeting with your account team before making the final decision.** Getting to know each other better outside the office may determine if you have the chemistry to make working together enjoyable. Some business professionals argue that fun is not an essential selection criterion, but anyone who has lived through a product launch knows that fun can be the ingredient that makes the process bearable. Market research travel schedules are unrelenting, timelines are unforgiving, copy submission is grueling, FDA submission is demand-

ing. Pressure is the name of the launch game. Team members who genuinely enjoy each other's company and laugh together within the confines of a demanding schedule can ease an otherwise painful process.

**DON'T be concerned if a few members of your agency team have yet to be assigned before signing the contract.** Many clients have been burned by bait-and-switch experiences in which a razzle-dazzle team spearheaded the pitch and won the account, then vanished, only to be replaced by a junior team to conduct the daily business. That experience became so commonplace, savvy clients began demanding that the pitch be made by the team that would actually work on the account.

Although that seems sensible, it is unrealistic. No hard-working and ethical agency has a full, idle account team waiting around to be assigned to a large piece of new business. Agency economics make that unaffordable. And, if an agency really does promise a full team, it is probably taking it from existing clients who will be disappointed by the loss—which could also happen to you in the future. So beware of agencies that promise full staffing from day one. Insist on meeting one or two key account and creative contacts who are definite members of the team, then take part in interviewing candidates to complete the team.

**DO ask senior agency managers what trends they are following and how they will affect your business.** That will help you differentiate the movers and shakers from those content with the status quo. The best agencies think about their clients' business and theirs as they evaluate new media, technologies, digital strategies, and ideas to communicate with a host of audiences. The list of trends could be endless, ranging from Medicare reform and the need to identify new reimbursement consultants to the design and development of Web sites that comply with current FDA regulations. Ask what trends the prospective agency team thinks will be important as the partnership evolves over time.

**DO probe the agency and its client references about the agency's record of delivering projects on time and on budget.** It's amazing how often those aspects of agency work are forgotten in the selection process and how often they lie at the root of what makes clients unhappy in the long run. No amount of great strategic thinking, creativity, and chemistry can make up for consistently missed deadlines and budgets. Even though it may seem like minutia at the time of the pitch and immediately thereafter, remember that consistent, quality execution and accountability are as important as the big ideas.

## The Big Decision

This list of dos and don'ts is by no means comprehensive. But, as you gain experience as a product manager, you will add your own guidelines to the list, which will help clarify your values as you seek the best choice for a long-term agency partner. ■



they are impractical for sorting through the nuances of agency similarities and differences that will affect a long-term relationship.

## Dating Tips

The following dos and don'ts offer insights for making the ultimate decision. They have stood the test of time and should help clarify the values you seek in an agency—for now and for the long term. Eventually, however, you will form your own opinions about what is most important, and your own finely honed instincts will become the best measures for choosing an agency partner.

**DON'T settle for a general-capabilities presentation alone. Combine it with the agency pitch.** Although the pitch should begin with a short statement about an agency's capabilities and credentials, a pure capabilities presentation is a complete waste of time. Little more than a talking resume, it often reveals nothing that is relevant to the company's business. Instead, select a list of agencies to interview based on recommendations from internal and external colleagues or from agency profiles in healthcare marketing trade journals or on Web sites. To level the playing field, send a brief questionnaire to prospective agencies to compare objective facts, such as size, client roster, services offered, and number of offices. Allow the agency to put its time and resources into the pitch, where you can see its creativity shine.

**DO brief potential agencies before the pitch and have them solve some of your real challenges.**

Potential clients often tell an agency very little before a pitch so they can assess how well the agency did its homework. A more valuable approach is giving the agency team outlines for one or two of the company's challenges before the meeting to establish a clear sense of its members' strategic and creative thinking about real-world issues. That makes it easier to compare agencies' responses to see which ones add value to your own thinking. Product managers can evaluate the differences in agency thought processes against a standard set of inputs.

The degree to which an agency agrees with your thinking is the wrong yardstick for measuring the presentation. The agency that disagrees with your views may, in fact, be the right partner to stimulate your thinking. As long as you and the agency team are open to the other's viewpoints and challenge each other intellectually and strategically, varying perspectives can be a healthy part of the relationship.

**DON'T make experience in the product category**

**an absolute requirement to win the account.** Although an agency has an obvious learning-curve advantage if it has experience in a particular product category, you will benefit from placing more weight on your overall impression of an agency's approach. You are buying your product's future, not the agency's past. Any good agency team can learn a new category quickly. Even if it takes a little more effort on your end, it may be well worth it in the long run. There's no substitute for a compatible partnership.

**DO ask the agency to include its branding philosophy in the pitch.** In today's crowded pharmaceutical market, every agency needs a firm approach to branding. It has taken the industry years to learn from consumer marketers the lessons that help their products win customers' hearts and minds. Agencies should thoughtfully sort through the branding issues that will help your product succeed in its category.

**DO get better acquainted with the contenders before you make the final decision.** Ask to visit for a day to meet with as many of the people who will work on your account as possible. Sit around a table and talk to each other. Throw out questions to get a sense of how the team members think on the spot, and allow the agency folks to ask their own questions about your business. Listen to what they ask to learn about how they think and what they think is important. Take a tour of the facility. Pay attention to employees and see if they seem happy there. Do they talk to each other? Are groups of people meeting together in offices? Does the culture seem collaborative and warm? All of those qualities paint a picture of how easy that agency is to work with.

**DO request a meeting with the creative team.**

A separate meeting should reveal an agency's philosophy of direct access to the creative people—something you want in an agency. Although you will maintain closest contact with the agency's account people, form strong bonds with its art director and copywriter, because your input and ideas will sometimes go directly to them. The creative people should get to know you well so they can understand your needs and beliefs. That makes for better communication and, ultimately, for better work.

Talking face to face with members of the creative team—without the account people—will reveal a better sense of their passion and creativity than a formal pitch may convey. Ask to see some of their work and discuss it with them. That will help you evaluate whether you can reach a meeting of the minds on the creative campaign you will ultimately develop together.