



IT'S TIME WE GREW UP

A study of the best and worst of client agency relationships, and how to improve them.



This paper is published by Big Black Door.

We believe that the best marketing is simple. And that simple marketing comes from making better, strategic decisions in a supportive and collaborative environment.

In reality that's not easy. But we have a unique blend of strategic thinking, commercial experience, creative flair and extensive training in blue chip companies that helps.

So you get the benefit of FMCG marketing director experience to help you avoid common, money wasting rookie errors.

TLDOR

The relationship between clients and agencies is often more than a little dysfunctional, despite the benefits of positive ones being obvious. Even the most productive partnerships inevitably experience the odd sticky patch.

But the strength of language used by both clients and agencies in this research to describe their poorest relationships is worrying. How have we got to a place where we are showing each other such a lack of basic human courtesy?

It's time we all grew the f*** up and were more respectful to each other.

This research uncovers six themes that appear to be driving the best and worst client agency relationships and goes on to offer some advice to help both parties.

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Find out more

METHODOLOGY

We asked clients and agencies to respond to four questions in our self-selected qualitative survey. Free text responses were analysed and clustered by Big Black Door. Follow up conversations were held with agency and client leaders to add colour and develop potential next steps.

01

What were the characteristics of your best relationship?

03

What were the characteristics of your worst relationship?

02

How could it have been even better?

04

How could it have been made better?

Robert Solomon's book, the Art of Client Service, outlines the holy trinity that sits at the heart of great client service: trust, great work and the relationship. He suggests that great work wins accounts but it's the relationships that keep them. In our experience, it's true that a great relationship between the client and agency will certainly avoid a pitch if the work starts to stray.

And nobody wants a pitch. It costs agencies time and a whole lot of money. I'm also yet to meet a client who enjoys a pitch. Sure, the first time you call one it's kinda exciting, but you were naïve back then. It's not.

One only needs to look at who's winning some of the more prestigious awards to see the benefit of long term client agency relationships.

But you can't tell me that the likes of John Lewis haven't had a moment with adam&eveDDB over the years of their relationship. Or that it's been plain sailing between Weetabix & BBH in the decade they've worked together. But, importantly, they will have found a way to get past these bumps.

It's a client's job to get the best work possible from their agency partners. To create a safe environment where bold work is freely shared. To make your brand the one that the entire agency wants to work on and so secure any discretionary effort that's floating around. This research supports the need for a safe space.



WHAT'S BEEN STOPPING US?

The more I read about this subject, the more surprising it becomes that the disconnect between clients and agencies endures. It's not new news, and yet the same feelings remain.

The Better Briefs project (October 2021) has highlighted the gulf between agencies and clients when it comes to the most important document that exists for both of us - the brief - and the financial implications of that gap. This research gives some clues as to why that gap exists, and how we could work together to close it.

Why has this not been addressed already then, if it's so important? A couple of elephants in this room:

- There is a power imbalance in a client agency relationship which makes the likelihood of agency challenge less likely. And agencies most definitely need to challenge some of the poor client behaviours we're seeing.
- There's no obvious financial benefit of clients chasing a better relationship with their agencies. Sure, they're there if you pause and think about it, but many clients simply don't have the time, training or inclination to look beyond the here and now and move past an outdated "agency as a slave" approach.

SIX THEMES

So, what do clients and agencies say are the reasons their best relationships were so good, and how they could have been even better? And what about the relationships that haven't worked well. What was it about them that was dysfunctional and how could they have been improved? There are six themes that emerged from this research. We'll look at each of them in turn.

01

The value of mutual understanding

04

Honesty & trust

02

Respectful challenge

05

The power of the brief

03

Dedicating time to the process

06

Stakeholder management



When the full data set is examined, there is one standout theme.

40%

of all respondents cited mutual understanding as a reason for their most positive relationship.

Source: BBD Research October 2021.

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'UNDERSTANDING'?

Understand me, and my business. The best client - agency relationships are the result of a sound mutual understanding of each other's businesses.

Do we all understand each other's objectives and the KPIs for this project?

That could be as simple as making the time to understand a client's current business performance, category performance and brand performance. Are you asking for and getting data from your partner?

Or it could be working with your agency leadership to retain or develop the team.

To the left are two examples of proactive work from agencies that went the extra mile to demonstrate understanding a client's business. A speculative strategic assessment of the Bulmers brand that led to a place on a pitch shortlist. And a multi award winning John Smith's promotion that came from that agency proactively spending time with drinkers in a pitch process for John Smith's.





But what about the people behind the job titles? Taking time to understand your opposite number and the person behind the job title is never a bad idea.

Now in days gone by, that involved a lost afternoon or two in a Soho pub, but with the changes to our working patterns since March 2020 we need to work harder to be available to understand each other.

Think about what's going on for your opposite number, is the agency going through a restructure for example? Or is your client contact equally as frustrated as you are about the changes to the brief that have been foisted upon them?

What are their aspirations?

And most importantly, how can you help them?

26%

...of clients cited challenge as something that was present in their best agency relationships

44%

...of agencies claimed that a lack of respect contributed to their worst relationships

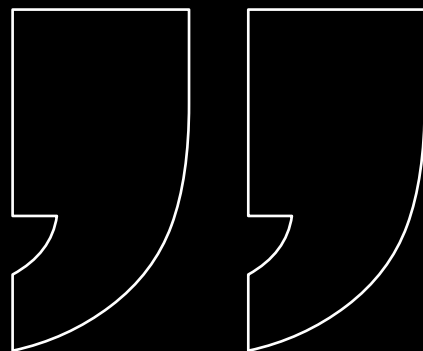
RESPECTFUL CHALLENGE

For clients, challenge was the second most quoted reason for their more productive client - agency relationships. But there's a tension between the 26% of marketers that value that challenge and the 44% of agencies that say they're not treated with respect.

In fact, lack of respect is the top reason given for poor relationships with 21% of clients also claiming that their agencies weren't showing them respect.

How can clients expect to get the honest challenge they crave if they haven't created a psychologically safe environment for that to happen? Creating a secure place of high challenge combined with high support is critical.

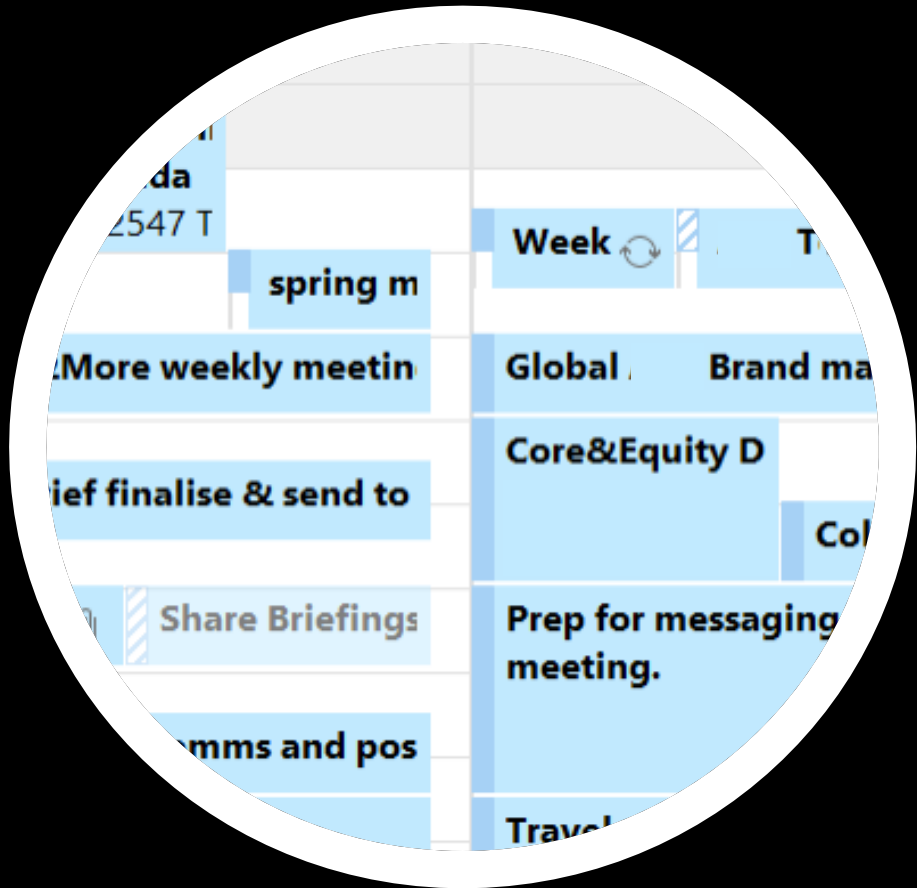
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I remember finally getting to our agency Christmas Party at 9pm and getting a call from my senior client at 10:30pm stating that we needed to get on a call at 7am the next morning to urgently discuss the agency fee.

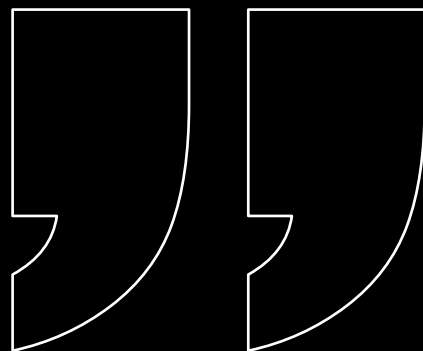
Agency

DEDICATING TIME



A root cause of many of the frustrations expressed elsewhere in this research is time. Whether that is dedicating sufficient time at the start of the process that allows a brief to be collaborative and tightly crafted. Or during the process where clients want responses in an unreasonable amount of time. Or whether it's missing deadlines. A lack of appreciation of the other side's time is an emotive subject.

32% of all respondents (35% of agencies, 26% of clients) gave lack of time as a reason for their worst relationships. Making this the second most quoted reason for poor client- agency relationships.



I think that we forget that we can set boundaries with how we work. This is not only good for the relationship but also for ourselves, knowing when to switch off and have your own time.

Agency

HONESTY AND TRUST

Honesty & Trust were both quoted by 35% of agencies as sitting behind their best relationships with clients. The joint second response behind understanding.

Honesty was cited by 28% of agencies (16% of clients) as a way to improve their poorer relationships, with Trust at 16% (0% for clients).

It's staggering that a perception of mistrust and dishonesty exists in what should be a relationship that sits at the heart of both party's roles.

How has this become a thing?



HONESTY AND TRUST

Whatever the project, it's unlikely that this is everyone's first rodeo. So, it's likely that whatever the problem that's encountered, by whichever side of the relationship, it'll have been experienced before.

So why wouldn't you share it?

A collaborative approach will not only find some new ways of fixing the problem, it will also build trust.

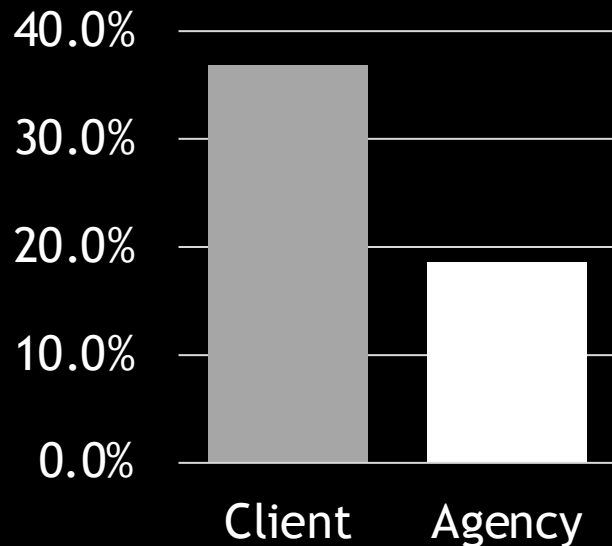
Take it from me, a budget cut is common. There's no reason to keep it secret from your agency partners. The same goes for an (ahem) "sub-optimal" brief. Research tells us that they're more common than we'd all like (The Better Briefs Project)

So if you see it, then say it. It saves time, effort and heartache in the long run.



THE POWER OF THE BRIEF

% of respondents mentioning “briefs” as a way to improve a poor working relationship



For anyone who has read the Better Briefs Project research, it will come as no surprise that this was also a common reason for the worst client - agency relationships in this research. However, the fact that only 25% of the total respondents identified this as an improvement area is surprising.

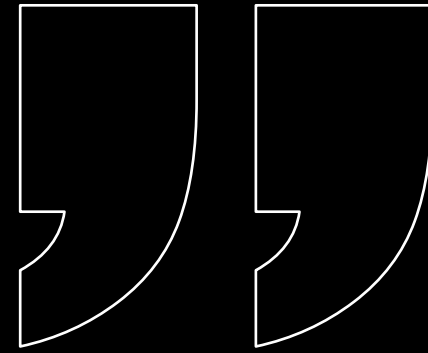
Clients identified this twice as often as their agency counterparts (37% vs 19%) giving us hope that all is not lost and that clients at least recognise the importance of this document.

The Better Briefs Project research found that 80% of clients believe they are good at writing briefs.

A fact that 90% of agencies disagree with!

Source: BBD Research October 2021.





*The agency didn't answer the brief.
I ordered a car and I got a boat...
...although it makes me wonder if I
was unclear."*

Client

Source: BBD Research October 2021.



STAKEHOLDERS AND POLITICS



brand director

“the line”

somebody else

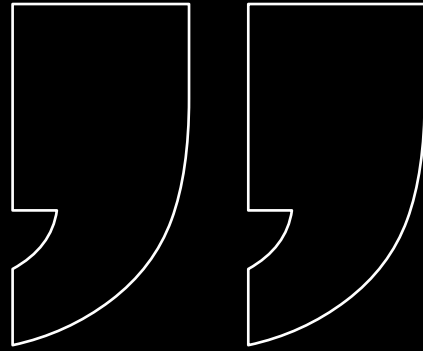
21% of agencies in our survey claimed that a contributing factor to their worst client - agency relationships was “stakeholders” - a combination of too many, not being consistent with when stakeholders were present in the process and new “secret stakeholders” coming in at the end of a process to throw a spanner in the works.

Once again, this is broadly consistent with the Better Briefs research , which indicated that 50% of briefs aren’t being signed off by the right people.

31% of all respondents claimed that “clarity” would have improved their worst relationships.

The reality is that many marketing leaders feel at their most comfortable in assessing agency responses, it’s part of what got them promoted. But a clear RACI at the start of the process can help manage this.

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*The client lived in fear of what
senior management would think*

Agency

4 WAYS TO IMPROVE

All is not lost.

A combination of stakeholder interviews and bitter experience leads to four simple actions we can take to improve our relationships. Big Black Door can work with you to create bespoke solutions for all 4 areas, drawing on our FMCG client-side marketing and commercial leadership experience.

01

The kick-off meeting

03

Spot the early warning signs

02

Improve your decency quotient

04

Improve your briefs

FIND OUT MORE

Over the past 20+ years we have grown some of Europe's biggest and best loved brands, trained retailer marketing teams, coached marketing heads and consulted with over 70 creative agency leaders on how to work better with their clients.

We'd love to discuss how we did that, and how we can help you.

Overleaf are some of our greatest hits.

gareth@bigblackdoor.com

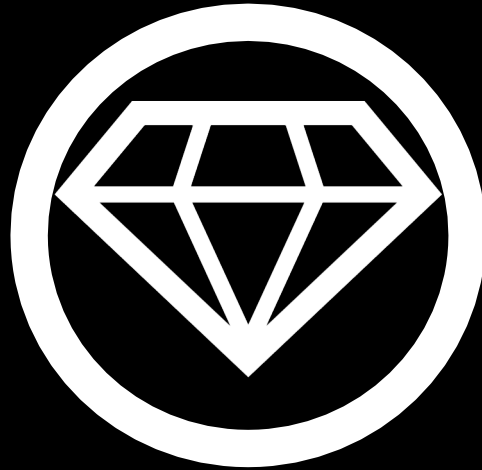




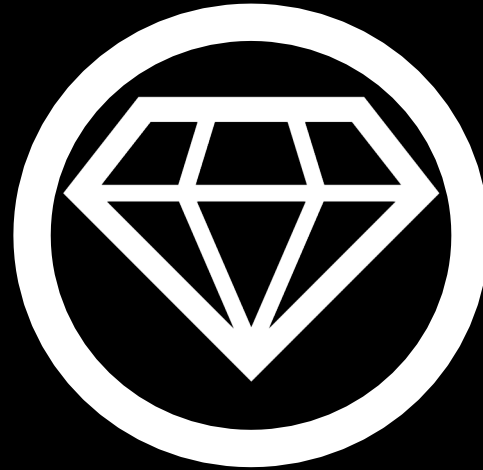
HOW BIG BLACK DOOR CAN HELP



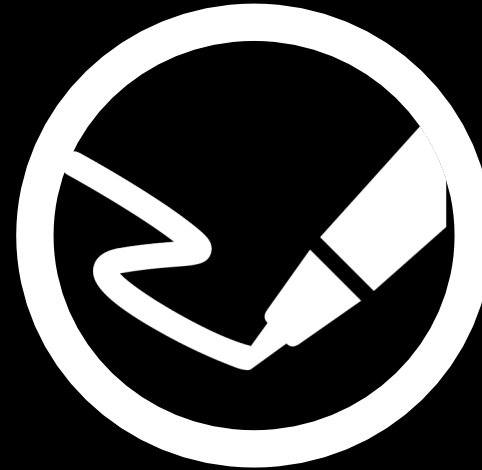
Kick off meeting
facilitation



Bespoke workshop for
both agencies and
clients - turning your
agency account
management from a cost
that's challenged into a
valuable asset



Individual seats at
workshop on how to
improve client agency
relationships

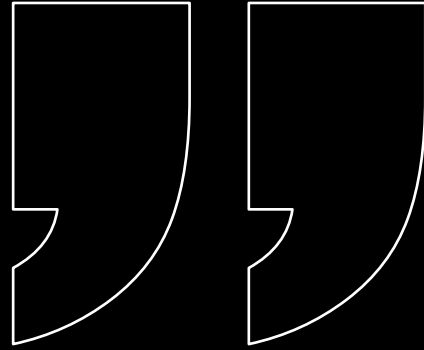


Brief writing and
creative evaluation for
clients



Bespoke marketing
consultancy, advisory
board member, Non-
Executive Director &
fractional CMO

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Very insightful and honest view of Agency/Client relationships... thank you.

It's been helpful to better understand client relationships and how to evolve them

This was really helpful - lots of food for thought!

Agency leader comments about client agency
relationships workshop



FURTHER READING

In the survey we asked for a recommendation of further reading. Here are the responses shared without review, plus a few from us. Enjoy.

The Art of Client Service, Robert Solomon

The Better Briefs Project

What your clients wish you knew, BBH

Annual “What Clients Think” survey, Jonathan Kirk, Up to the Light

7 Stage Model, Oasis School of Human Relations

10 Must Reads on Collaboration, HBR

Senior Client & Agency Leaders Research, AAR 2016

Agencynomics, Spencer Gallagher & Peter Hoole

Radical Candor, Kim Scott



IMAGE CREDITS

"Why" by Ksayer1

"Listen" by brittreints

"Surprise" by Jesse Wagstaff

"In graffiti we trust" by jpbourque

"Too many cooks spoil the broth," by Kecko

"Squirrel" by Nick Savchenko

"Sad face ghost" by goldberg

"Subs Bench, Slindon Sports Ground" by Simon Carey

"Slice of bread, crumbs and honey" by Horia Varlan

"Kick off" by Ronnie Macdonald

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