

Why can't ad agencies sell?

by John Bradley
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I wonder if advertising agencies know this happens: The client brand team is sitting in the agency boardroom, waiting for the multitude to assemble. We tell ourselves that we're supposed to be a "motivating client." Be positive! Be upbeat! We flex those muscles so we're primed to leap out of our seats doing multiple high fives should the idea actually be on strategy.

But beneath the façade, deep down inside, we're tense. Tense because we know what's coming. We know because it happens every time.

When and why did agencies forget how to sell their own work? How could the Masters of Persuasion get it so wrong?

I have a theory. Sometime in the early 1960s, when advertising was establishing itself, not as a business discipline but as some kind of altruistic contribution to the nations' wellbeing, someone decided that selling was a bit too down-market and that they were in the business of persuasion. And that these were two different things.

But I disagree. I think persuasion is just good selling, and agencies would be much more successful if they adopted some of the basic rules of good selling.

For instance, agencies need to give the client some ownership. Make us think it was our idea. Involve us early, in the embryonic stage.

Agencies should also do away with the almost insurmountable barriers that custom and practice have erected to any pre-selling: the "black box" phase between brief and response - when it's as though they have forgotten that we exist - and the phone call to book the meeting, where the account manager gushes that it's terrific. "What is?" we ask. "Oh, you'll see!"

Then there's the meeting. Make the customer feel comfortable. Put us at ease. After all, this is going to benefit us.

Hats off if they can progress from insisting on meeting at their place, not ours. And who are all these people at the meeting? Am I paying for them? What about all that food? That spread could feed the entire agency for a week. And kill the visible tension and the nervous laughter (I've felt more relaxed in the vasectomy clinic).

Once the presentation begins, don't oversell, and don't pressure the customer. This is a critical step and, contrary to public belief, doesn't include any of the following tactics:

- * Seven people taking turns to tell the client, quoting Mary Poppins, that a concept practically perfect in every way, while six other heads nod in unison.
- * The painful, forced laughter at the punchline.
- * The assurance that "The director loves it SO much, he'll work for virtually nothing."
- * 14 eyes boring into the VP, interpreting every facial twitch.
- * The soulful expressions on the faces of the creative team, awaiting the inevitable.
- * The instant and complete contradiction of any comment uttered by the client.

* The last resort of "everyone in the agency loves it."

And you must close the sale.

I would recommend the book Getting to "Yes" which has a basic premise of avoiding no and making it easy for the customer to say yes. Maybe there's a book in advertising circles which says the opposite: "How much will it cost?" "More than you budgeted." "Are you sure Tom Cruise will play the human banana?" "Well...." "Can I use my 20 years of experience to suggest an improvement?" "No!"

At this point the client utters the timeless phrase of the non-customer: "I think I'll sleep on it."

A career in marketing (with usually some time in sales) makes the average client pretty good at selling - selling the boss on next year's budget increase; selling the board on the strategy; selling the plan to the sales team; sometimes even selling to customers. And as we all know, there's nothing worse than watching poor sales technique. It drives us nuts, because we know it could have been done so much better.

Maybe one day, agencies will figure out that persuasion and selling are the same thing, and then we'll all be happier. Clients will feel much more ownership for the work. Agencies will get more of their work produced. They will both feel a lot more like partners. And everyone will be a lot less stressed.

Or maybe nothing much will change, and it'll still come down to clients not being able to appreciate a great idea when they see one.

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