



HOW TO SPRINKLE MAGIC PIXIE-DUST

So what's it actually like to sit on the client side during a pitch? LUCIAN CAMP unearthed some surprising, or maybe not so surprising, discoveries.

Throughout my many years on the agency side, I'd have happily paid a large amount of my own money to sit on the client's side of the table during a pitch process. Partly, I was sure I'd learn from what other agencies did: but also, it was partly an ever-so-slightly voyeuristic curiosity. I wanted to see my competitors in action.

Over the two years that I've been a one-man consultancy, my wish has been granted several times over – and, far from having to part with my own money, I've actually been paid to sit on the client's side. What have I learned from the invaluable experience?

Well, mostly, to be honest, it's things that I already suspected. Among these, first and foremost, is that agencies pitch to a pretty high standard. If you see a long list of, say, half a dozen, and then ask three to go forward to a final shoot-out, you're likely to find that one gets it hilariously (or tragically, depending on your point of view) wrong, and proposes that you should target your new annuity on the 18-24 market. But apart from that, you'll be quite impressed by all of them.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Then, of course, I've had first-hand experience of the things that agencies do wrong. There's Not Listening, and its close relative Talking Too Much (the easiest and commonest way to shoot yourself in both feet simultaneously); there's Zeroing In Excessively On The Top Client, so that when he or she asks the junior clients for their opinions they're all deeply negative because they haven't enjoyed a single moment's eye contact; and then there's the somewhat more subtle Not Thinking

About Where You Are In The Batting Order, which is all about the fact that if you're first on then the market background section is interesting and important, while if you're fourth or fifth it's just deeply dull.

But the truth is that really, nine times out of ten, the only bit that really matters in a pitch is the creative work – and it's here that my client-side experiences have taught me something new.

Win or lose (but especially lose) I was always mystified when the client's post-pitch feedback said, as it often did, that everyone's presentations were really good but the winning agency is the one that

more expensive than the others; and two, it had a punchy and rather frightening creative director with an incomprehensibly strong regional accent who looked like a bit of a handful.

SHOW THE PASSION

In the final round, though, the clients' feet were all rendered sockless by a brilliant idea shown by this creative director. At once, and as a direct result, the perceived weaknesses turned into strengths. 'They are expensive,' said the senior client, 'but hey ho - in this business you get what you pay for.' And: 'That creative director is

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showed them a creative idea that just blew them away. 'WTF?' I would think to myself. 'You're choosing an agency partner for the next two, three, four, five years, and you're ignoring chemistry, commitment to your business, cost, depth of resource, insight, track record and a whole bunch of other grown-up business-like criteria, and choosing the agency that showed you an amusing animated dancing wombat?'

What I now know is that it's not quite that simple. What happens is that when an agency shows the clients the proverbial idea that knocks their socks off, *that idea in itself validates everything else about the agency*. Let me give you a slightly fictionalised example.

In the first meetings, one agency taking part in a pitch that I'd organised made a good impression, but the clients had two anxieties. One, it would clearly be a lot

brilliant,' said one of the others. 'Someone with real conviction, real commitment, real passion. Made the rest look wishy-washy.'

So, in fact, when the clients fed back to the losing agencies that the winners showed them an idea that simply blew them away, at one level that's absolutely for real. But at another level, that idea has sprinkled magic pixie-dust over every other aspect of the agency's presentation, so that, amazingly, that agency comes first on all the other dimensions on the clients' score-sheets, from strategic insight to personal chemistry.

So, to sum up, I think what I'm saying is that the best way to win a pitch is to show the clients a creative idea that they really love. Hmm, I wonder whether this sitting on the clients' side has really proved to be the revelatory learning experience I was hoping for. ■

» LUCIAN CAMP is the founder of Lucian Camp Consulting. Contact: Lucian@luciancampconsulting.com