

Evaluating agency credentials: What turns clients' heads

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In a 2018 article in AdAge, MediaLink chairman and CEO Michael Kassan was quoted as saying: "Nobody has a crystal ball and nobody can say the agency of the future will be this way or that way. But what we can say is that there has to be a true willingness for the agency of the future to be more adaptive and reflective of clients' needs. Only the ones who can adapt will survive."



Today, Johanna McDowell, CEO of the Independent Agency Search and Selection Company (IAS), concurs. "Even as we talk 'new normal' and 'futureproofing', we need to clearly define this sentiment so it becomes a business imperative," she says.

"The way agencies are going to turn a client's head in the current market is by understanding that their credentials are far more than creativity, no matter how amazing."

The SCOPEN 2019 Market Trends Report shows that, even while creativity is important, it forms part the broader segment that includes credentials, case studies and quality of work. "This," notes McDowell, "is what we encourage agencies to start a pitch with. And today, I'd add return on investment (ROI) as a vital upfront addition.

"This enables both the marketer and procurement to tick off what has become a crucial box before being swayed by creativity they can't afford or that is questionable on the ROI front. We can't put too fine a point on how important the latter is across all business sectors now."



Industry reputation

McDowell highlights the value of adding some history about the agency and its standing in the industry and a client list. “Back this up with press coverage and case studies, as well as a brief analysis of outcomes, or value for a client’s spend.”

Company culture, BBBEE standing and procurement recommendations are also valuable, and often help clients determine whether they have a perfect fit or merely a creative agency.

“At this juncture, specialisation is also important, as some clients look for ‘one shop fits all’ and others are happy to have more than one specialist agency in order to cover digital capabilities, strategic planning and a good understanding of the client’s market. These are all becoming must haves rather than nice to haves,” McDowell asserts.

The IAS encourages clients to evaluate credentials during a pitch process, as this session gives them a better view of how the agency will ultimately perform. McDowell notes here that the client who is seduced largely by creative work and isn’t actively looking for strategy and measurement tools is the client most likely to be disappointed soon into the relationship with an agency.

To highlight the importance of overall credentials, the IAS decided to bring back the IAS Credentials Award, launched in 2016 in collaboration with the DMA Assegai Awards for integrated marketing excellence. 2020 saw an increased number of entries, and in 2021 we expect to see further growth with entries extending into Africa. The event will give participants a great opportunity to present all credentials to a diverse panel of Marketing judges during the current uncharted journey.

“The ‘new normal’ has got many companies building the plane while flying it,” says McDowell, “so while we have the data to indicate trends and years of experience with what works, Michael Kassan is right – there is no crystal ball. What we do know for certain now is that the client seeking key credentials is more likely to get that magical ROI than the client wowed purely by creativity. Every ad Rand spent may not be pretty, but it has to count.”

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