
AAR's role in pitch process evolution

by Paul Phillips

We are always working with clients to clarify their briefs and objectives, define what they need from their agency and probe for genuine insights about the client culture, people and style of working to enable us to advise them better. We create the relevant shortlist, manage the pitch process and help establish the relationship on sound commercial terms.

This year, we have introduced two new approaches as part of the agency search and selection process, both of which have garnered a positive response.

The first was to introduce a shorter, snappier, less work-intensive means of holding chemistry meetings; the second was trying to find a way to ensure that a fulsome and personal pitch brief was delivered to all agencies participating in the pitch whilst maintaining a completely level playing field.

We also began to look at the process itself – particularly from the media pitch perspective – as to whether there was a better way to approach media planning and buying reviews.

A NEW APPROACH TO PITCH BRIEFING

This year we have whole-heartedly embraced the all-agency pitch briefing day as we have found that it works well for both clients and agencies.

WHAT'S THE RISK IN DOING IT THIS WAY?

On the face of it, all-agency briefing days could suffer across several criteria:

- A frosty group of agency folk, eyeing each other warily across the room
- A complete absence of questions for the clients, through fear of an agency revealing its hand or giving something away
- A bemused client who isn't sure of the etiquette of the day and becomes confused about who's who agency side

BUT NOTHING COULD BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH...

THE BENEFITS OF ALL AGENCY BRIEFINGS

We work in a pretty small village where the norm is closer to two degrees of separation rather than six. So, more often than not within a group of 15-20 people from four different agencies, there are more than a few people who know each other, have worked together or are even related in some way!

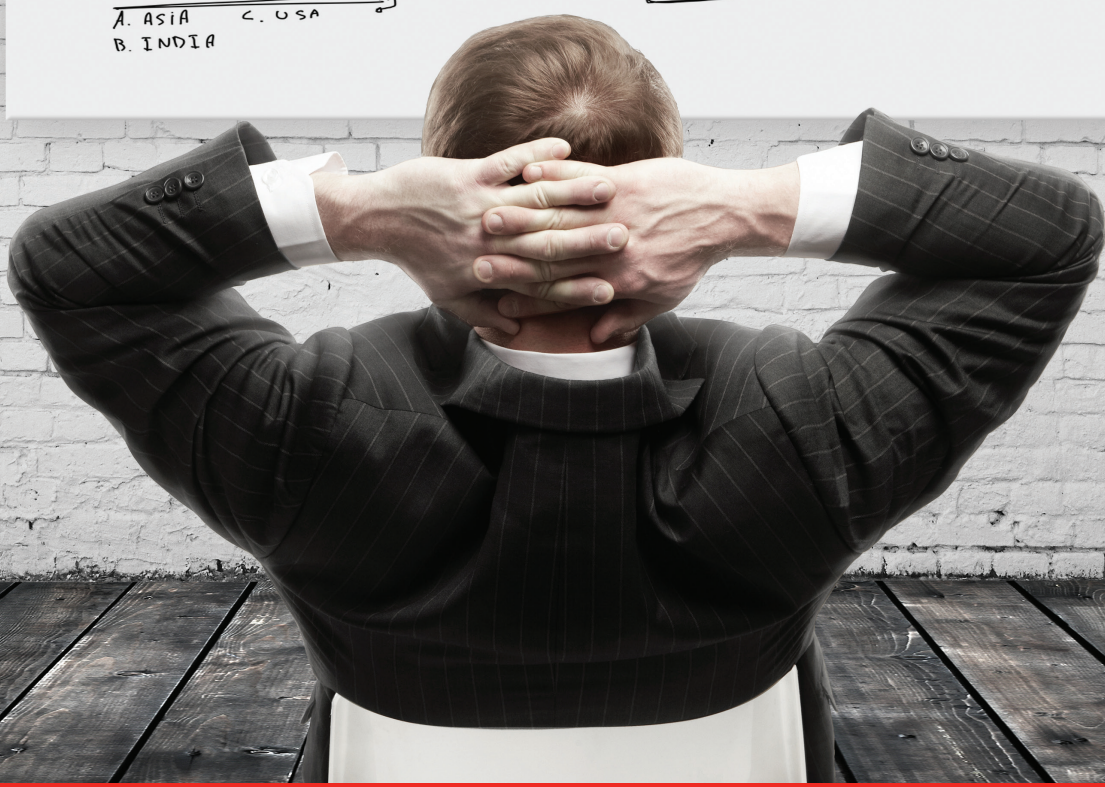
Any nervousness about 'the opposition' going into an all-agency briefing is very quickly dispelled once everyone has seen the competition.

Encouragingly, agency folk have never been shy or reticent about asking the odd question or two.

Given the effort that clients make to ensure these briefing days are worthwhile, the result has been a richness of questions coming from all agencies, with pitching teams being enthused by the briefing they have received. And there's always an opportunity for individual agency time with clients following an all-agency briefing day, so any killer questions or observations needn't be shared.



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RECENT CASES

● MAJESTIC WINES

With Majestic Wines, we heard from the Head of HR, met with store management and staff in-store, and were educated about wine by buyers, as well as learning about which wines to match with which food.

● MINI

The MINI pitch brief included a tour of the plant where we were able to see the car being assembled, each to the exact and different specification of the customers' order. There was also some test driving - always enjoyable and doing no harm to prospective sales.

● BULMERS

Bulmers introduced us to the world of cider in a pub garden, recreated in the centre of London on a freezing cold day with sub-zero temperatures. Indeed, it was so cold that we cut short the briefing and all ended up in the pub for the afternoon.

● UNIPART

Towards the end of the year, Unipart, led by their Chairman and Chief Executive, hosted the pitching agencies for a day sharing rich insight into the company culture. We were even served Christmas lunch.

● KRONENBOURG

Kronenbourg1664 hosted their briefing in a pub, inviting a Brew Master, Dominique Felix, to share his love of, and passion for, the product. The fact that his English was, shall we say, very Gallic in delivery, only added to the authenticity of the briefing!

But you don't need alcohol to host a great agency briefing!

We all know that at all stages, the costs involved in making the wrong decisions can be huge and the AAR serves as a knowledgeable and well-connected partner, steering you towards a successful appointment.

Clients are to be applauded for the effort they have placed in making sure these briefing sessions are suitably inspiring. All have taken the opportunity to involve senior management who are more than happy to commit some of their time to one meeting, but would never be able to do the same for four separate agency briefing sessions.

They have also involved others in the organisation that might not have a direct involvement in the choice of agency but are often a rich source of information about the company: people from the shop floor, the factory floor, the staff canteen, the warehouse, the distribution centre, the call centre, from HR Departments or even the orchard!

MEET AND GREET

This year we have introduced a new approach for clients to select their chosen agencies to pitch, namely Meet and Greet sessions, or speed-dating, to use a more familiar expression.

Where circumstances have been appropriate - starting with a client that is up for it - instead of holding more traditional chemistry sessions across a couple of days, we have invited agencies and consultancies to spend 20 minutes with a prospective client to demonstrate their appropriateness and suitability to be invited to pitch.

The format works for client requirements across all disciplines and feedback has been overwhelmingly positive from those who have participated.

Clients have the opportunity to meet with a broader range of agencies, giving them the opportunity to meet with more people across a marketplace that continues to increase in volume and breadth of capability.

Meet and Greet sessions will not universally replace chemistry meetings but we'll continue to use them where appropriate to do so, and look forward to more feedback from agencies and clients alike.

MEDIA AGENCY REVIEWS – IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

Last year we initiated a project to examine whether the media pitch process was fit for purpose or needed a refresh.

At a breakfast session for 40 people, representing 20 media agencies and holding companies, auditors and a procurement intermediary, the discussion threw up key areas of common frustration for the media community.

We have consequently formed a small working party of representatives from agencies and the auditors to review these concerns and develop a proposal for solutions that would work for everyone. Both ISBA and the IPA are supporting this initiative and we are hoping to report back with the outcome of this project by mid-2013. ■

