



Mutual respect is the key in making the in-house/outside agency relationship work. Using metrics as a tool for business conversations, strategic thinking can come from both the in-house creative team and the outside agency. Both teams share a common goal: to do great work for one's company/client. Yet, the relationship-building process can be challenging and complex at times.

InSource assembled a panel of eight distinguished thought leaders to discuss their experiences and insights on best practices for managing the in-house/outside agency relationship. This panel discussion was held on November 14, 2013, in New York City. Facilitated by **Andy Brenits**, President of InSource and Creative Services Leader at APS, this panel discussion featured **Gail Bichler** (Art Director, New York Times Magazine), **Ken Carbone** (Founding Partner & Chief Creative Director, CSA Carbone Smolan Agency), **Andy Epstein** (Team Lead, The BOSS Group at Merck), **Hilary Greenbaum** (Director of Graphic Design, Whitney Museum of American Art), **Randy Hunt** (Creative Director, Etsy), **Michael Lee** (Forbes Contributor on the marketing environment and founder of Madam), **Gael Towey** (Creative Director, Gael Towey & Co.; formerly of Martha Stewart Living), and **Thomas Wright** (Director of Advertising and Design, Neenah Paper).

InSource provides the following takeaway messages from this panel discussion:

What Works Well

- Strategic thinking can be identified as a gap and an opportunity within a company/organization. When seeking assistance from an external agency, it's important to build trust from the start.
- The process of selecting an agency can vary, ranging from a few days to several months. For best results, establish clear expectations and continue building trust through the process.
- Some in-house creative leaders build relationships with an outside agency that can last for many years, whereas others prefer to cycle through agencies depending on their changing needs.
- In some situations, the agency establishes the system/brand architecture of a creative approach and the in-house creative team does the design work.
- It can be useful for the agency to first gain an understanding of the client's leadership structure in terms of (1) courage (2) collaboration and (3) commitment. Then it's important for the agency to assure the in-house creative team that "we will be your greatest advocate." Together, the agency and in-house creative team may want to revisit ideas that were not accepted in the past and figure out ways to make these ideas more compelling.
- Seeking the work of an outside agency makes sense "when we need expertise we don't have in-house." It's important to keep on track and not derail the day-to-day work of the in-house creative team.
- Choose an outside agency "that can play well with others." Think of it this way. It's no different than hiring a designer onto your team. You look for skill set, experience and personality fit. All three of these attributes make the difference between success and failure.
- Risk is involved whenever outsiders analyze one's internal operations and insecurities are revealed as people navigate the internal political dynamics of an organization. This can lead the organization in different directions, ranging from "they helped us talk to each other" to "they don't know what they're doing."

Lessons Learned

- The in-house creative leaders should be actively involved in choosing and managing the agency relationship. If you aren't, get in the game. Find the opportunity and go after it.
- In-house creative leaders must present themselves as strategic thought leaders, not just the creative types, in order to be recognized and respected to lead this work.
- Establish a relationship first. Understand there will be moments of tension in figuring



InSource presents a panel event discussing best practices for how in-house and outside agencies can best collaborate, featuring **Ken Carbone** (Founding Partner & Chief Creative Director, CSA Carbone Smolan Agency), **Thomas Wright** (Director of Advertising and Design, Neenah Paper), **Randy Hunt** (Creative Director, Etsy), **Hilary Greenbaum** (Director of Graphic Design, Whitney Museum of American Art), **Gail Bichler** (Creative Director, New York Times Magazine), **Gael Towey** (Creative Director, Gael Towey & Co), **Andy Epstein** (Team Lead, The BOSS Group at Merck), and **Michael Lee**: Forbes Contributor on the marketing environment and founder of Madam).

out which direction to go. Honesty is the best way to move forward.

- Transparency and speed are the keys to building a productive partnership with an agency.
- The in-house creative team needs to feel engaged in the process. Make introductions and show them everything about the agency's work, not hiding anything.
- Make the in-house/agency relationship a collaboration, not a competition.
- In-house creative leaders can serve as the liaison between business-trained staff and design-trained staff.
- When the relationship with an agency is not going well, one way to get back on track is to conduct some brainstorming sessions with the agency. Use these sessions to get to know each other and show them the best of what the agency and in-house creative team are doing to help promote mutual respect.
- When growing pains emerge, be engaged in the process to address the issue and help others win. Find out how to get closer and become allies. Get in early and solve problems together. Apply the maxim: "Keep your friends close but your enemies closer."
- Other factors that do not promote a productive partnership include
 - > Lack of willingness to understand the client's business
 - > The assumption that an agency understands what the in-house creative team needs without asking questions first
 - > Boilerplate pitches from agencies without any attempt to build a relationship with the in-house creative leadership
- "Working right at the heart of a brand gives you the whole picture, the real 360 view, the ability to influence a brand early with your ideas, and more important, the ability to protect them." See more about the growth of in-house marketing capabilities in Michael Lee's October 2013 posting, "Can In-House Agencies Ever Be Great?" (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/michaellee/2013/10/07/can-in-house-agencies-ever-be-great/>).

- In-house talent can often develop effective creative strategies, not only business strategies. "Creative strategy is part of what we deliver every day." Along with their institutional knowledge and brand

knowledge, in-house creative leaders can help shape the messaging and tell the company's story in engaging ways to targeted audiences.

- Seek out opportunities to build the agency relationships up with your team. Be open and collaborative. The end result will be amazing branding, creative and career-long relationships!

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