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How you know when it's time to fire the client

Clients have the budget, so it may look like they hold all the cards. But agencies have a say in the relationship, too. And any agency worth its salt must be selective about the clients it's willing to engage with.

It's too bad most agencies passively wait for request for proposals to appear or search agencies to call. I believe you get a better agency-client relationship and better advertising when agencies deliberately go after the clients they really want. Agencies are in a better position to know about a potential client's marketing challenges — and they're often passionate about the opportunity. We recently landed a client that wasn't looking for a new agency. We went after them because we knew we'd be a great fit. Our insights and, frankly, our enthusiasm were persuasive.

You often find that an agency is willing to say anything to get a new client. They may take on work outside their core competency. They pursue large accounts that will break their business model — just for the PR value of working on the brand. They parrot what the client says they're looking for, rather than being true to themselves. We've picked up accounts after the client had to drop an agency that just couldn't do the work. It was an expensive lesson for both the client and the agency.

In my experience, it works best when agencies first have a plan, and then only pursue clients that can help them reach their own goals.

Here are some things agencies ought to be looking for.

1. Similar outlook. Uber-cool agencies align well with hip clients. Results-focused agencies fit with performance-oriented clients. I even know of some quite happy long-term alliances that are mostly about friendship and not about the work. That's why my first question to prospective clients is "Why are you looking for a new

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wonderful when you come out the other side with something magical. The best clients allow us to come up with brilliant ideas and don't edit them to death. And the best agencies can take an honest challenge seriously.

3. Truth. I don't know of any relationship that can handle a steady diet of brutal honesty. But if I find out a client has a habit of insincerity, I may not fire them immediately, but I know I'm not going to have their business for long.

4. Passion. The agency must be passionate about the work — but the client has to care even more. When the client doesn't return calls, doesn't express emotion, doesn't get excited when we do, we're ready to move on ... and we often do. Clients who love their own brand and what it can bring to their customers are our kind of people. We'll turn ourselves inside out to please them.

5. Respect. You don't have to always agree with your agency, but you do have to be kind. The first client our agency ever fired, quite a number of years ago, was nasty to the account people and could turn vicious when a creative person came into the room. We respectfully declined to do business with her anymore.

agency?" Or even just, "So, why did you take our call?" If a client has an answer for that question that matches our goals, I'll keep the conversation going. If not, we won't be pursuing them.

2. A little creative tension. Commonalities are elemental, but the spice is in the differences. And it's

6. A promise is a contract. A client, as much as any agency, must keep commitments. If they don't, their agency may feel their commitments aren't important either — and that leads to a downward spiral that leaves all parties bitter. So, if a client can't do what they say they will, I'm not willing to enter into a contract with them.

Agencies really do struggle with the idea of declining clients — especially when we are certain we can help.



7. A fair profit. If you can't be profitable, you have to resign the account — no matter how much you like the people or how great the brand looks on your client list. If you don't make money with someone, you'll have to make it up elsewhere, which isn't fair to the rest of your client portfolio. And it's unfair to your employees, who are counting on you to make payroll. Unprofitable clients take vital energy and resources you could apply to the great clients who are paying the bills.

Right now, my agency is debating whether to take on a client who's pursuing us. Some of these basic elements are slightly out of kilter, but this particular client is hard to turn away. Agencies really do struggle with the idea of declining clients — especially when we are certain we can help. Focusing on a solid business development plan is the best way to know whether the client is a good fit for the long term.

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