



How Client-Agency Teams Build Trust

What it takes to create meaningful relationships with agency partners.



Trust between marketers and agencies is very similar to an investment account.

After initial deposits are made into the account, proper attention and care can pay both short- and long-term dividends that fuel not only the organic growth of the brand and business but also high levels of confidence and satisfaction in the client–agency relationship. When the trust bank between marketers and agencies is healthy, relationships flourish. When it is not, relationships falter.

Arguably, trust is a seed fund for effective and truly innovative marketing and advertising. Trust provides client and agency teams the means to think outside the box and challenge the status quo, which, over the long term, builds a synergistic portfolio that consists of respect and understanding and a shared mission, vision, and purpose.

There are three key elements to building trust between marketers and their strategic partners in even the most competitive marketing categories. They are rooted in well-defined engagement terms, a belief that bold ideas are welcome, and a consistent dedication to the humans bringing these ideas to life.



Here's where marketing and agency partners can invest to develop trust and build long-term relationships that thrive.

01 **Ensure Ground Rules Are Set and Understood**

Every high-trust relationship begins with a clear, foundational understanding of what is and, sometimes more important, is not expected of each party. In relationships between marketers and agencies, the scope of work (SOW) is the cornerstone of the relationship.

High quality, purposeful scoping processes that include input from all key stakeholders provide unmatched and necessary clarity into the relationship. This helps illuminate gray areas, and it sets the ground rules and expectations for success. From financial clarity to legal peace of mind, a strong SOW provides both an aligned and focused foundation for bringing great work to life.

02 Define and Pursue Bold Work

Like any relationship, having confidence that a partner is on the same page as the marketing team is a critical first step. Almost equally important is a relationship dynamic in which there is freedom to explore, imagine, design, and recommend initiatives that push boundaries. When a relationship that welcomes boldness is not only allowed but nurtured, trust flourishes between marketer and agency.

To stand out from its competitors, a brand has to be bold in its strategy, messaging, and activation. Along with a strong scoping process, marketers and agencies must have a definition of what bold means for the brand and category. Even then, strategic partners need to understand what is fair game to propose and, ultimately, execute.

For example, Nike's boldness came to life through its partnership with Colin Kaepernick for a controversial advertising campaign that sought to make a brand statement as well as a cultural statement. The campaign almost never was. When the quarterback, who had stirred controversy in the NFL by kneeling during the playing of the national anthem to protest police brutality, was dropped by the San Francisco 49ers, Nike nearly removed him from its roster. But, as the New York Times reports, members of the Nike communications team fought to keep him, and the company's agency Wieden+Kennedy went on to push to make him the star of the brand's 30th anniversary "Just Do It" campaign. Through boldness, the two teams were able to create a truly iconic moment in advertising.

03 Dedication to Progress and Future Thinking

Successful client–agency relationships and great brand work hinge on collaboration, co-creativity, and dedication to the craft of advertising. These marketers and agency teams must be supported by their respective organizations, with special emphasis placed on proper and responsible performance evaluations.

The 360-degree performance evaluation has become the gold standard, allowing members of the relationship — both marketer and agency — to review all those with whom they work closely. This style of evaluation should be seen as an engine and not simply a contractual or procedural tool. A dedication to the evaluation process and the action plan borne out of it displays a mutual respect for what may be the greatest assets a partnership can have: the people working to bring the vision to life.



Trust Is a Long-term Investment

It's not easy getting to a place of trust and synergy between strategic partners. All too often these relationships are tainted by suspicion, distaste, and an unwillingness to address the situations in which partners find themselves. These are toxic traits that poison efforts to build trust, and they can be more damaging to a brand than one may realize.

Returning to the financial theme, the trust that marketers and agencies build is an investment that can pay dividends for decades. Similar to a long-term investment, it takes responsible action and a vision for the future to achieve success. As the account becomes more mature and consistent deposits are made, the impact of all that hard work starts to materialize in outstanding and exceptionally effective advertising that can be shared with the world.

After all, during the past two decades consumers have made it clear that they want engage with brands they can trust. So, how can marketers expect customers to trust their brands if they don't nurture trust with the people they've hired to help lead those brands?



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