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Things an agency should never do for its clients

Those agencies that maintain their dignity, combined with a pinch of charisma and charm, often prosper even in times of adversity – writes Wunderman Thompson strategy head Panos Papadopoulos

By Panos Papadopoulos
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I've been blessed with longevity in a fickle business. Given that I've worked as a strategist for 20+ years in major advertising/communication networks all over the world, one would expect a modicum of wisdom from me in the form of recipes for success. I hate to disappoint but I have nothing to offer on that front.

My inability, and my unwillingness, to boil my travails down to a few wisdom pearls worthy of Lao Tzu could be due to mental sluggishness or a natural aversion to recipes. My wife will tell you that I've never used one. I'm good at cooking blobs, mixing together ingredients and coming up with a green-grey-brownish sludge that may smell like John Belushi after a seven-day binge. Then again, it may taste pretty fine. One can never predict the outcome.

So down to brass tacks. The big ad agency networks have been hit hard by the pandemic, as well as by flexible and adaptable fringe players; such as start-ups, consultants and the like. As a result, CEOs and MDs have been crying that they are manning a ship that's sinking fast. The usual complaints are common. Clients shrinking their budgets. Clients shifting their loyalty away from their long-standing partners. Clients pushing for constant innovation. Clients looking for data-driven solutions in an industry that has been using hunch-based creativity as its staple for more than a century. Ah, those traitors, the clients. If only we could survive without them.

Given that we cannot, it behooves us to find solutions that reframe the age-old alliance between communication networks and clients; and place it into a newfound territory of viability. How do we do that? Unless you skipped the first paragraph, you have figured out that I steadfastly refuse to give you a list of do's. Lucky you though, I am in the mood to give you a peak into that unappreciated victim of the tyrannical positivity trend that has been plaguing us since the advent of beard oil and arm tattoo sleeves: the list of don'ts.

Here's a short list of maladies to avoid:

The butler syndrome

As Sir Anthony Hopkins and that baritone dude in *Downton Abbey* proved beyond contention, butlering is a noble profession. Being an excellent servant entails reacting promptly and with decorum to your master's needs. Being reactive is an age-old trait of major communication networks – reacting on trends, on fads, on tendencies, on social movements, on clients' requests, even on their whims. Alas, being constantly reactive takes its toll on a professional relationship. It makes one look weak-willed, subservient and less beddable than Joey Diaz after bombing on open mic at the Comedy Store.

The Foursquare syndrome

You know Foursquare. You used to have it on your iPhone 5. You were checking in like a maniac on supermarkets, churches, pizza parlors and saunas. Then you didn't even consider downloading its forked mutation on your iPhone 8. Why? Possible answer: the Foursquare dudes & dudettes departed from what made their app desirable.

Consequently, their incumbent audience stopped recognising them and their target audience would not consider them. Foursquare became the cautionary tale of your neighborhood burger joint: one day you asked for a chilly burger – the cornerstone of your comfort zone – and you were told that it was replaced on the menu by a croque monsieur served with goose paté and green tomato chutney. Moral of the story: evolving is grand, just do not lose yourself in the process.

The Motley Crüe syndrome

In their film biog the glam rockers embark on a life-long orgy, mating with fauna of all kinds and sizes while lamenting that they cannot keep a healthy and meaningful relationship.

Here's my take on the folk that subscribe to that 'a hot furnace burns everything' mentality. Times are hard and the green of the dollar is everybody's favourite color. That said, not being selective makes you look needy and greedy. Desperate agencies are cannon fodder for clients. On the contrary, an agency that selects its clients is an agency with character, one that clients will covet.

The V*enus in Furs* syndrome

In von Sacher-Masoch's seminal book the protagonist is a willing victim to his mistress. No more than a poodle on a short leash, a submissive, servile, objectified sex-slave.

Clients feel comfortable playing the master. They also get bored of servility fairly soon. Agencies fall into the trap of bowing to the master, catering to their every whim and caprice, rarely daring to raise their voice let alone challenging their clients. As a result, they end up being blamed for everything but the kitchen sink.

Those precious few agencies that maintain their dignity, combined with a pinch of charisma and charm, often prosper even in times of adversity. Eeven an arrogant intransigence to stand by your beliefs is preferable to playing chicken and losing time and again.

In this business, it is often better to be Andrew Dice Clay than Napoleon Dynamite.

The catenaccio syndrome

Legend has it that the catenaccio (the padlock) football system was invented in Italy by Gipo Viana as a solution against conceding goals when facing stronger teams. It failed initially because Viana had his team play full defence. No counterattacks, no shots at the opposition goal. As a result, his team never won.

Agencies often resort to catenaccio when they lack the self-respect, the fortitude and even the grit to advance their own claims – to plant their own flag, to stand for what they believe in. Providing they believe in anything, of course.

We often see agencies with a roster comprised of 70% account handlers, 15% creatives and 15% others. Few cows, but an abundance of milkers, to paraphrase David Ogilvy. Are these agencies on the path to success? Methinks not.

Let's end with a disclaimer. Thomas Schelling, that behemoth of nuclear strategy, was inspired by his kids in his books. He observed his children playing and he deduced that their interaction – raw, unadorned by shoulds and unfettered by social conventions – could serve as the foundation; for a realistic, practical set of rules that would, in turn, lead to an "art of winning" (smart alecs call it 'strategy').

The above list is my observation of my industry colleagues – both on the agency's and on the client's side – in their Dadaist tango, ebbing and flowing like *Rocky Horror Picture Show* escapees. After all, we are all kids in our own right. And, more often than not, we leave the playground bruised but with one more story to tell.

Panos Papadopoulos is head of strategy at Wunderman Thompson in Qatar

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