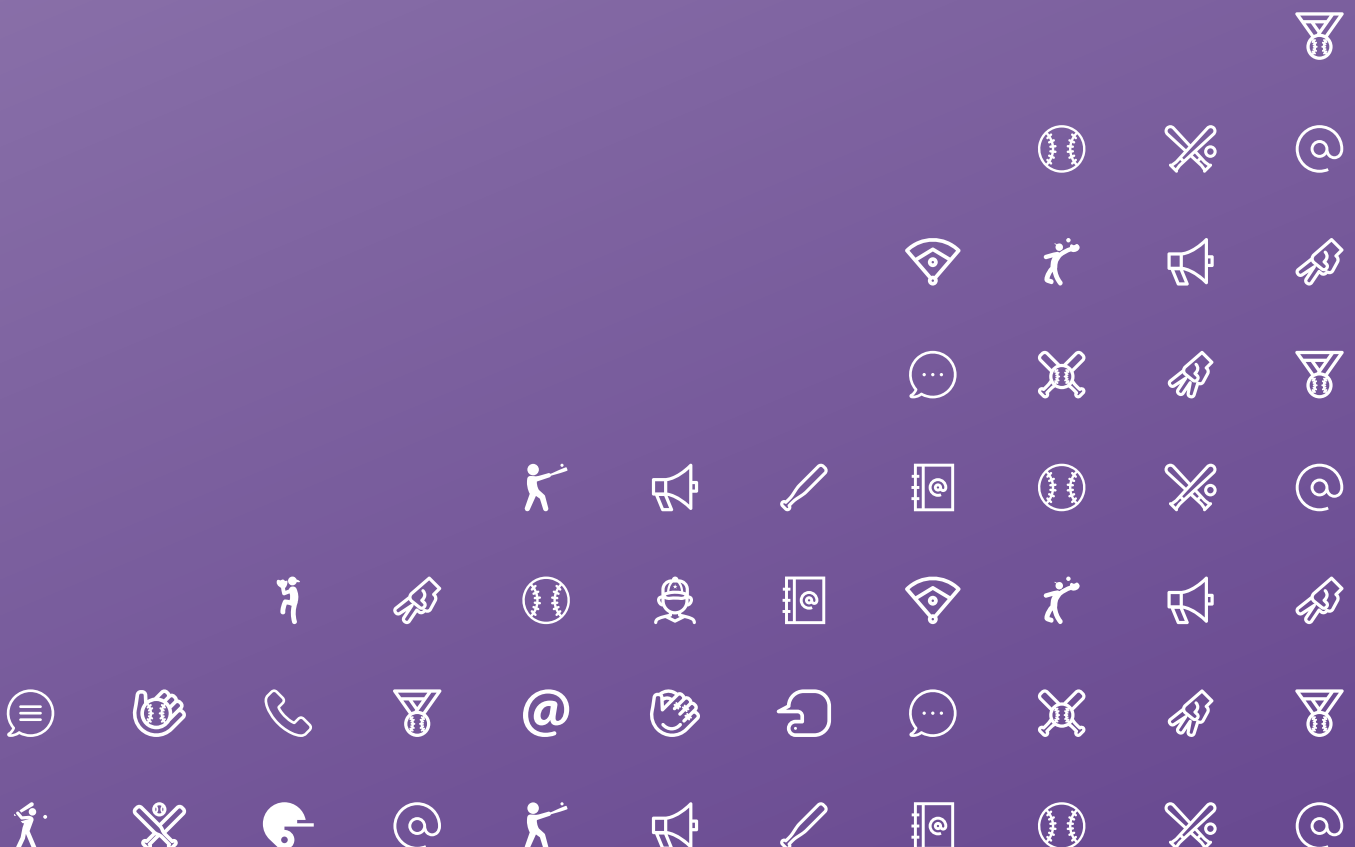


PITCH PERFECT: NEW TRENDS AND WINNING NEW BUSINESS IN PR

HOW AGENCIES CAN ADAPT TO WIN NEW CLIENTS





Summary



As much as the press release is a fundamental building block of media relations, new business is the lifeblood of all agencies. And despite rumours of its demise, the new business pitch is alive and kicking in 2016.



However, thanks to heightened competition, increasing pressures on client budgets and other factors, the new business pitch has evolved. Pitches are shorter, more competitive than ever and, compared to even 10 years ago, there can be lack of a formal structure or process.



Thanks to the profile and importance of procurement, there are still more formal processes but, at the same time, clients and agencies alike are developing different ways of testing their compatibility and creating the foundation for a successful business partnership and relationship.



So how do agencies stand out in this environment and convince potential clients they are the best business solution?



This White Paper looks at some of the changes PR professionals may be witnessing in the pitching process and gains advice from agencies from all sides of the market, including MHP, LEWIS, W, PLMR, Porter Novelli and more.



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Introduction



Pitching for new business can be contentious. Agencies often despair about the cost of pitching or the lack of a level playing field in the process. On the other hand, clients can feel short-changed by inflated promises in pitches and the fact that the pitch team is not always the team that ends up working on their business.



Paradoxically, if handled badly by either party, even a successful pitch win can cause a brand and agency relationship to get off on the wrong foot and undermine a partnership which, ideally, should be for the long term.



But, for all its faults, the pitch process is still an essential new business tool for PR and marketing agencies.



For this reason calls for reform in the process have been ongoing. In 2010, the PRCA called for improvements to the pitching process after finding that both agency and in-house comms teams were experiencing a growth in pitch lists, and there was exceptional competition as multiple agencies were asked to pitch for a brief at one time. Many were even asked to pay to attend such meetings.



Cases showing elements of these problems have continued since. For example, in 2012, BAA was accused of charging PR agencies to pitch for their business. Other businesses have also been cited for making unreasonable demands on agencies in following years.



In 2015, a PRCA study showed that alongside other big challenges such as skills and talent shortages, and the encroachment of marketing disciplines on traditional PR budgets, the cost of new business pitches is one of the biggest issues facing the PR industry today.



Wider trends in marketing offer little assurance that these new business trends will fade quickly. Across the board - in marketing and advertising - there is a growth in the number of agencies, short term calls to pitch and a rising influence of procurement departments which both extends the process and raises costs.



So how you engage in the pitching process during times of change is a big decision.



As London Communication Agency's Luke Blair says (page 11), successful PR is a mix of the banal and the extraordinary. In the same way, new business is all about striking the right balance.



Getting ahead of the competition

The PR agency sector is growing. The Holmes Report's 2016 Global Communication Report shows that PR agency leaders expect the worldwide PR agency business to grow, from \$14 billion (£10.62 billion) to \$19.3 billion (£14.64 billion) over the next five years.

In comparison, the report shows client-side budgets have increased by an average of 2.67% - a slower rate - and respondents expect budgets to grow even more slowly over the next five years.

So, it is a highly competitive environment, and as the blurring of lines between PR and other marketing disciplines continues, the attention of specialist agencies, with SEO, social, content, experiential and events offerings, means they often compete for the same brief. Comms pros from MHP and LEWIS describe how to stay ahead in a tough, and competitive, marketplace.



Rachael Sansom

Head of brand and integrated client services

MHP

Have you noticed that more disciplines now pitch for one brief?

Clients are increasingly not framing pitches through a discipline spectrum, but rather saying, 'Here is the challenge we have, here are all the different audiences and stakeholders we need to reach— can you help us?' Most of our briefs sit into this category and our job is to bring together the right team of people, regardless of discipline or specialism, in order to meet the challenge the client has.

Often this isn't the main challenge the client has identified in the brief, but actually something else more fundamental which you can unearth by applying cross discipline strategic thinking.

What challenges does such an environment present for PR agencies?

The challenge for agencies in this environment is to ensure they have both the cultural and operational mechanisms in place to bring the best people and thinking to a pitch. Too often agencies can be scuppered by their own internal discipline structures which means that a seamless team is not brought together to bring the client the right solution. At MHP we have worked very hard both on a cultural and operational level to ensure that our internal structures do not stop us from putting the best team together. Our

recent win of a multi-national cosmetics brand was a great example of this. While in essence a corporate affairs brief, we brought together a hybrid team containing consumer, creative and content specialists as well as issues based corporate affairs specialists to ensure we were delivering the right solution to the brief.

How does MHP stay competitive in that environment?

We believe our point of difference is the ability to look at clients in a 360 perspective. To do this, we use insight, channel data, industry knowledge to analyse the client's challenge, ensuring we have the most comprehensive view of the client's landscape before we look at the potential solution.



Giles Peddy
Managing director UK
LEWIS

Have you noticed that more disciplines now pitch for one brief?

"We are definitely seeing clients want a more integrated approach. This is due not because they want a PR, digital and content programme, but because they want help solving awareness, advocacy and demand challenges. To solve these, you need to think about the most appropriate channels to reach and influence target audiences and that is why clients want and need an integrated approach."

How does LEWIS stay competitive in that environment?

"For over 20 years we have been a storytelling agency. At the outset this was mainly to media but over time this has evolved to include social, digital, advertising and marketing services. In recognition of this evolution, we dropped PR from our brand to become just LEWIS. We have grown every year of our 21-year history, and as an independent agency we reinvest most of our profits back into the business so we can bring in new talent, develop new services, acquire agencies or invest in training and development. That is how we have remained competitive."

What are the three big factors when successful in such an environment?

"Keep investing. It's that simple. Unless you can invest in people, training, technology, capabilities and services then it will be hard for agencies to stay relevant. We can do this because of our independence.

"Other factors I would also say is having good leaders who can see the opportunity, point teams in the right direction and give them the tools to succeed.

"And third, make sure you blend the operational with the emotional. People want to work in a fun, vibrant, creative place that is continually developing. At LEWIS we think we have a good mix and our success is testament to this great company culture."

Client-side view: The Stroke Association



Anil Ranchod

Deputy director, PR and comms
The Stroke Association

Agencies need to stand out in the market

"I've held a number of marketing and PR roles in the voluntary sector for over 23 years now and have worked with a number of agencies in PR, advertising and communications.

It's been interesting to watch the emergence of new agencies, many of which have some fantastic talent. Conversely some established agencies have a tendency to rely on their reputation. It's easier to deliver impressive results with multi-million pound brands, but for me, the true measure of success is impactful creativity on a tiny budget.

Here's a tale of two agencies: one we paid and one was pro-bono. Unsurprisingly, both produced some fantastic work but their approaches and my experiences were very different.

One was an established name and the other a rising star (at the time). I managed both agencies in exactly the same way and remember a colleague once saying to me: "Surely the pro-bono agency should be given more freedom as they doing it (almost) for free." To which I replied: "We want to get the best creative response to the challenges facing our brand and there's no special dispensation for that."

Both agencies added value but, surprisingly, the established took a cookie cutter approach whereas the pro-bono wanted to explore and be creative together. Just because we're in-house doesn't mean our team can't offer expert creative solutions. Listening to the client's experiences of what our audiences need to know about our cause is essential to any productive working relationship.

I've been with the Stroke Association for over six years and I created Make May Purple for stroke - stroke awareness month. It is now the charity's flagship event providing a platform for us raise profile, reach out to those affected by stroke, attract new supporters and showcase our Life After Stroke Services while raising essential funds. I'm lucky to work with a great team and we've made some fantastic achievements (without a budget for three years) but we still have much to do. Among the approaches I've received, I'm still waiting for an agency to approach me proactively with suggestions and ideas about how they could help me with growing stroke month.

Undoubtedly, it's a crowded market out there and there's the need to stand out. But sometimes the breakthroughs come from those causes who haven't had the big budgets or sexy image. This is your chance for your creativity to shine and for your agency to get noticed."

The rise of the one-day hustle

Is a one-day, competition-style, 'live' pitch good or bad for business strategy? Agencies give a mixed response. But, they report a rise in clients - at all levels of the market - requesting agencies to pitch for business in this format.

Comms pros from Firstlight PR, Dynamo and PLMR discuss the impact of a shorter pitch and how they think a winning pitch can be crafted in this environment.



Anna Price
Associate director
Firstlight PR

Have you noticed an increase in clients requesting shorter, competition-style pitches?

"While the longer, more formal selection processes are still commonplace, we have noticed an increase in shorter, competition style pitches. With the brief provided on the day, and only a couple of hours to prepare, these are not for the faint hearted, but can also be an exciting and rewarding experience. What's more, they allow a client to test a team's ability to think quickly and creatively under pressure - essential skills for any agency partner."

What are the benefits of this process for agencies?

"Whether a pitch is formal or fast-paced, it's encouraging to see businesses prioritising chemistry and creativity over process and procurement. That generally means more interaction and more engagement throughout, allowing agencies to concentrate on the core brief, rather than box ticking. This approach builds chemistry from the outset, laying the groundwork for a stronger and more successful partnership in the long term."



Kevin Craig
Managing director
PLMR

Do you still get requests for pitches that take months to complete? How often in comparison to shorter pitches?

"Probably one in four is what I would call a MEGA pitch. And in fact just last week we pulled out of mega pitch where we felt the client was giving an unrealistically short timetable for us to respond to."

What can PR agencies do to succeed in shorter, competitive pitches?

“The rules are always the same we think for winning pitches - meet the brief, be creative, display insight, display digital integration, understand the client, think laterally, go the extra mile, make the client feel you want to work with them, do your research, don't cut corners, deliver communications proposals that will allow them to achieve their goals.”

What's an example of one of your greatest successes?

“I am not going to give away trade secrets but I would say the fundamental requirement to maximise your new business wins is to continue to innovate - never get stale.

“In PLMR's case, Elin de Zoete and I endeavour to make every pitch as good, as creative, as exciting, as important to our business as we would have done in the first three years of the business working out of the office in Lambeth - as opposed to now, as a multimillion pound business in London and Edinburgh with a global network of associates.”



Sally Brown
Associate director
Dynamo

Have you noticed an increase in clients requesting shorter, competition-style pitches?

“We have noticed clients taking a more informal approach to pitches. Rather than two stage process of brief and pitch, we've seen more clients open a line of communication and make themselves available for regular check-ins while we go through the process of responding to the brief, from looking at data and insights, to coming up with strategy and ideas.”

What can PR agencies do to succeed in these kinds of pitches?

“Listen just as much as you talk (if not more!) to make the most of their time and find out more about their business. Add value from day one - if you're interrogating the brief or testing out different routes to go down with ideas, explain your thinking. Make sure they can learn something about your approach.

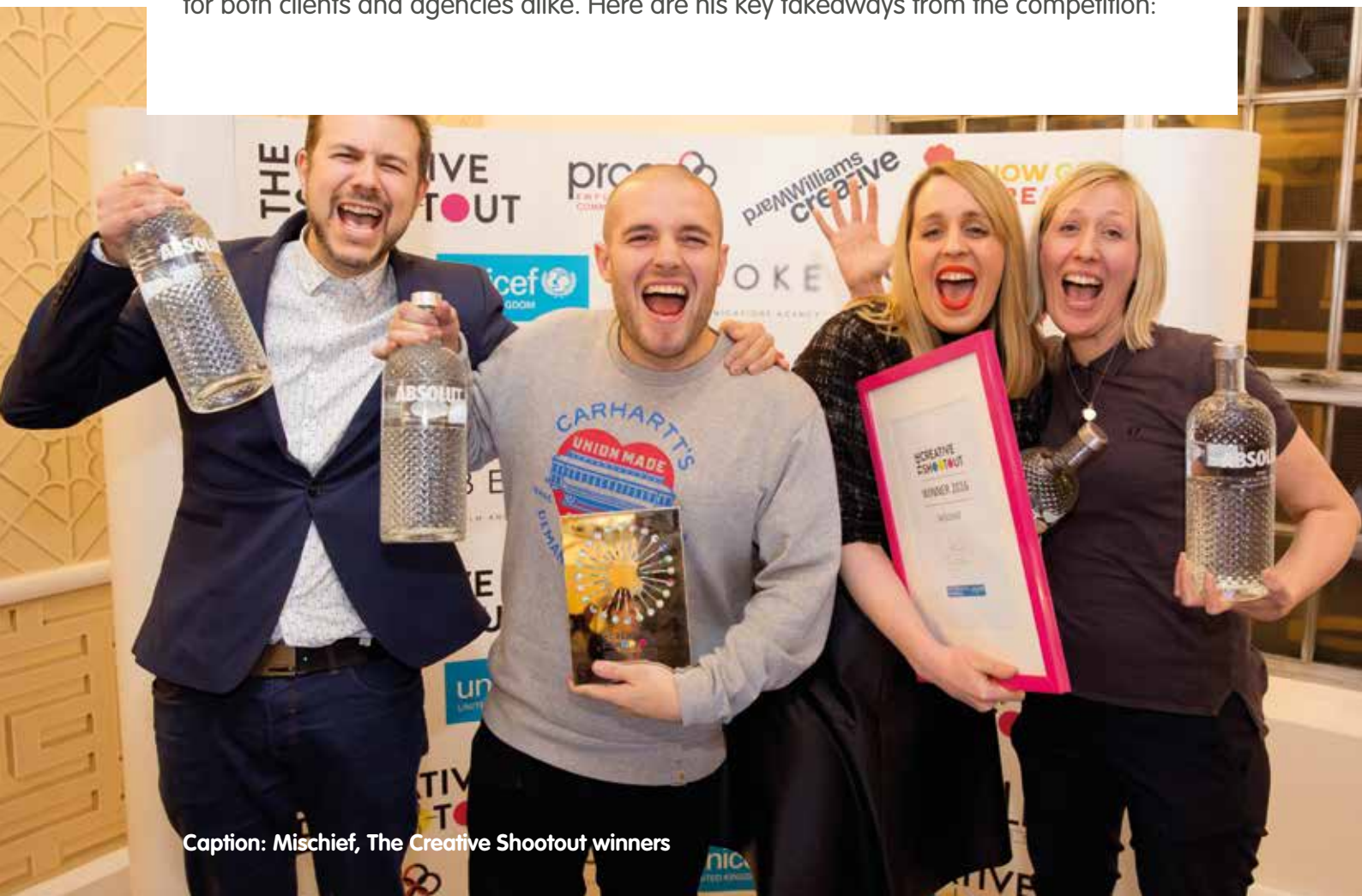
What The Creative Shootout teaches us about competition-style pitches

The Creative Shootout is a one-day pitching competition and award, which took place for the first time in January 2016 (it is accepting entrants for the next round this September).

To gain a place as a shortlisted agency in the live final, PR teams had to submit a '60 second' idea in whatever format they thought best. January's finalists consisted of Bottle PR, Dynamo PR, Frank PR, PLMR, TVC Group and the winning agency Mischief. All pitched for a Unicef UK brief.

Johnny Pitt, the founder of the competition and Launch PR, initially shaped the idea to breed more creativity in new business pitches. The competition has even had some influence in how new business pitches are now shaped, he claims.

Pitt told Gorkana that clients in the retail sector have taken tips on running their own pitches from the competition, as it breeds creative thinking and saves time and resources for both clients and agencies alike. Here are his key takeaways from the competition:



Caption: Mischief, The Creative Shootout winners



Johnny Pitt **Founder** **Launch PR**

What Mischief's 2015 win suggests about the format you should adopt

"Don't be restricted by format. Powerpoint can be great, but it can be creatively restrictive, especially if time is tight. Surprise, engage - don't do the norm! Use props and bold imagery. You have to remember that competition is fierce, so anything that gets people to pay more attention to what you're saying is good. Also, focus on simplicity, too. Don't over-engineer. Mischief did that well. And one big, impactful and simply explained idea is far better than lots of not bad ones. And whatever you do, tie it all back in to compelling and ideally commercial evaluation at the end."

Choose one creative lead and stick with them

"Time is tight. It's pressurised. Four hours to crack a brief you've just seen and turn it in to a compelling pitch. If you have a whole load of chiefs in a room, you're less likely to do it well. Like anything (take the Euros!), it's not all about star players. Get a team that thinks well together; that consistently comes up with good creative together and give someone autonomy to make the ultimate decision. They actually should self select. And again, if you have the right team, they understand that's the process and see it as entirely natural. A lot of our judges said that. Again, it's part of good team work."

A good idea grabs you in 60 seconds!

"The entry mechanic for The Creative Shootout was not five sides of A4 or 1500 words, it was content driven. So, it was about sending the judges 60 seconds of frankly anything. But, it must show why you

have the creative clout for the annual charity partner. We had cakes, Snapchat, music, videos, poems, letters, apps, games, posters, coverage ... think about format. Think about surprise. Think about being different and let it communicate who you really are. I always say a good idea makes me smile, even if it's a smile of joy or a reflective smile twinged with sadness."



Creativity is key to winning pitches, according to the PRCA

Creativity is the most important factor in winning pitches according to a panel of PRCA agency and in-house leaders - but 71% do not believe PR industry showcases creativity enough. Research by the PRCA's Leaders Panel of agencies and in-house teams has found more than half (56%) believe that creativity is the most important factor for winning a pitch.

However, despite the major value put on creativity in PR pitching, 71% said that they do not believe that PR showcases or debates creativity enough as an industry. And more than half (52%) admitted that creativity was NOT held up as the most prized asset in agency talent, losing out to factors such as 'personal chemistry between the team and the prospective client', 'a steady pair of hands' and 'delivery'.

When asked to define creativity in three words, the most popular word to come up was 'ideas', followed by 'inspiring/inspirational' and 'fun'.

And when the PR leaders were asked what they view as the most creative brand, the most popular response was Lego, followed by Nike, Paddy Power and Brew Dog.



When asked how PRs can keep their creative talent fresh, PRCA members had these tips:

1. Hold regular brainstorming sessions
2. Challenge yourself and others to think differently
3. Attend events you wouldn't normally attend, read things you wouldn't normally read
4. Keep your finger on the pulse of the news agenda
5. Get away from your desk and be in a place that is stimulating
6. Mix with different teams and bring in new people to work with
7. Take risks and have fun
8. Keep up to date on what other creative brands are doing

Luke Blair MPRCA, Board Director, London Communications Agency, said: "Successful PR is a mix of the banal (being organised, billing properly, attention to detail) and the extraordinary (new ideas, innovation, creativity) - it's about keeping the balance between all these things and they are two ends of the PR/human spectrum. Hence why truly creative people are often the most disorganised. And why a highly organised yet creative person makes for excellent PR material."

To pitch, or not to pitch - what agencies consider

The client/agency intermediary AAR reported that in the first quarter of 2016 new-business activity declined by almost a fifth compared to 2015*. Gorkana asked pitching pros from W and Porter Novelli if they are now pickier with the briefs they accept and how they choose to work with a client.

Both agencies deny that they are making fewer pitches but they do say the pitching process is now more informal, that the agency must have a good chemistry with the client and that they would not work with clients that are not compatible with the agency.



Warren Johnson
Founder and CEO
W Communications

Are fewer clients asking for long and expensive pitches?

“In a word: yes. But we are finding that the biggest and best pitches continue to be those run by the AAR for big brands like Unilever and Lidl. While they might demand more from us, they have also invested more in the process themselves; in clear goals, and well-thought-through budgets. The more energy clients put into the pitch process, the better work they will get from agencies at pitch, and beyond.”

What changes have you seen in the industry and agencies’ approach to new business pitches?

“Over the last few years, (aside from the big-brand pitches mentioned above) we have found many potential clients coming to us with a vague brief; a source of both frustration, and opportunity.

“We have also witnessed a tension in new business briefs that call for creativity but also

for reassurance. This conflict is heightened by the fact that big creative ideas intrinsically carry with them potential risk.

“Across the industry there has been a shift towards a closer 50/50 split of retainer/project pitches. As clients look to award projects that allow agencies to showcase their creativity within a strict framework, but that can also enable agencies to push for a retainer afterwards.”

Are agencies investing less in winning new business through pitches?

“Agencies are finding ways to be more agile and resourceful in how they invest in new business pitches, but the best pitches are those where the agency has gone above and beyond to gain a clear understanding of what the client needs and what they want to get out of their PR activity.”

How is W’s approach changing when it comes to new business pitches?

“In an increasingly competitive environment, we are finding ourselves needing to be laser-focused on understanding precisely what a client actually wants out of their brief in preparing for our pitch. Often we write the brief ourselves following initial conversations.”



Philip Honour
**Senior new business and
marketing manager**
Porter Novelli

What changes have you seen in the industry and agencies’ approach to new business pitches?

“The big change is the rise of “chemistry +” pitches – when the decision is made more on the team make up and the development of the relationship with a client rather than

purely on the creative and strategic outputs. Intermediaries in general are playing a much more active role in the pitch process as well rather than just making recommendations.”

Are agencies investing less in winning new business through pitches?

“Absolutely not. If anything, they are investing more but maybe not in the same places they were in the past. Investment has increased in pitch theatre and creative set pieces that make an agency’s pitch response more memorable rather than just purely on the pitch presentation itself.”

How is Porter Novelli's approach changing when it comes to new business pitches?

"We are moving with the industry, focusing on chemistry and creating lasting impact within the pitch room through thought out creative executions so that clients remember us a long time after they leave our offices."

What are your key rules now for new business pitches?

"One golden rule. Face to face client time is a must - you can't deliver a tailored, insightful response if the client will not invest or share the wider content of the business need driving a pitch process. This also goes for budget perimeters, how can you give them what you want if you don't know what they can realistically activate?"

Are you now more picky with new business briefs?

"Yes. Very picky. It is just as important that a client is the right fit for us as well as being the right fit for the client."

*AAR's figure stretches across all marketing activity. It doesn't disclose PR activity on its own.

New business coach Ken Kelling on the 'perfect pitch'



Ken Kelling
Partner and Coach
Kelling Wood Associates

Ken Kelling is one part of the media and new business coaching team at Kelling Wood Associates, currently the associate director at Davies Tanner and former communications director for Visit London. Here are his top tips on how to thrive during the modern business pitch:

"Agencies definitely seem to be facing an increasing diversity of approaches to pitching. From the anonymous "written response only" to the all-singing all-dancing beauty parade where specialist PRs may find themselves alongside all-inclusive agencies, no two clients are the same.

"At the same time the rather overused expression "content" production can be claimed by virtually anyone' so it's harder for clients to make a clear distinction between agencies. None of this is going away anytime soon. But the principles about what makes a winning pitch haven't changed in our view. And it's those principles that agencies can focus on."

What's the best way to prepare for a one day pitch in this environment?

"The same as always. Putting yourself as much as possible into the client's mindset and living and breathing their challenges. Assembling a team that is confident, coherent and looks and behaves like a real team - that's Iceland's football team not England's by the way. Having a clear and well understood process in place to put the pitch together and plenty of time to plan and rehearse."

How can teams remain calm under pressure?

"We've all experienced the last minute panic to get a presentation together, getting stuck in a cab in traffic on the way to the pitch then struggling with the technology when you

get there. It's all a recipe for putting ourselves under pressure and it all comes across to the client in the pitch room. Like anything in business, it's preparation that makes the difference. Rehearsing properly, making sure everyone understands the key theme that you want to leave with the client and having faith in each other as a team will all help."

How can teams build a rapport with clients?

"There's something about the artificiality of a pitch situation that makes some agencies want to talk the hind legs off a donkey. If they just talk for long enough, with bags of enthusiasm, they'll win the client over with their zeal and creativity. Enthusiasm and passion are great, but listening and clarifying your understanding of the challenges faced by the client are the most important ways of rapport building. Any chemistry meetings you can land should be 90% listening to the client and 10% asking questions. Aim for a pitch to be a two-way conversation, not a monologue."

Who is most likely to win the pitch?

"The perceived wisdom is that the agency with the best creative wins the day. But it's never that straight forward. Great creative from a dysfunctional team won't inspire faith, for example. Having the right strategy, inspiring ideas and a great answer to the brief can still fail to get an agency across the line - sometimes it seems, inexplicably. Although it's hard to scientific about whose most likely to win a pitch, people skills and emotional intelligence tend to be underestimated and under-invested in our view. For all of the complexities of a brief and its business challenges, clients are generally thinking about one question - "do they get us?".

Guide to the Gorkana database

Helping you start the right conversations

- Each journalist profile has an integrated Twitter feed so that you can always see exactly what they are talking, and writing, about.
- We list all areas of expertise and topics a journalist writes about so you can guarantee that you are always pitching the appropriate message.
- You can download a media briefing pack directly from each journalist profile, which lists everything you need to know. Their career history, the last article they've written, where they like to have coffee, and their last ten Tweets...
- And, we're always innovating. The new social media topic search function provides real-time insight into what key influencers from the database are talking about. Use the tool to search for any keyword, phrase, hashtag and @ mention and you'll be presented with a contact list of the journalists who have mentioned that subject within the last 90 days.
- If you'd like more information contact your account manager, or email us at sales@gorkana.com.



Business development firm Future Factory's 5 tips on adapting to change

The Future Factory is a business development firm that builds relationships between agencies and clients. The business has had six PR agencies on its roster this year. Here are a series of trends it has seen in the industry and top tips for PR agencies - both big or small.

Proof of delivery is more important than ever

Trend:

Comms agencies are more capable of managing larger strategic issues, marketing budgets and delivering outputs across a broader number of disciplines so it is imperative that agencies can prove that they can not only talk the talk, but that they can walk the walk.

Action:

Any agency claim or service must be backed up with a case study (and ROI) that proves how the agency's approach has been successful in delivering a greater outcome than a traditional approach might have.

Brand expectations in initial meeting are higher than ever

Trend:

Thinking on your feet and sharing opinions is the bare minimum in a chemistry meeting, however, not all account teams have the experience or skill to sit opposite a client and share off the cuff opinions, insight and relevant case studies.

Action:

In a competitive landscape, to distinguish yourself, you need to prove you're one of the best by showing you are a true expert in your craft when approaching an introductory or pitch meeting. Going through the motions with a creds deck will no longer cut it, no matter how relevant your experience is. You're in the room to address a brand's specific comms challenges so make sure your pitch team is armed to do so.

Be prepared to share

Trend:

There is more and more agency competition but less and less retained business available, with brands opting to outsource project based work or bring their comms in-house.

Action:

Use your increasingly diverse service mix as a way to support and complement a brand's incumbent/internal team or, on the flip side, find a gap in their comms via an agency specialism.

Creds need to be more substantial

Trend:

The UK is still considered to be one of the global leaders when it comes to all types of creative comms agencies. We get to see a huge volume of agency creds (slides an agency would present at pitch meetings), websites, propositions and presenting styles and often the quality from an aesthetic, content or consistency perspective doesn't reflect this leading status.

Action:

Build into your new business process a chunk of time to reflect on your brand to make sure your comms are of as high a standard as the work you'd hope to produce for your client.

Carve out a specialism and pounce on the errors of those who don't

Trend:

For over five years our business has described the PR agency/brand relationships as the most volatile and promiscuous. Could this be because, in many cases, the number of services and variety of thinking now being offered has stretched agencies, leading to mistakes being made? Press, social, video, events, experiential, partnerships - strategically all of these are complex and it really is impossible to be a jack of all trades! We believe the work delivered to brands is often better than ever but the agencies themselves are vulnerable and prone to slipping up which can prompt a pitch or trial briefs from brands.

Action:

As an agency, it's better to do one or two things very well rather than many things to adequate level. Look out for opportunities or gaps in the market and if you see an agency campaign that's below the level you feel you could deliver, be aggressive to capitalise on their mistakes.



Conclusion



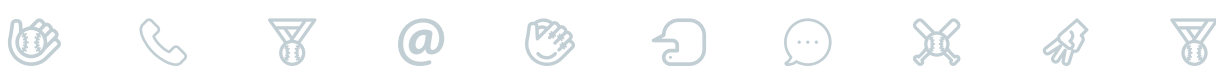
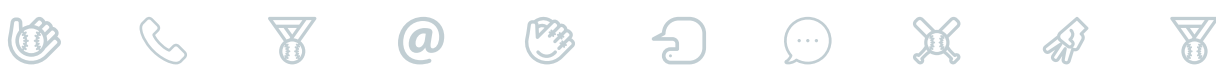
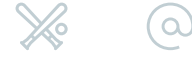
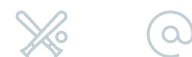
Agencies are slowly but steadily re-evaluating relationships with clients. A successful pitch now calls for a more responsive approach than ever. Firstly, as MHP's Sansom suggested, clients require a '360 perspective' in campaign strategy. This means that agencies have to look at which tools will best serve a brand message and weigh-up how well-equipped they are for the challenge.



In addition, the conversation between clients and agencies is becoming more relaxed during the brief and the pitch process. Comms pros from Dynamo, W and Firstlight PR have all commented that negotiating for the pitch process is now more likely to be a two-way conversation and agencies such as Porter Novelli have noted that they will no longer accept a brief unless the agency has a voice too.



This evolving pitch set-up largely comes down to a renewed focus on chemistry. Most of the agencies said that pitches were more successful when they had a positive personal relationship with the client. This view was echoed by pitch expert Ken Kelling who argues that people skills and emotional intelligence are the key factors to pitch success.



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