

WFA/EACA guidelines on client-agency relations and best practice in the pitch process... Executive Summary



The aim of this paper is to provide an **executive summary** of the full guidelines document, which can be found at www.wfanet.org or www.eaca.eu. WFA & EACA **recommend utilizing the full document** if at all possible, to enable a win/win for all parties involved in a competitive pitch.

It is always recommended to both clients and agencies to make every possible effort to maintain good relations and to repair problems before resorting to a competitive pitch. However client-agency relationships do come to an end. When this happens, clients will call competitive pitches.

1 Before the pitch process has started

1.1 Reasons for change: It is important that all parties define and understand why the pitch has been decided and what the outcome should be. That aim should be kept in mind throughout.

1.2 How to change agency without changing agency: It is recommended that both sides try to make the existing client-agency relationship work before deciding on a pitch. More can sometimes be lost than gained by changing agencies.

1.3 How to deal with the incumbent agency in a pitch situation: Discuss the situation openly with the existing agency(ies). If there is no chance for the incumbent agency to succeed in the re-pitch the client should make this clear.

1.4 Is a full pitch always the appropriate solution? Even if the client decides to talk to other agencies, a fully fledged pitch may not be necessary. Other options include working meetings with the proposed agency teams and management

2 Getting started: The steering team:

The first step for the client is to create a small steering team which will manage the process. Typically 'core' members are; the marketing (or brand) leader, the relevant 'discipline' leader (e.g. media, interactive, marketing research) marketing procurement and one or two representatives of product management. The advertiser should also consider taking advantage of outside help, for example pitch consultants.

2.1 Defining the pitch objectives and the role the agency is expected to play: It is essential to establish a set of requirements on which business can be awarded. The advertiser should analyse the role advertising and other marketing communications play in the marketing mix and consider what type of an agency is required in relation to budgets, location and specialisation.

2.2 Considering specialist versus full-service agencies: The client needs to consider what mix agency skills should be employed. The pitch process can be influenced by the specifics of particular requirements. It can also be influenced by the time and resources the client has to coordinate specialists, or to work with a full integrated agency.

2.3 Considering the budget: It is important that the client clarifies in advance what a realistic level of expenditure is likely to be.

3 Drafting the brief:

The most important presentation in the whole process is often the client's briefing. The exact same brief should be given to all agencies in the pitch, even with those who are familiar with the brand and/or project.

3.1 Clarifying the requirements: The advertiser should provide a review of the brand's current/ future needs and draw up a time schedule and decision criteria. The role of marketing communications overall for the brand should be defined.

3.2 Defining the selection criteria: If the advertiser has several agencies to choose from, it will be important to determine what capabilities are needed and to prioritise areas of preference. It is natural for these preferences to evolve as the process goes along, however the selection criteria should be agreed internally before the pitch process begins.

3.3 Producing a written brief: The client must write a concise but thorough brief for the agencies. Agencies should be given the key criteria they will be judged on. The client should be explicit about the nature of services expected from the winning agency.

4 Selecting the pitching agencies:

The advertiser must limit the number of agencies taking part in the pitch stages beyond any legally required open tender. The choice of the number of agencies invited should be based on the size and/or complexity of the communication project to which the pitch refers.

4.1 Re-pitches and statutory reviews: The client should always let other agencies know if the incumbent agency will be re-pitching and whether the review they are conducting is due to any dissatisfaction, or due to a statutory contract renewal process.

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- 4.2 Creating a 'pitch list':** Having too many candidate agencies can increase costs for the participants and provide no substantial advantage for the advertiser.
- 4.2.1 Establishing conflict rules:** The client will not want to consider a direct competitor's agency. The client should try to define only the specific areas of conflict that really matter to them.
- 4.2.2 Drawing up a Consideration, Long & Short List:** The client needs to look at the credentials of all agencies which meet the pre-agreed criteria. This is a consideration list. To arrive at a long list, it is necessary to contact the most interesting agencies on the consideration list, ask if they are interested in competing for the account, and (if yes) place them under a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). A short list should ideally comprise no more than 3 or 4 agencies, including the incumbent. In pitches where the EU procurement rules require the publication of an advertisement in the OJEU (Official Journal of the European Union), specific procedural rules will apply and these may vary slightly from country to country. It is recommended that specialist legal counsel is obtained for such a pitch.
- 5 RFIs and RFPs:** Another option is to issue an RFI (request for information) to the consideration list, and RFPs (request for proposal) to the short list. An RFI can help the advertiser get a good picture of the assistance available. The best RFIs allow the first meetings with long listed agencies to focus entirely on the task and on the personalities involved, rather than on agency credentials. Unless there are legal constraints that require the client to accept proposals in document or tender form without holding prior one-on-one meetings with agencies (as may be the case in some OJEU processes), the practice of briefing agencies purely by RFP cannot be recommended.
- 6 Laying down a timeline:** Sufficient time must be allowed between the briefing occasion and the presentation; a minimum of 4 weeks is considered fair for a full pitch.
- 7 Handling publicity:** It is important to agree the rules on talking to the press throughout the process. Many clients require agencies to refrain from talking to the press until the outcome is determined.
- 8 Forming the decision-making team:** In general a small team is better, perhaps three people who are aware of the needs of all parts of their business. It is important that all final-decision-makers are involved in the outcome of each phase if they are not already part of the steering team.
- 9 The use of pitch consultants:** If using outside consultants, the client should specify from the initial meeting what his expectations are of the consultant. This should also be communicated to the agencies.
- 10 Meeting the agencies**
- 10.1 Chemistry meetings:** This meeting should be with key management and the team that will be working on the client's business. It might involve a brief working session around the problems and opportunities, or might be entirely social.
- 10.2 Selecting the short-list agencies:** The client will need to be decisive about reducing to the three or four to make a full pitch. It is best to first ensure chosen shortlist agencies are happy to go ahead, before standing down the rest. At this point, news of the review may be picked up by the press, so the client should have their response ready and agreed with the incumbent.
- 11 The core pitch process**
- 11.1 Briefing the short-list agencies:** When writing a brief, a questioning process should be built in. It is advisable to share with all the agencies the answers given to all agency questions, if these reveal insufficient clarity within the brief.
- 11.2 Deciding the number of stages required:** A maximum of two stages should be envisaged. This might be a strategic stage and a creative one. If one or two agencies clearly do not "get it" at the strategic stage, the client might decide to drop them at that stage.
- 11.3 Managing the process:** To ensure a fair pitch, no agencies should be added to the list during the process. If no agency meets the requirements, the client should start a new process.
- 11.3.1 Intermediate ("tissue") sessions can help:** If the process includes creative development, then the chances of coming up with a usable solution may be improved if the parties arrange an intermediate (tissue) session in which they discuss outlines or partly-developed ideas.

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- 11.3.2 Their place or yours?** It is often easier to get the client team together at their own location; however being 'out of office' might help to avoid distractions. If the culture of the agency is a consideration, then more will be learned at their offices.
- 11.3.3 Timekeeping:** Timing of the presentation should be set to allow the agency to present the requested work as well as for questions and discussions. Generally, an agency should not be allowed to overrun their time, unless questions or interruptions from the client side have caused it.
- 11.3.4 Helping the client to remember:** It is best to have some time between meetings to set down impressions. Statistically, the last agency to present can have a major advantage, so the client should try to hold all meetings over as short a time-span as possible. Late changes to meeting times can have a dramatic effect on the agencies and should be avoided if at all possible.
- 12 Pitch fees optional:** It is up to the advertiser whether they offer one or not and they should be open about their opinions. The same offer should apply to all agencies, including the incumbent, if included in the process. This should be made clear in the original brief and not left up to discussion during the pitch process. Local agreements should be respected.
- 13 Playing by the rules**
- 13.1 Providing background market data:** The advertiser must be willing, on a strictly confidential basis, to share relevant market data and research, including post-testing of existing campaigns. The advertiser should ensure that there is always a member of the steering team that the agencies can contact with questions, or for clarification.
- 13.2 Respect copyright principles:** Creative concepts from an agency pitch remain the property of the agencies. In case ideas produced are of interest to the advertiser, the purchase of usage rights should be negotiated. There may also be local regulations that must be adhered to.
- 13.3 Pitch ethics:** It is unethical for agencies to offer to work free of charge for a trial period. This might also offend competition laws. Any agency making such an offer should be excluded. It is also unethical for a client to hold a pitch with the sole purpose of collecting market data or professional opinions.
- 14 Scoring and evaluation system:** Great presenters, locations, etc. may give an idea of the agency's keenness and motivation; however the client should also try to look at proposals objectively. A checklist with a scoring system related to priorities determined in advance is a useful way of keeping track.
- 15 Contracts & remuneration:** It is recommended that the client conduct pro forma negotiations on terms of business with each of the short-listed agencies. Before making the announcement of the winner, the client should firm up on the business side of the partnership, e.g. contract including remuneration format, the management of the relationship and the timetables for next steps.
- 16 Making and communicating the decision:** As soon as possible after the presentation round has ended, the client should decide on the winning agency. The client should establish a procedure for informing the winning and unsuccessful agencies about the decision. All pitching agencies should learn about the decision the same day and a press release should be immediately issued to the trade press.
- 17 After the pitch:** The client should offer the unsuccessful agencies the courtesy of a de-briefing. The agencies must return all confidential material and information provided by the client. The advertiser must, upon request, return unsuccessful agency pitch presentation(s), and undertake not to use any of the ideas contained therein without seeking permission and if necessary making a payment.
- 18 Managing the transition ('hand-over') process:** It is key for the client to ensure that there is a proper hand-over process when they move their brand or corporate account to a new agency. This is particularly important for the transition of media planning/buying assignments, not least in relation to the transfer of longer-term agreements of the client with the media companies. The hand-over should involve all three parties: client, incumbent and new agency.