

The Death of the Creative Pitch.

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The Creative Pitch Doesn't Work

We appreciate this might sound odd coming from a design agency, but the creative pitch process doesn't work. For either party. At all.

In putting this piece together we've been researching other agencies thoughts on the pitch process and it turns out we're not alone. It seems that lots of agencies (small agencies in particular) are starting to reject the creative pitch process - which is great news for agencies and clients alike.

It has long been accepted that the way to choose an agency to complete a project for you is to start a pitch process. You know the sort of thing I'm talking about. You call up 3 or 4 agencies, tell them a bit about your project, ask them to come and see you, give them a brief and ask them to present their ideas a few weeks later. Often there isn't even a face to face meeting before the actual pitch - the "brief" simply gets emailed to everyone you'd like to pitch for the work.

You then spend the next few weeks looking forward to having a whole bunch of creatives present their ideas to you. It's fun. It's exciting. It's visual and engaging. You get to see how your brief has been interpreted and how different companies will take a different approach. But this isn't the way it should be and we're hoping to shed a little light on more effective and fairer ways to pick a design agency to work with.

We'd welcome any feedback, thoughts or suggestions from either agencies or clients, so feel free to get in touch via [email](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), or [Facebook](#).

B&M Design & Advertising

Contents

- 4 The "Brief"
- 5 The Judging Process
- 6 Are you picking the best agency or the quietest?
- 7 It's not free design!
- 8 So how should we be doing this?
- 9 Summary

The “Brief”

Every design project should start with a brief, but a brief should be collaborative.

The moment you know you need something designing, you have the beginnings of a brief. You need a brochure, a website or an entirely new brand. You have a rough deadline in mind, maybe a budget too. You might have a few ideas about some photos, colours or general style. You know the market or purpose it's intended for, so you write all this down and send this to the agencies you're asking to pitch.

This is where an agency will look to expand the brief though. We'll want to know more about your company, your clients, your brand and brand values, the priority of your objectives and how this one piece fits in with the rest of your marketing objectives. Never once have we received a brief that gives us all the answers we need to deliver the best possible result. With a handful of exceptions, we've only received the client's thoughts on what they need. Maybe a little more about their company or the target market, but that's usually it.

This is strange though? The reason you're speaking to an agency in the first place is that you're looking for that degree of insight? That edge over your competitors that comes from asking the right questions and writing a collaborative brief.

So what you thought was a brief is actually just the beginnings of a brief. But we frequently find that if we call the prospective client and want to arrange a meeting to discuss the brief, we're declined the opportunity. The client just wants the creative work as (as far as they're concerned) they've already written the brief. So straight away you're not getting what you actually need because none of the agencies you're asking to pitch have all the right information.

Even if you did put together a hugely comprehensive brief, there should still be some collaboration as it's this collaboration that is often a huge part of picking the right agency to work with. How well you work together on the brief, how the agency understands what you're trying to achieve by asking insightful questions, how they get to the crux of what's required is often more telling than some visuals that are essentially guessing at what you need.

Finally, you're only going to get what you asked for. The designs you'll receive are playing it safe - squarely aimed at what we already know is an underdeveloped brief. After all, you've engaged them in a sales process for their business

and not a sales process for you to your clients - and they want to win that business.

A good agency will be trying to challenge your preconceptions and guide you towards a better way of doing things. You'll never really see this in the creative pitch though.

Alternatively, you might receive some designs that completely rewrite the brief. We've lost out on work in the past as the client has gone with someone who submitted something completely different to what was asked for. This is hugely frustrating as straight away it means you're not comparing like-for-like, which would be much fairer when asking companies to give up their time for free.

The Judging Process

A beauty contest is no way to pick an agency to partner with on a project.

There are several problems with picking an agency purely from the visuals they've provided:

1. Subjectivity shouldn't overrule commercial sense.

Invariably it's the most senior member of staff involved in the pitch process that makes the ultimate decision, but their subjective taste shouldn't be used to pick the best agency for the job. Perhaps they prefer the colour of one design over another or prefer a particular photo? This isn't the best way to select key suppliers.

2. The judge is rarely the end user of the design.

If a piece of design is doing its job it should be engaging and persuasive, but what's engaging and persuasive to you isn't necessarily what's engaging and persuasive to your clients. Remember who the target audience is.

3. You've already picked the agencies you want to pitch based on their creativity.

You're probably speaking solely to agencies who you've done some research on. You've seen their websites, you've reviewed their portfolio. You're speaking to them because you *know* you like what they do, so what's the point in testing their design skills again?

Chances are the work you liked is the result of a great agency/client relationship, hours of collaborative work and no small amount of research and client insight too.

4. It's about how well the agency can sell themselves to your business, not how well they can sell your product to your clients.

This type of pitch is more about 'wowing' the client than producing what is suitable for the end user. Looking for that 'wow' factor is often the driving force behind wanting a creative pitch, but this frequently just muddies the water of what's actually required.

5. Design is about collaboration, not relying on a single designer having a moment of divine inspiration.

A designer will know how to make things look good. They'll understand the visual communication, aesthetics, and usability of a piece of design, but you know your target audience. You know what has and hasn't worked in the past. You know your most important selling points. Combine your skill sets to drive your project forward and it will yield far better responses.

By working together you will always get a better end result.

Are you picking the best agency or the quietest?

Free creative work isn't the best measure of who is the most suitable agency.

We're a small agency and we're usually pretty busy. Being busy is good - it's the best measure that you're doing things well and your clients keep coming back. We want you to become one of those clients we're working hard for too.

The reason you want to work with us is the very reason we're busy. You like that we have a good client base, you like the work we're producing for those clients and want to tap into that resource.

Being busy means we rarely have the time to spend days creating speculative work for free. It's not unusual to spend several days putting a pitch together, then at least half a day in the pitch itself and travelling there and back.

If an agency is quiet they can afford to devote days, weeks even, to your pitch. Designers, copywriters, artworkers, illustrators, account managers, business development staff, web developers - all with time to spare.

Maybe the quiet agency will present 2, 3 even 4 different concepts to you. Maybe you'll really like the designs they show you too - and you should - they'll have spent a significant amount of time on them!

Unless you're dealing with a very large agency (who will have significant overheads that will be charged on to the client, but that's a story for another day) then a busy agency won't be putting the time or effort into a pitch that they would with a paying job. If they do, it's because they're quiet, in which case you'd have to question if you're picking the best agency or the one who was quietest at the time of the pitch.

It's not free design!

How much do you want to pay for other peoples design work?

I'm going to guess that the answer is "not much", because who would want to pay for design work they're not going to use? A lot of companies think that if you ask to see speculative design work, you can effectively pick from several designers work and only pay for the one you want to work with. This is another driving force behind the creative pitch - you get to see a whole bunch of ideas but only pay for one of them.

For any agency that produces speculative design work for free, this is part of their sales cost. Their sales model is based on producing an amount of work for nothing – then winning a percentage of that work and being able to charge for it. The same way as you have to pay for advertising or marketing materials, you have to consider speculative design work as an outgoing cost. That cost has to be recovered though. For every creative pitch an agency wins there are all the pitches they've lost too.

So who's paying for those? You are. If you commission an agency that does free speculative work you're going to be paying for every failed pitch that agency has ever had. They have to recoup those overheads through other work.

We have to raise the question of how this has become the norm in the design industry too. We can't think of any other industry where you get more than one company to do a job for you but only pick and pay for the one you like the best. Reviews, previous work examples and speaking to existing customers is fine for anyone commissioning someone to do a job for them, so why not the design industry? If you're unsure, start off with a smaller job and see how it goes?

We don't profess to get every design right first time – as we've already mentioned this is a subjective decision-making process – but we'll work with you to get it right, understand your needs and keep going until you're happy with the end result. And we won't charge you until it's right. In fact, we offer a guarantee that if you don't like what we've produced and decide to use someone else, we won't charge you for what we've done. We've never had to do that though - which is surely testament enough that you're in safe hands?

We should also raise the question of how some companies use the free creative pitch to harvest as many ideas as they can, cherry picks the ones they like the

best, then ask the winning agency to implement them all into their designs – usually whoever was cheapest.

This is pretty morally repugnant but it happens more often than you might realise. Judgement and experience has taught us how to sniff out this sort of company in the past (it's happened to us and once it does you'll be pretty keen to make sure it doesn't happen again) but we'd rather spend time trying to educate prospective clients to the best way to find a design agency to work with (see page 8) rather get involved in a creative pitch.

So how should we be doing this?

Tom Foulkes has a great concept called “The Five Cs”. We’ve replicated his article on this below:

Selecting and appointing a new design partner is one of the most important elements of what we do. To be effective, relationships with consultancies should be built for the long-term. We need to be sure that the partnership will work and not just for us as the client but also for the consultancy.

We focus on five key areas to help us make this judgment, which we call The Five Cs:

- Credentials
- Capability
- Creative
- Chemistry
- Cost

We look to gather hard evidence across these five areas. The way we gather this hard evidence is through a credentials pitch. Essentially this boils down to a series of meetings with a small number of (usually no more than five) suppliers. None of these meetings require any of the consultancies to produce any original creative work.

This differs to the traditional methodology for selecting a new design partner, which unfortunately more commonly sees clients ask consultancies to produce creative work as evidence of their ability to undertake projects: the

creative pitch, as it has become known. We believe this method leads to poor decisions and may undermine the commercial strength of our organisation. Fundamentally, we believe the free creative pitch is commercially toxic and is a tradition the marketing profession can do without.

Commercially toxic may sound a little over the top, but here are some of the potential hidden consequences of the creative pitch that can have a negative impact on a business, post-decision:

- The creative will be naïve and hastily pulled together. It will be based on a very narrow understanding of the client, its market and the true nature of what is required. Creative like this is dangerous to share within a business as it can lead to commercial decisions being made on the basis of taste rather than commercial sense. This ultimately may lead to commercial failure.
- Free creative isn't necessarily free creative. The cost of producing this work will be recovered through the subsequent work the client does, the consultancy will likely resent giving its work away for free and this

dysfunction will undermine and ultimately destroy the commercial partnership. A failure in such a vital strategic relationship may lead to commercial failure.

- The quality of any creative produced will only reflect the amount of time the consultancy has spent on the pitch. In any successful consultancy, this will not be a great amount of time, unless the consultancy is struggling to win work. This will lead to poor decision-making as it is likely that the client will appoint a poor-quality consultancy with lots of time to spend on a pitch over the strongest consultancy, who was busy with fee-paying work in the lead up to the pitch. Ultimately this will affect competitiveness and may lead to commercial failure.

Summary

Is it time to kill off the creative pitch once and for all?

There is still a place for the creative pitch, but this is really the preserve of the large agency. If you're a massive international brand about to appoint a global agency for the next 5+ years, spending millions of pounds a year - the pitch process is probably still relevant.

The pitch process is likely to be a long one, with several phases and a defined structure for each of those phases. Scoping meetings, due diligence and many discussions are likely to have taken place before any creative work is shown, by which time the number of agencies involved will have been reduced down to just the final few. Creative will be part of, but not all of the pitch process. Most global agencies will be happy to work this way knowing they'll be earning lucrative contracts which will last several years at a time. The sizeable fees that they charge can offset the costs of pitching for work of this type.

This shouldn't be the way small to medium sized agencies have to work though. For a small agency, devoting so much time and money to a creative pitch can be difficult. It's not because we wouldn't want your business (far from it) but it's only right

that we prioritise the work of our fee-paying customers. If you became one of those customers you'd expect your work to be prioritised over speculative work we're doing for free too?

A survey commissioned by [Creativebrief in May 2018](#) discovered that two-thirds of advertisers would still consider hiring an agency that refuses to participate in the traditional pitch process.

Respondents were largely in agreement that the traditional pitch process is no longer "fit for purpose" in today's environment – with 61% of brands and 93% of agencies wanting to see change.

Less than half of brands (44%) believe that the pitch process offers a "true sense" of what it will be like to work with an agency, a figure that drops to 21% when looking at agency leaders.

When asked if they would work with agencies that refused to engage in the traditional pitch process, 67% of brands responded positively.

Over four-fifths (82%) of agencies agreed that they should be prepared to refuse to pitch for an account to

encourage the process to change and modernise.

This represents quite a shift in the marketplace, with a large number of agencies wanting to see the pitch process change and clients largely agreeing.

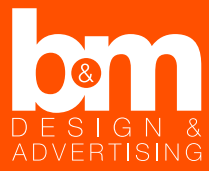
Does this mean we won't pitch for new business?

We'd welcome the chance to discuss any brief with a client - new or old. We've never charged for meetings or advice and would be happy to discuss your next project.

If you wanted us to present our skills and experience, our portfolio, or provide you with some references you can speak to we can provide this to you quickly and easily.

If you'd like a quote for your project we'd be delighted to put something together for you. We'd want a short meeting beforehand to discuss the project and make sure we have all the right information though.

If you wanted some free creative work which you'd be comparing with other designs, we'd politely decline. Times are changing and there is more value in using more measurable ways to pick an agency to work with. Hopefully, you'll see the value in this too.



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