



PULSE

FOR MARKETERS
AND AGENCIES 2024



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AAR: Experts in Marketing Ecosystems

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Welcome to Pulse.

By Victoria Fox

WITH CHANGE COMES OPPORTUNITY

I re-read my introduction to last year's Pulse and it made for sober reading; war in Ukraine, a cost-of-living crisis, political instability, a looming economic recession, a continuing climate crisis and an escalating talent crisis across our industry.

Rather depressingly, a *lift* and *shift* of these comments would not have looked out of place this year.

But without wanting to diminish or dilute the very real and concerning global, societal and economic challenges we face, and their impact on all of our businesses, I want to set a more optimistic and upbeat tone as we head into 2024 with an unequal amount of hope, anticipation and concern.

Change is the overriding theme in the marketing industry; driven by technology, changing customer needs, conscious consumption and how we want to work post-Covid. With change comes opportunity, and also the need for community,

where we can learn from and support each other. At AAR, we've focused on ways we can support our clients at this time of change.

The impact of Gen AI

Let's start with AI or, to be precise, Generative Artificial Intelligence, which enjoyed more than its fair share of attention in 2023. We're at the foothills of the impact of Gen AI on our industry, but the common view is that its application will have a material and seismic (mostly positive) effect on the business of marketing.

The *glass half full* cohort see it as freedom to apply talent where it can add most value, whereas the *glass half empty* brigade sees a further erosion of agency fees, influence and job losses. We are optimistic about the positive impact Gen AI will have in demonstrating that creativity is a business accelerant and imperative for growth.

You can read more about the issues AI has raised in our recent report, "Cutting through the hype" [here](#).



Cutting through the hype

"[Cutting through the hype](#)" tackles five of the most pressing issues in marketing today: artificial intelligence (AI), fluidity, data, environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) and Gen Z, helping marketers cut through the hype and appreciate the opportunities available to them. It's a thorough investigation of the realities of a changing market as marketers go into 2024. With interviews from 25+ leaders across marketing, including CMOs and senior marketers, agency founders, CEOs, and CSOs, the report offers a snapshot of how the market is responding to developments. Do make the time to download and read if you can.

Continuing in a positive vein, I want to reference two new initiatives from AAR that we introduced in 2023; initiatives that we hope contribute positively to the industry.

No Bullsh*t Leadership

In June, we launched our new e-learning leadership development programme, No Bullsh*t Leadership. Based on the best-selling business book by the same name, the course exists to solve the misconception that leadership is only for those at the top.

One of the biggest trends we've seen at AAR is the growing leadership development gap, driven by changing working patterns and the pace at which we are now promoting. So much leadership needs to come from the middle, and we need to unlock this cohort to drive growth for businesses.

The course has been designed to accelerate the development of our future leaders, helping them to recognise themselves as leaders earlier by giving them the necessary skills, tools, and confidence. Feedback has been incredibly positive so far, with our graduates seeing the immediate benefits to their day-to-day roles.

If you want to find out more or think a member of your team might benefit from this course, more details can be found [here](#).

AAR Exchange

In October we introduced AAR Exchange, a reverse mentoring programme between the rising marketing stars of the future and a community of NEDs. A simple value exchange proposition; what

advice can NEDs offer to the future CMOs and, in return, what coalface perspectives can the rising star marketers share that will inform and enhance the value NEDs bring to their respective boards?

The first event, held in person, was a great success, with a real sense of positivity amongst all who participated, and we look forward to hosting the next AAR Exchange later this year.

Innovative agency selection

This year has seen a significant number of column inches devoted to the subject of pitching and the ambition for it to be less onerous on all involved. We are strong advocates of a respectful approach to agency selection and work hard to challenge ourselves and our clients to embrace new ways of reviewing the marketplace and selecting agency partners.

As we head into 2024, we will continue to look to innovate, always ensuring the ask of agencies is commensurate with the size of the prize.

You can read about our innovative approach to pitching later in this report.

Tectonic shifts in the agency landscape

It cannot have escaped anyone's notice that 2023 saw a continued shift in the agency landscape's tectonic plates as heritage holding companies further rationalised their network offerings, and micro-holding companies and networks built in the 21st Century sharpened their go-to market propositions, all with the aim of maintaining relevance, simplifying and delivering value to their current and future clients.

For CMOs, the choice of agency partners feels like it's never been wider while, for agencies, there are new opportunities, with the former challenges of geography and scale no longer being the barrier to purchase that they once were.

We believe the meritocracy that is the lifeblood of our industry, where talent and drive are rewarded, makes the prospect of 2024 an exciting one for those of us who embrace the uncertainty, and relish a challenge.

Enjoy this edition of Pulse. ●

Victoria Fox | CEO, AAR
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People news at AAR →

By Victoria Fox



Kirsty Boyd



Emma Regan



Kate Donaldson



Adam Freeman



Paul Jacobs

Four new team members joined AAR in 2023, and we're delighted to introduce them to you.

Two of these - **Kirsty Boyd** and **Emma Regan** - joined our Business Management team, which is critical to how we work and deliver seamlessly across all our projects. Our Practice Leads rely on this support for client relationship management, project management, logistics and project design. Our Business Managers will often be the people with whom you'll engage most regularly, and we know you'll enjoy working with Kirsty and Emma along with the rest of the team.

Kate Donaldson, who has been with us for over 8 years and is the rock we all rely on, has been promoted to Head of Business Management. Congratulations for this well-deserved promotion.

As AAR diversifies and develops new lines of business, we are delighted that **Paul Jacobs** has joined us full time as Commercial Lead. As well as covering all sales and marketing, Paul will be responsible for new product lines and will oversee the AAR brand. Paul has been working with us for the past year, launching our 'No Bullsh*t Leadership' E-Learning product. He comes with extensive agency experience and a broad set of skills from which AAR will undoubtedly benefit, and is a really exciting addition to the team.

Adam Freeman joins as Head of Growth, having amassed a wealth of experience from his time at Xeim, Contagious and Cannes Lions. Adam will work closely with both Paul Jacobs and with our wonderful Marketing Manager, **Katrina Law**, who many of you already know.

All are featured in the 'Meet the Team' page later in this edition of Pulse, along with their contact details. ●

AAR Quiz for NABS supported by Meta



AAR Quiz for NABS returns!

By Paul Phillips

Almost two decades ago, AAR hosted our first *pub quiz* in a Soho basement wine bar, attended by a handful of agencies for what was a bit of summer evening fun, entertainment, and bragging rights.

Over the years the AAR quiz grew in popularity and competitiveness, only to be put on pause during COVID-19.

This year we resurrected the quiz to raise funds for NABS, the advertising industry's charity that needed as much support as possible.

The response was overwhelming as 56 agencies booked their places to be crowned The AAR Quiz for NABS Champions 2023.

Wednesday 17 May saw 350 of ad and media agency-land's smartest (or at least most enthusiastic) come together at Meta's generously donated facilities in Rathbone Place for what was to be a new quiz experience.

We embraced technology with iPads replacing paper and pen, a new speedy quiz format and automatically generated scoring, all supported by Meta's brilliant in-house tech team.

What could possibly go wrong?

Thankfully nothing! Indeed, the new format was applauded by everyone on the night and proved a great success. (Speedy Stu, I never doubted him! ☺)

Alongside the new format we also enjoyed a new hosting double act. Tony Spong (yes, it was the same sparkly jacket), previously our sole quiz master, was joined on stage by Hannah Astill, who proved to be a natural, and together they managed the room like seasoned professionals.

After three hours of intense quizzing the team from Anomaly were victorious, with no one more surprised than their leader Camilla Harrison.

And once all the pennies were counted, a cheque for £15,000 was handed over to Sue Todd, CEO of NABS (it was actually a bank transfer but that's not very poetic, is it?).

Thanks to everyone that supported the event behind the scenes as well as front of house, to everyone at AAR who were waiting staff, cleaners and gofers for the night, and to all the agencies that bought tables.

It was a huge effort, but definitely worth it.

More information on NABS can be found [here](#), along with ways to [donate](#) to this vital charity. ●



AAR launches No Bullsh*t Leadership

E-Learning Programme to develop the next generation of leaders

By Paul Jacobs

Last summer we launched our new E-Learning leadership development programme, No Bullsh*t Leadership, based on the bestselling business book by the same name and created in collaboration with author, Chris Hirst (former CEO of Havas Creative Group and Grey).

It was time to act. In 2023 [only 40% of people said their company had high quality leaders](#), whilst Forbes highlighted "an increased need for leadership development" as one of the key business trends for the year. The online course is specifically designed to accelerate the development of emerging leaders by democratising leadership training. It aims to solve the common misconception that leadership is all about CEOs and the C-Suite and, by doing so, unlock the true potential of the next generation by helping them see themselves as leaders earlier in their journey.

Aimed at 'anyone with influence', the course runs over eight modules covering topics from 'decision making' through to 'culture as the leader's superpower'. Delegates are able to complete the course in their own time with guidance and tuition from a tutor team of leadership coaches throughout, giving participants the skills, tools and confidence needed to develop a leadership style that is entirely their own.

The course is led by Chris Hirst and Vonnice Alexander, with a host of exceptional guest speakers including Harpreet Kaur (Founder/CEO at OhSoYum and winner of the Apprentice), Akua Agyemfra (a cultural strategist who works for Stormzy, Wretch32 and Spotify) and Paul Tisdale (Professional Football Manager).



In 2023, cohorts took place in summer and autumn, where we welcomed a great selection of businesses who enrolled their future leaders from the likes of Channel 4, VM02, and Ogilvy, to name a few. The breadth of talent and variety of industries in the mixed cohorts has really enriched the classrooms and alumni group, as delegates learn from, and share knowledge with, each other. Commenting on the course, a delegate from our founding cohort said:



This course has had a profound impact on my day-to-day, giving me new-found confidence in myself as a leader."

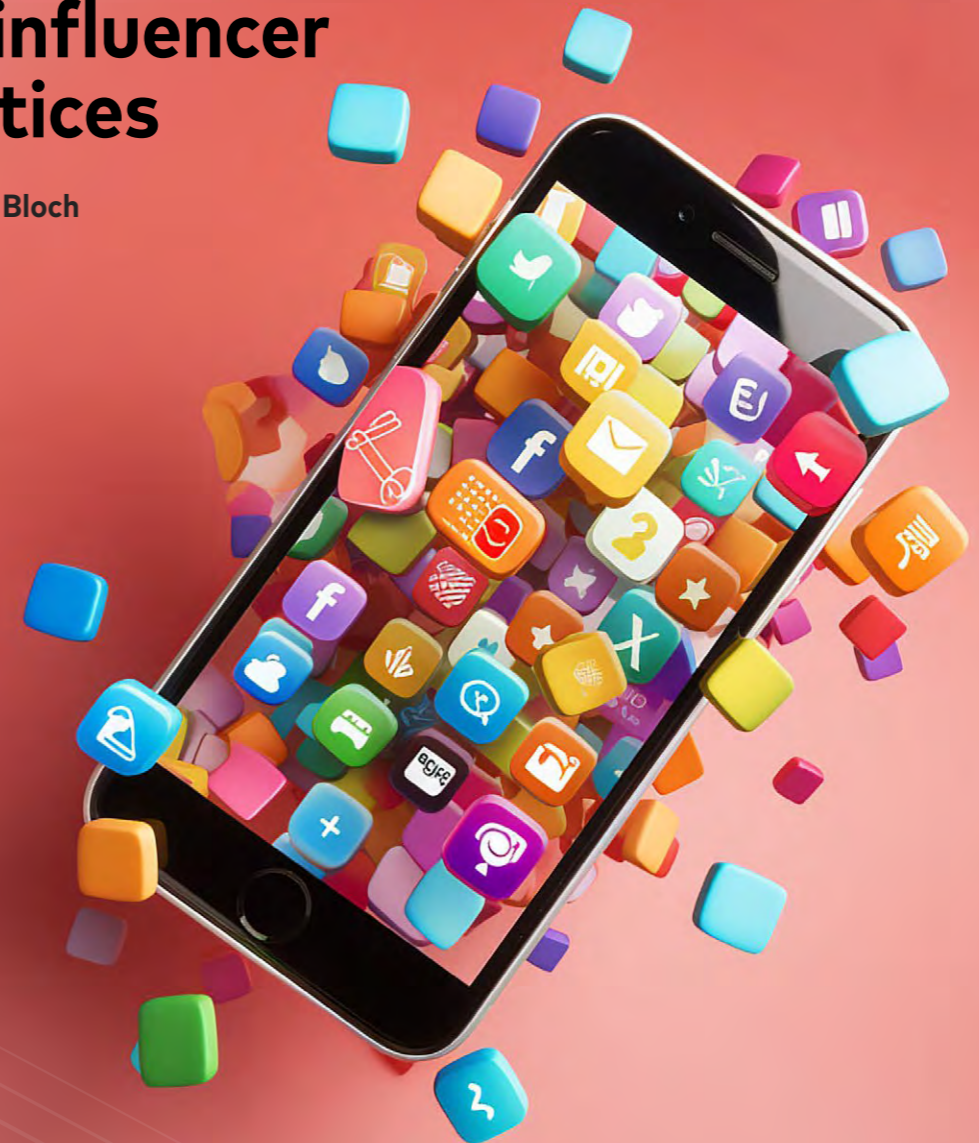
As a tangible commitment to democratising leadership training, we are also proudly partnered with the incredible Mama Youth Project. The multi-award-winning project recruits, trains and nurtures young people between 18-25 years of age from under-represented groups or with limited educational or employment opportunities, and we are able to provide free places for each cohort we run.

After a successful launch year for No Bullsh*t Leadership training, we are looking forward to welcoming more delegates in 2024, with bookings open for our next cohort, beginning in April. For anyone interested in finding out more about the course, its contents and if it might be suitable for your business, please check out our [website](#) or [email](#) us for more info. You can also watch our teaser [video](#) to get a flavour of what the course involves. ●



AAR bolsters social, content and influencer practices

By Andrew Bloch



Off the back of unprecedented demand from clients, AAR extended its social, content and influencer offering in March 2023. To reflect the modern marketing landscape, and the expansive nature of social, content and influencer, the offering is led by Andrew Bloch and Rebecca Nunneley, working closely with Hannah Astill, who oversees performance marketing.

As the marketing landscape shifts continuously, CMOs have turned their focus to their social, content and influencer agency support. AAR has seen an explosion in the number of these briefs

in the last year, including pitches for Nintendo, Comparethemarket, Starbucks, Kerry Foods, Holland & Barrett and Lidl, as brands look to make sure they have the best partners in place to drive best-in-class strategy and approach.

Clients are increasingly overwhelmed by the service offerings of various agencies and the fact that traditional silos are fast becoming a thing of the past. This, combined with specialist requirements, has driven great demand for AAR to help select the right agencies for their specific needs. Expanding our social, content and influencer practice allows us to help more clients ensure that they are set up for success in a world with such fragmented, hard to reach audiences. ●

Introducing AAR Exchange

By Meg Colborne

Last October we hosted 40 industry leaders and 'Rising Stars' from across the marketing industry to launch our new community – AAR Exchange. This group aims to support the next generation of marketing leaders in their progression to CMO level, and share knowledge of industry trends, themes, and challenges for NEDs to take into the boardroom.

AAR believes there is a real gap in the market for both NEDs and Rising Stars and, with so much value to garner from each other, we felt that their collective impact could make real headway in tackling some of the industry's biggest challenges.



"It was a wonderful opportunity to connect with and learn from NEDs, and also join the community with Rising Stars."

"Bright, smart group coming together in a nice casual environment to share interesting perspectives on realities of now."

"Brilliant to get this group together. Loved hearing from the stars and the informal setting. Everyone was very open and keen to share."



AAR | EXCHANGE

The event, hosted at the Ivy Club by AAR's CEO Victoria Fox and Mark Evans, comprised three rounds of reverse mentoring between a randomly assigned NED and Rising Star on a topic of their choosing. The key themes that came out of these discussions were:

THE CHALLENGE OF BECOMING A LEADER

Rising Stars felt more like 'the frustrated, overqualified middle' and shared the difficulties of career progression when upward mobility is limited by the number of available leadership roles. On the other side, NEDs shared their struggle in finding CMOs with a 'breadth of marketing discipline experience,' rather than a specialism in one area. It was also raised that future leaders need to learn the language of the boardroom and keep commerciality at the top of their priorities.

NEW PRIORITIES IN A CHANGING INDUSTRY

As NEDs sit further from the coalface of marketing, they were keen to know more about generative AI, the rise of performance marketing, the role of marketing operations and how creativity is being encouraged in an environment of budget and resource challenges. The need for hands-on experience over reading theory and examples was evident in gaining real understanding of these areas.

RETAINING A WORK/ LIFE BALANCE

An evergreen discussion point, and only heightened post-pandemic, our community felt that the culture for success didn't allow them to build a joyful life, with many anecdotes shared of peers leaving the industry. While 'empathy makes us good at our jobs', it's not just about being empathetic in our selling, but also in supporting our teams, our bosses, and our industry.



"That was energising and inspiring – what a great forum for learning. Just think of the possibilities!"

"It felt amazing to step out of the whirlwind, take a breath and connect. My step was definitely springier as I left."

"Random assignment of chairs meant it didn't feel forced and actually could find something in common or useful from everyone."



We will continue to run reverse-mentoring events throughout 2024, as well as hosting more casual meetups for what we hope will become a thriving community! ●

INSIGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES.



The New Business Market in 2023

By Paul Phillips

Never completely satisfied

We regularly talk to agency leaders and those responsible for growth about new business and the state of the market. It's what I get asked about more than any other topic.

I barely have time to answer how I am before being asked *What's going on with new business* and, by implication, *What opportunities are there for my agency?*

All of which is fine by me, it's their job to ask and mine to answer.

And whenever we have this ritual exchange, the common feeling across agencies is a mix of general disappointment and slight paranoia, characterised by a handful of similar reasons:

- The market seems busy but we're not busy enough.
- We're getting enquiries but they are the wrong kind (income opportunity is too small or not the kind of work we want to do).
- We're the incumbent on a global review (that's going to run for at least six months) and don't have the capacity to take on anything else.
- We're just out of back-to-back pitches and our people need a break.

And very, very occasionally:

- We want to make sure our existing clients are being serviced properly and bed in the new business we have recently won.

Publication of the data showing what has actually happened offers quantifiable evidence against which the new business temperature can be measured, and individual agencies benchmark themselves.

The Headlines

Opportunity	2023 v 2022*	2022 v 2021*
Total Market	-15%	-32%
Advertising & Integrated	-18%	-39%
CRM/CX	-16%	-37%
Digital (strategy and build)	-17%	-34%
Social	+19%	Not reported
All Media	-3%	+5%

PR not reported as insufficient accurate data

2023 saw a continued decline in new business activity, but year on year the overall rate of decline has reduced by just over half.

The two notable exceptions are Social, in which appointments have increased by almost one fifth, and Media, where there has been a marginal decline that we would suggest is statistically insignificant.

The story behind the numbers goes some way to explaining the sentiments expressed by agency folk above.



Advertising and Integrated sector dominated by big brands moving

The top end (defined as brands with an annual media spend of more than £20m) was significantly more active in 2023 with 15 brands reviewing and appointing agencies in comparison to three in 2022.

Allwyn**, BT Business, Confused.com, Coral, Dreams, Halifax, John Lewis & Waitrose, Nationwide, Oak Furnitureland, Paraspara**, Sainsbury's, Sky Bet, Very, Vodafone and Wickes.

(**technically both these businesses have yet to spend a penny on consumer facing comms, but both are expected to be comfortably in the >£20m media investment bracket.)

The five-fold increase in top end new business activity came with a level of trade press media coverage that was journalistic copy-rich heaven; not simply the volume of large-scale new business activity, but the profile of brands and accompanying back stories.

Experience and history have demonstrated that the two most significant factors determining the security of tenure an agency has with its clients' is the business success their brands are enjoying and the personal relationship between the CMO and agency leaders, past and present.

The top end (defined as brands with an annual media spend of more than £20m) was significantly more active in 2023.

When a business is in trouble, often some element of an account - creative, media or possibly everything - will go to market. Similarly, with a new CMO in role, new agencies (often) follow.

The gracious, if painful, splitting of John Lewis from adam&eveDDB to a new home in Saatchi's; Allwyn, soon to be custodian of the National Lottery, appointing Leo Burnett and VCCP after a marathon review; Halifax being resigned by NCA (to pitch for Nationwide) and returning to adam&eveDDB from whence it came; NCA being appointed by Nationwide; Sainsbury's (to NCA), Confused.com (to Leo Burnett) and Vodafone (on the move but new home not known at time of writing). All fabric of the nation brands appointing new agencies, and each with a back story that was fully reported.

The resultant sentiment amongst advertising agencies offered a polarised perspective: either being too busy or not getting a look-in, in what appeared to be a very active new business market and working out the economics (and impact on the agency) of chasing prospects that fell short of what they considered to be bullseye opportunities.

The standout sector for new business in 2023 was in the social space that saw a 19% year on year increase in the number of pitches and appointments.

Continued lack of activity in CRM/CX and Digital

The volume of CRM/CX and Digital reviews mirrored those of advertising and integrated, declining by 16% and 17% respectively, but this still being less than half the rate of decline in 2022 vs 2021.

What appears to be more than a passing trend is that while the number of CRM/CX reviews is in long-term decline, the scale of each opportunity is significant as CMOs deal with the interconnected issues covering strategy, creative, data, production, distribution and martech.

Financial services brands were particularly active with Aviva, Lloyds, Barclays and Nationwide all in market for CRM/CX agencies. Other significant appointments were made by British Heart Foundation, Burger King and Sage.

Digital activity that was focused on strategy and build tended to be smaller scale opportunities, with the exception of a few larger brands like Audible, OVO and Samsung.

Media continues to be buoyant

It's not news to report that media agencies have, for many years, been kept busy by a continuous flow of new business activity. This constant pitching is driven by two factors distinctive from the creative agency landscape.

The first is that there are far fewer media agencies from which to choose, on top of which the holding companies will rarely put family members up against each other for the same opportunity.

Second, paid for media investment is one of the biggest cheques that a company will write and commercial governance means that there will always be a significant number of brands that are reviewing their media agency arrangements at any one time, globally and on the domestic front.

Of the major domestic media pitches in 2023, four were for gambling or lottery brands; 888 Holdings, Allwyn, Flutter and People's Postcode Lottery.

The year also saw much more new business activity in Performance Media, in which some of the specialist digital media agencies found themselves competing for and, on occasion, winning against full-service media agency competition.

Social pitching breaks through

The standout sector for new business in 2023 was in the social space that saw a 19% year on year increase in the number of pitches and appointments.

Why the reason for such growth?

The impact that social media can have across different stages of the purchasing cycle combined with its efficacy across multiple audiences (for some of which, as we all know, social media is where they spend most of their screen time) has resulted in marketers paying more attention to which external agencies service their brands' social media requirements.

The not insignificant delta in agencies' social capabilities has contributed to marketers paying specific attention to their brands' social requirements and seeking out the best the market has to offer.

The classic pitch still dominates

Of all reported pitches in 2023, 52% were open with no restrictions on which agencies could be considered, 21% were roster pitches, open only to those agencies on a brand's roster of recognised agency partners and 27% (23% in 2022) of appointments did not involve a full pitch programme but were made following a lighter touch approach and degree of due diligence.

Therefore, three quarters of all pitches in 2023 followed a classically recognised approach involving some or all elements of an RFI, chemistry meeting, RFP, tissue meeting, technical deep dive, commercial and operational response, final presentation and possibly creative research.

And while such elements can, on occasion, be justified we have to question the extent to which this fully loaded approach to selecting an agency partner is taken, and ask if there's a more appropriate and alternative way in which to identify and select agencies that is kinder to all involved.

You can read about the innovative initiatives in agency selection AAR has been undertaking on behalf of some of the brands with which we have been working in the [Innovation in agency pitching](#) article later in this edition of Pulse.

Pitch activity concentrated in familiar sectors

Sector making most appointments 2023	Sector making most appointments 2022
1 Retail	Food
2 Travel, Tourism & Holidays	Retail
3 Financial Services	Travel, Tourism & Holidays
4 Food	Charity
5 Alcoholic Drinks	Automotive
6 Automotive	Financial Services

Inevitably the more brands there are in a sector, the more likely that sector will enjoy a higher incidence of pitching hence Retail, Finance and Food are always active new business sectors.

Travel, Tourism and Holidays has been enjoying a resurgence in part as a bounce-back following the pandemic and, in recessionary times, people still choosing to spend on holidays at the expense of other demands on the household wallet.

Both these factors have resulted in brands ensuring they have the right external agency partners to take advantage of what disposable income consumers have.

What conclusions can we draw as attention turns to 2024?

There's no getting away from the fact that total new business opportunities are in long-term decline. Looking through the *glass half full* lens, this means that the market is doing a better job at retaining existing clients, through better service and work contributing to improved business performance.

There should also be a positive effect on the well-being of agency staff as, other than in very exceptional circumstances, agencies are not on a continuous new business infinity loop.

CRM/CX and Digital opportunities will increasingly focus on knitting all elements of the *messy middle* together and, while we expect the number of opportunities to be limited, the scale of each one will be significant.

Media was busy last year and is more or less the same this year. In fact, media agencies are pretty much always busy pitching, and we don't see this changing to any significant degree in 2024.

As Social Media is moving more to the mainstream of brands' communication strategy, so attention on having the right agency partner to deliver social comms will continue to grow and we expect to see continued strong new business activity for social expertise.

We're all in agreement that growth, be it net new business or organic, doesn't get any easier and this is likely to be the case in 2024. So, whether you have the luxury of being able to pick and choose the new business opportunities that come your way, or you must take what's on offer, we wish you every success for 2024. ●



Cutting through the hype: Industry trends and how brands and agencies are responding

By Victoria Fox

The way we as marketers engage with our customers is changing; we are constantly being asked for more for less. So how can we do this while also staying ahead of current trends when our time is already at a premium?

In our latest report, we take on five of the most pressing issues in marketing today; AI, Fluidity, Data, ESG, and Gen Z, helping marketers cut through the hype and appreciate the opportunities available to them.

"Cutting through the hype: Industry trends and how brands and agencies are responding" is a thorough investigation of the realities of a changing market as we go into 2024. With interviews from 25+ leaders across marketing, including CMOs and Senior Marketers, Agency Founder, CEOs, and CSOs, the report offers a snapshot of how the market is responding to developments. What are the myths and misconceptions surrounding these trends? How can you support and develop your own marketing ecosystem to deliver the best possible results in light of the changing market?



Key discussions in the report:

Man x Machine. The impact of AI in the marketing and agency ecosystem

AI is a hot topic of conversation across the industry. AAR tackles key areas of debate; from concerns over jobs at risk, to questions on how we can use it to maximise efficiencies, and where we find a balance between efficiency and creativity.



Fluidity in Marketing Ecosystems in a post-Covid world

How is the agency ecosystem changing to reflect the changing workplace? And how can you future-proof your business and brand with this in mind? The report dives into how three companies are structuring their ecosystem for a fascinating insight into how to examine your internal capabilities in order to support a fluid workforce.



Leveraging Customer Data: Brand vs Performance and the 'missing' middle

The industry has emphasised being data-led, but the dichotomy between "brand" and "performance" marketing, driven by agency culture and mindset, can hinder the effective use of customer data. How can we work to effectively leverage customer data, working towards bridging the gap between brand and performance marketing?



Beyond Purpose: The rise of 'Conscious Creativity'

Increased awareness of a company's 'conscience', or at least their ESG policies, is pushing towards a future where we demand sustainable and ethical approaches from our agencies and partners. It's also becoming important in attracting top talent. How critical is this for the future of the agency ecosystem?



Connecting with Gen Z: Is a new approach required?

There is no one size fits all approach for Gen Z; the group is not a homogenous cohort. Leveraging young talent to take an interest-driven approach to dividing an audience is key. The report breaks down critical skills needed to tackle strategy, as well as how NOT to do it. It also takes a critical look at 'generation free' marketing, and whether we should be considering it 'generationally' at all, or rather prioritising a mindset-led approach.



The report offers an insight into how marketers can take advantage of trends to leverage opportunities, and how to manage change across the ecosystem to deliver the best possible results. It's an opportunity to not only get a view of the latest shifts but to get out in front of them, so you can start to consider how these changes may impact on your people, processes, platforms, and partners in order to set up for success in 2024. ●

▶ [Download your copy here.](#)



The way leadership is taught and thought of needs to change. We need to strip out the bullsh*t.

By Victoria Fox

When I was coming up in the marketing industry, I - like many others - spent a lot of my time learning through osmosis. By spending time shadowing great leaders or observing 'bad' leadership in action and by having the space to try things out and make mistakes, I was able to develop my own definition of leadership and success over time.

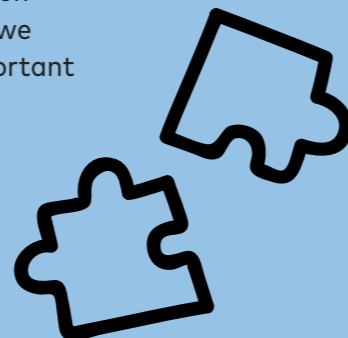
But my journey to becoming a leader took place in a workplace that doesn't really exist in the same way anymore. For businesses in today's digital, post-Covid world, our working environments look completely different to even a few years ago. After decades of sustained transformation and change, we've had to promote people quicker and quicker without investing in helping them develop their unique leadership style and approach. And in a world of continued financial uncertainty, we face an upward talent drain as more senior, experienced leaders depart. The gaps are showing in the next generations coming through, and it is a problem that needs addressing.

It's this challenge that led AAR to develop our self-paced E-Learning programme 'No Bullsh*t Leadership', that we successfully launched in summer 2023.

Created in partnership with award-winning author Chris Hirst and based on his best-selling book of the same name, No Bullsh*t Leadership has been designed specifically to accelerate the development of the next generation of leaders. To help people see themselves and act as leaders much earlier on in their journey.

We love Chris' approach as it strips things right back and provides a pragmatic, practical framework to help individuals and organisations deepen and strengthen their leadership capabilities – which in today's tumultuous landscape, is the surest way to accelerate your or your team's growth. Without wanting to sound too dramatic, it helps democratise leadership training and will unlock potential in anyone who wants to make change happen.

So, I'm sharing a few reasons why this is such a passion point of mine and why we feel this is such an important tool for businesses to take advantage of.

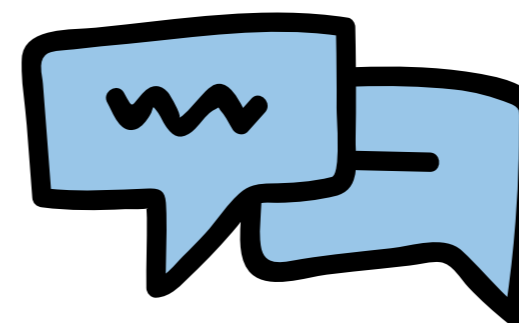


Digital transformation has completely redefined the way we work, and our people are now required to master a wider - and ever-expanding - set of core skills.

Leadership is in crisis

In 2023, **only 40% of people reported that their company had high-quality leaders**. And when people say leader, they immediately think about the CEO or the C-suite. In reality, a leader is anyone with influence, responsible for guiding people or projects from point A to point B. Understanding this is more important than ever. We see it first hand at AAR because clients are always pushing to see beyond the C-suite that they meet in pitches. They want to meet the 'day to day' leads. What they are saying is they want to meet the leaders that they know will have the most impact on their business, as they will be working with them day in and day out.

We have all been working through a challenging and sustained period of upheaval which has affected businesses everywhere. CEOs are increasingly reporting that they don't believe their businesses are keeping up with customer change, and at AAR we're regularly working with clients that are struggling to affect structural innovation fast enough to keep up with demand. Digital transformation has completely redefined the way we work, and our people are now required to master a wider - and ever-expanding - set of core skills.



Roles that previously would have been siloed are now far-reaching; if you're a head of customer engagement, you're now required to collaborate with almost every other project owner across the organisation. While you won't have ownership of every moving part, you still need to be able to influence and collaborate with key stakeholders in a far broader context than ever before.

These changing demands also mean we're promoting faster. But while the people we're giving more responsibility to are brilliantly capable, they don't have the experience and tools they need to navigate at this level.

The ability to manage all of this effectively is rooted in great leadership. It's such a crucial skill set to be able to understand and articulate where people are, where they need to get to, and how to bring them on that journey. We need these skills and capabilities now. We don't have time to wait for them to develop naturally, as we once could.

If brands, agencies, and businesses are going to be able to stand against the tidal wave of change we face, they desperately need to make the most of the fantastic leadership talent that exists within their industries and invest - in the right way - in the people they already have.



Challenging perceptions of leadership

Leadership isn't top-down anymore: so much leadership needs to come from the middle, and we need to unlock this. We need to help lift people with potential or responsibility out of the mindset of 'I'm just here to do a job' and into the mindset of 'I'm going to lead and help affect real change'.

This is where you see dynamic growth and change happening. If you just see yourself as a cog in a machine, and you haven't been shown how to unlock your leadership potential, you'll probably do your job well and little else. But if you're taught to see yourself as a leader earlier and are given the tools to fully encompass the role of changemaker, the halo effect of what you can have an impact on is so much bigger.



Making leadership accessible

For two years, I was the chair of WACL: Future Leaders Awards (now the WACL: Talent Awards), in which applicants had to identify the barrier that was personally stopping them from reaching their next level, and what training or course could help them achieve that milestone. What this made abundantly clear was that so many of us hit stumbling blocks, particularly around leadership, and great training and learning is the way to overcome them.

We also need to work really hard to ensure we don't gate-keep. For too long, leadership has felt inaccessible to people who don't come from a certain background of education or experience, and we need to challenge this damaging misconception.

That's why AAR is working in partnership with the fantastic [MAMA Youth Project](#) on No Bullsh*t Leadership. MAMA Youth Project recruits, trains and nurtures young people aged between 18-25 from under-represented groups or with limited educational or employment opportunities, and we are making free places available to MAMA Youth alumni on every No Bullsh*t Leadership cohort.

This partnership speaks to the core of what No Bullsh*t Leadership is all about: demystifying leadership and making it accessible to those who might not see themselves as 'traditional' leaders, but who have real potential to transform business growth in their organisations - and throughout their careers and lives.

The answer: No Bullsh*t Leadership

Addressing the leadership gap is going to take time and commitment, but we really believe that training programmes like No Bullsh*t Leadership are the key to unlocking success. We need to be proactive and invest in our future leaders.

We need to empower our people to develop the leadership skills and tools to excel and we need to do so in a way that's accessible, clear, concise and practical. These are the guiding principles of No Bullsh*t Leadership, which is the antithesis of traditional leadership coaching. Offering participants flexibility, access to guest contributors and personal tuition, it will make dynamic leaders out of people determined to make change happen.

Group learning and connection is a big part of the course too. We are building cohorts who are on a similar path and who can connect and share beyond the course. Connection is a powerful tool as you start to implement your learning in the real world. We have created an alumni group for delegates to support each other and learn through shared experiences.

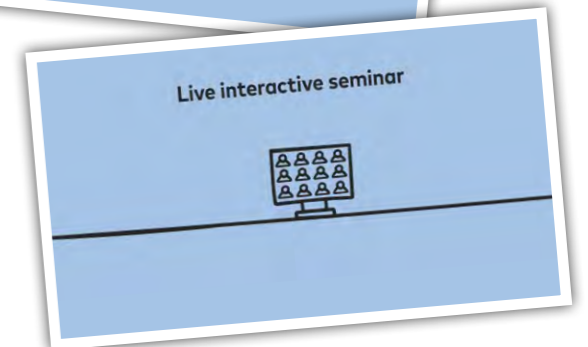
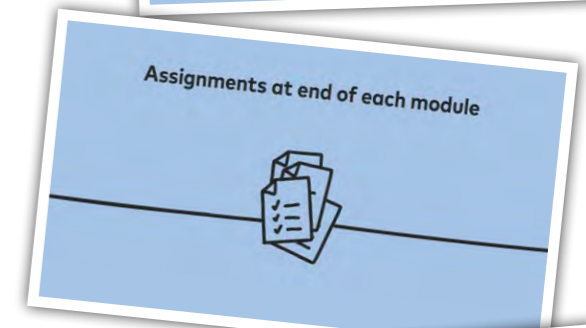
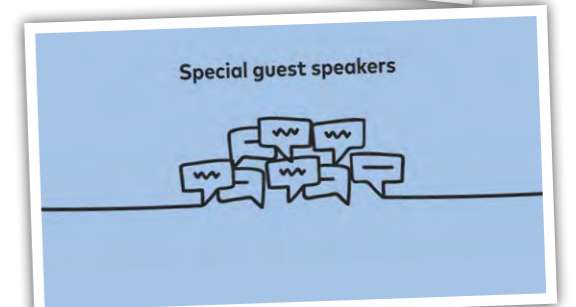
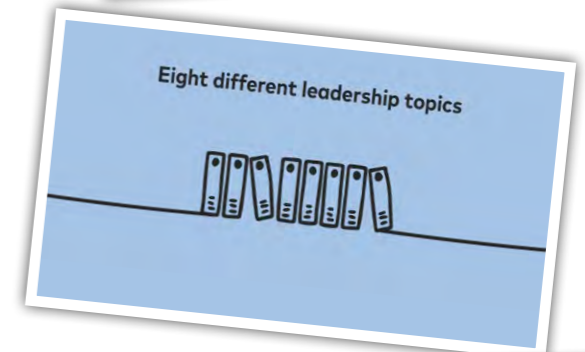
Launching the first cohort of our inaugural programme in summer 2023 was an exciting milestone for AAR. We've since launched our second cohort in autumn 2023 and it is exciting to see our graduates continue their leadership journey together beyond the classroom.

As the programme grew throughout 2023, and we gathered more feedback, we continue to be reassured that the programme is making a big difference. Not just to our graduates' day-to-day but in the unlocked potential from simply redefining what leadership means. Our graduates talk of "the profound impact [the course has had] on my day-to-day, giving me new-found confidence in myself as a leader." How "it couldn't be more clarifying and pertinent. I'm scribbling notes, rewinding to rewatch, and having 100 ideas a lesson." And how "the enlightening insights have shifted my perspective, and I now recognise the immense potential within myself to thrive as a leader."

Looking ahead to 2024 with our next cohort taking place in the spring, we're so excited to evolve the programme, welcome many more delegates and build the alumni network. For more information about the contents of the course, head to the course website [here](#). You can also watch our [teaser](#) to get a flavour of what the course involves and hear from course leaders Vonnie and Chris as they explain why this is such a fantastic opportunity.

We will continually listen, learn and adapt the course and the alumni groups to make sure we are as valuable to these emerging leaders as possible, always working towards reducing the leadership development gap. ●

We need to empower our people to develop the leadership skills and tools to excel and we need to do so in a way that's accessible, clear, concise and practical.



The right foundations for a rock-solid marketing operating model: A CMOs checklist

By Robin Charney

At the start of 2023, Gartner shared that **71% of CMOs** said they lacked sufficient budget to fully execute their strategy. Add to that the snippet from our recent **AAR Exchange Event** where we even went so far as to ask, "Are we all busy fools?" and it's no wonder that most of our time in 2023 has been spent helping CMOs optimise their marketing operating model. Tough decisions need to be made; CFOs are (sadly) not loosening the purse strings anytime soon. If CMOs want more flexibility in their operating costs, they need to ensure that the foundations of their marketing ecosystem can support business growth.

Whether it be through the lens of People, Partners, Process or Platforms, marketing teams are re-examining the operational approach for marketing. The meticulously planned marketing strategies CMOs develop will fail if not supported by the right operating model.

Where should you focus and what can you do as a short, sharp injection to ensure you have the right model going into 2024?

Our four foundation stones for a strong marketing operating model include:



- 1** Your structure and your people
- 2** Your agency and in-house agency ecosystem
- 3** Your ways of working
- 4** Your Martech and marketing operations

Here's what you should be asking yourself.

1. About your structure and people:

- Do you have the right marketing organisational design to deliver growth and integrated customer-centric marketing?
- Do you have the right blend of traditional skills in brand storytelling with media, performance and digital disciplines?
- Are these teams set up for success in light of any regional/global structures? Where can you centralise to drive efficiencies and better integration? Are you siloed?
- Do you have a holistic long-term approach to marketing capability development with the right training to elevate business critical marketing skills?

2. Is your agency ecosystem fit for purpose?

- Is your in-house agency set up for success with clear strategy, prioritisation objectives and ways of working with both your internal team and external agencies? Could it do more? Should it do less? Does it offer you the flexibility you need? Does it have the right level of experts? Is it cost effective?
- Are your external agencies set up for success with clear scopes and roles to play? Are you remunerating them correctly? Are there overlaps or gaps? Are the right measurement frameworks in place to drive value and performance?
- Have you reassessed your volume production requirements and partnerships?

3. Are your ways of working making your team's work harder or easier?

- Do you have agreed and widely communicated planning processes for the delivery of your campaigns?
- Do you have a playbook on how to work with your agencies, including around briefing, sign off and measurement processes?
- Do you have a clear RACI for inter-team ways of working?

4. Do you have the right workflow and marketing operations strategy to enable delivery and measurement at scale?

- Do you have a workflow system that allows for brief tracking, review and sign off of campaigns?
- Do you know how much you are producing, by whom and at what cost? Do you know if it's working?
- Do you have a central DAM to drive reuse and repurpose rather than constant new creative?

Once you have completed your 2024 marketing operating model questions checklist...don't despair! Prioritise what should be tackled first in order to give you the best start for what is sure to be another challenging year for marketers.

If you need help prioritising (or auditing), [drop me a line](#). An investment in solid foundations is never a bad place to start and always a good investment for the future.

2024 is going to be a fun ride. Let's get ready! ●

Poor briefing: A bad habit to break

By Vicky Gillan

We've all got bad habits and good habits; it's what makes us loveable humans. But when it comes to briefing, bad habits have a tangible cost - rework, over-servicing, and missed opportunities, to name a few. And yet the importance of a great brief is something we're all so aware of, with our creative and media leads flagging it over and over...

This is why AAR's approach is different; when we run an [AAR Upskill: Better Briefing](#) programme, we don't just talk theory, we actually work with you after the training session on your next live brief to make sure you're practising those *all-important good habits* and *breaking those bad ones*.

Let's have a quick look at six of the most common bad habits. And, honesty box time now, if you're a client, which ones are you or your team guilty of? Or if you're an agency or in-house lead - which ones do you see most regularly?

1. The TBC brief

"This brief should manifest world togetherness." And how will that be measured, and how does that ladder up to your business and marketing strategy? Oh 'TBC'. Right.

Each brief has a specific purpose and needs clarity to show how the business task connects to your customers and their needs. It needs to give your creative and media leads the right balance of 'inform, instruct and inspire'. And enable all to objectively judge the work and then evaluate the results versus the brief. Not possible with 'TBC target audience', 'TBC Objectives', 'TBC OKR's' and 'TBC budget'.

2. The peace treaty task list brief

Internal alignment is so important when creating a brief for new work or challenging issues. And from my own client experience I know that can be a tricky ask. But creating a brief crammed *full of contrasting ideas* like a feedback log is definitely not the solution to multiple voices. How can anyone do their best work if they aren't presented with a clear, unified brief that focuses on the problem to be solved?

3. The war and peace brief

Your briefs need to be the *right* length. They need to inform, instruct, and inspire. The goal here is effectively communicating what your in-house teams or agencies need to do their best work, not throwing the kitchen sink at them. There are few things more frustrating and

prohibiting than having to wade through pages and pages to get to the heart of what you're being asked to do.

4. The one-line task brief

Just as problematic are briefs that are too... well, too brief. While every word needs to be meaningful, and every element needs to count, there need to be enough of them to give your teams enough ingredients to work with. It's all about getting the balance right for the specific type of brief you're working on. Too little is as much a bad habit as too much.

5. The buzzword bingo brief

We all hate buzzwords, and we all joke about it, but how many of us still find ourselves using them? A brief is not the place to use buzzwords, jargon or generalities; it just confuses and infuriates people. The important thing here is context and clarity. 'WOW' and 'BRAVE' don't mean anything on their own, nor does '*uniquely humanistic yet professional and sophisticated*'. Yep, not a clue, either.

6. The cut and paste brief

We get it - people are busy and anything that can help with pace, bring it on. Surely, it's a good thing to quietly pull out a previous brief and do a quick cut and paste of the standard sections? Sounds tempting, doesn't it?

But how do the previous brief's facts relate to this brief, and if using a brief from last year, are you really suggesting that nothing's changed in the last 12 months? Cost of living anyone? Wash up and PCA learnings? Operational concerns?

In summary...

Identifying the bad habits (and the list above is only a snapshot) is the relatively easy part. The path to **breaking these bad habits is what really counts if we are to stop them costing**. And that's what we judge success on. We see change and good habits as the endgame. That's always at the heart of our [AAR Upskill: Better Briefing](#) programme. Whatever the types of briefs you work with, and whether you're a small or a large team, **come and have a chat**. We'll help you break those bad habits, and upskill some great ones, too. ●

What role will AI play in helping marketers choose the best agency partners?

By Paul Phillips

AI has been predicted, with a high degree of confidence by some, to precipitate and accelerate the inevitability of redundancy across multiple business categories and sectors, so why not pitch consultancy as well?

It takes someone very brave or very stupid or very rich to not consider the impact of AI on what we do. But I don't think my colleagues and I need to be brushing up our CVs and looking for a change in career just yet.

For while AI may be able to replicate the superficial scraping about agencies that any Google search can uncover, it does not have the capability to navigate and understand relationships, to identify cultural chemistry or, equally importantly, a lack of it.

Nor does it know about the friction between an agency CEO and their ECD.

Or that the joint CSOs currently in role are soon to be replaced by a single CSO, and not necessarily one of the joint incumbents!

This is the point about what we do at AAR. We are trusted advisors who consult to marketers and agency leaders across a wide variety of the marketing, communications, and business challenges that they are trying to address.

Much of this advice is based on evidence, case studies and the gathering of hygienic information and data, and this may well be undertaken with greater efficiency by AI. But the human nature of selecting an agency partner is too important to marketers and too nuanced a role for AI to successfully replicate what our consultants do, day in day out, on behalf of the brands and agencies we support.

Can AI identify that the issue is not an underperforming incumbent agency, but a way of working between the brand and agency teams that's not set up for success?

Will it identify that the marketing team's new requirement can be served best by the incumbent agency which, if given the opportunity, will prove to be the right choice of partner rather than going to the open market?

Or will it be able to accurately factor in the importance of chemistry between the marketing and agency teams, or the lack of it? In a market full of choice, when there's no chemistry, the CMO and their team will not be persuaded to consider the agency further, regardless of their apparent suitability.

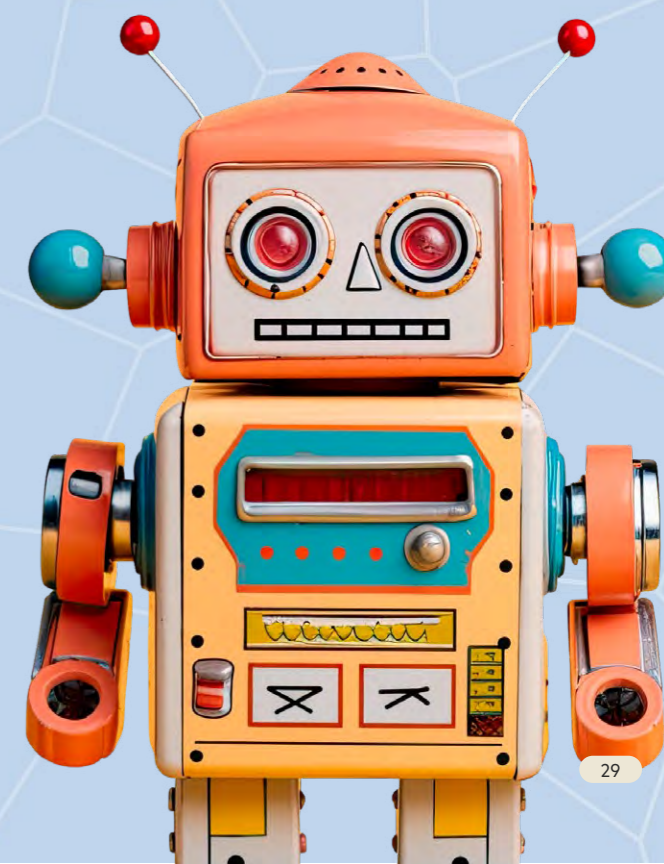
AI will be adopted more readily by pitch consultants at the fact-gathering end of the research spectrum, given the amount of published data and information that already exists. This will create more time to deliver the insight-driven consultancy that is more highly valued by CMOs, their teams and procurement colleagues.

However, as our own research shows, pitch consultancy is not a long-term scale business, with the overall volume of opportunities trending in negative growth, as is the way of describing what used to be called a decline!

In anticipation and response, AAR has developed new business practices and revenue streams; we support marketers to design and build the right marketing ecosystems and to drive high performing partnerships between brands and their agency partners. More recently, we have launched an E-Learning practice, the demand for which is evident and will further broaden our portfolio of services.

No doubt sometime soon we'll hear of instances in which a marketer has selected an agency partner with the primary, if not exclusive, support of Chat GPT or other AI technology. Indeed, the relationship may last long enough for decent work to be delivered by the appointed agency.

But people buy people, and the nuanced nature and subtleties that take place when selecting an agency team to develop a long-term partnership cannot be replaced by an algorithm. Yet. ●



Innovation in agency pitching

By Paul Phillips

Any mention of the word pitch and the automatic, and not surprising expectation, is that it will involve some or all of the following: a request for information, credentials, chemistry meeting, pitch briefing, Q&A sessions, tissue sessions, technical deep dive, commercial, operational and transition submission, final presentation, follow up to final presentation and research.

Exhausting to just list it all, and even more exhausting for agencies spending precious time and money on these processes.

But not all agency selection needs to or should be like this and, here at AAR Towers, the golden rule of which we are always conscious is that **the size of the prize needs to be reflective of the agency ask** in determining the right partner.

Selecting an agency partner is essentially an insurance policy with the level of insurance required being different for each CMO, their teams and the level of governance their companies are duty bound to undertake.

And when so much of the decision is based on the chemistry and promise of the relationship between the brand and agency teams, there should certainly be an element of fun, enjoyment and respect for everyone involved when it comes to selecting or being selected as an agency partner.

With this in mind, over the last 18 months we have spent a lot of time looking very critically at the pitch model of old, and challenging ourselves and our clients to think creatively about how we approach agency selection. Whatever the approach is, it needs to serve the dual masters of providing sufficient evidence and insurance for the brand team to make a confident, informed choice and, at the same time, offer a platform for agencies to shine. All without boiling the ocean and being respectful of everyone's work, time, personal boundaries and commitments.

Here are four examples from the last year of such innovation in helping CMOs and their teams to select the right agency partner.

We're looking to buy the team and their thinking, not an ad

Motability Operations, led by Lisa Thomas CMO, wanted to avoid the short-term campaign thinking that asking for creative work in pitches can encourage.

Lisa wanted to buy a team, not an ad.

Introductory meetings took place with just four agency groups comprising people from their strategic, creative and media capabilities. The time was split equally between agencies and Motability Operations, with each *sharing their story* in recognition that both parties had an active choice in expressing interest in each other and the opportunity.

Motability Operations made the decision to invite just two agencies to participate in a strategic workshop, confident in the creative heights that both agencies could achieve based on the evidence of what they have delivered for other clients.

The workshop was participatory, in which well-articulated opinion and insight would carry more weight than any creative work.

Feedback from all involved reflected the focus on strategic smarts as being most important; a great lens through which agencies were happy to present themselves, and the marketing team to evaluate them. All undertaken in a suitably light touch manner.

Preparation is everything

It's becoming clear that brands seeking CRM agency partners are increasingly looking for a long-term business partner that can offer solutions to problems far beyond excellent customer communications. Agencies need to be able to prove their superpowers in data, martech, strategy, creative, innovation and loyalty.

To be able to demonstrate and evaluate this, what's needed is a process that is rigorous, in the right measure, and tailored to each client's needs and stage of evolution.

One such case this year for one of the major gambling brands involved extensive behind the scenes pre-work, long before we even began to think about candidate agencies. We needed to understand what the brand wanted to achieve through its customer communications, but also how the sum of those parts needed support from an agency partner.

Our programme kicked off with a fact-finding phase in which we interrogated the needs of each individual stakeholder across the marketing team. This informed what the whole marketing team wanted from an agency and allowed us to identify differences of opinion that needed to be aired and discussed internally to come to an agreement on the agency brief.

With so many stakeholders, all of whom would need to engage with the appointed agency, this level of alignment was crucial before starting the selection programme. Indeed, without it there would be chaos, and none of us wants a chaotic pitch.

By nature of the very specific technical capability requirements, it made sense to arrange deep dive sessions in which the subject matter specialists from both brand and agency side met to focus on aspects of the capabilities that were central to the brief, outside of the inappropriate confines of a boardroom presentation.

This, in turn allowed space and time for the strategic storytelling to take place backed up by the required technical competencies having been evaluated in a separate and appropriate manner.

The result? A reassured marketing team, and happy agencies for being able to demonstrate all of their skills in the right environment.

The last thing I want to see is a media plan

After seven years, Weetabix had decided to review their media agency arrangements for a fresh, strategic approach. Above all else, Francesca Theokili and her marketing team wanted the experience to be a positive one, summarised in their brief as 'fair, focussed and fun'.

The three participating agencies were sent a basket of goodies together with a pitch promise from the marketing team.

The pitch briefing was to all agencies, with the opportunity to hear directly from members of the Weetabix team from across the company's portfolio of brands.

To minimise the application of Parkinson's Law - that work expands to fill the time allotted for its completion - once briefed, agencies had one week to prepare their responses.

The ask was high-level in nature, to which there was no right or wrong answer; just the opportunity for agencies' strategic Jedi knights to flex their muscles.

Not a media plan or spreadsheet in sight.

Decision making and full feedback to all agencies was prompt and substantive and while there could, of course, be only one winner, all agencies reported the selection programme to be a positive one that lived up to the ambition of 'fair, focussed and fun'.

Don't tell me you're funny, tell me a joke

PwC were looking for a global creative agency partner. They were in a hurry and December was fast approaching.

Asking agencies to demonstrate strategic thinking or creative expression during the limited time available would be setting up for failure.

With this in mind, the marketing team took the bold and very welcome approach to base their decision-making solely on what prospective agencies had done on behalf of their current clients, and not what they might be able to do for PwC. They felt confident that they would be able to select the right agency partner without the need for more insurance in the form of strategic platforms or creative work.

Instead, agencies shared relevant experience and analogous circumstances that they had addressed on behalf of their clients, drawing parallels with the opportunities and challenges they saw facing PwC.

Decisions were made quickly, knowing it would only be by working together that the signed off platform and messaging would stand a much greater chance of success.

The agencies were appreciative of the confidence displayed by PwC in making their decision based on what agencies had delivered for their existing clients.

And PwC were able to start working with the chosen agency much sooner than a classic pitch programme would have allowed.

An innovative approach that worked for all involved!

There is still lots of work that needs to be done when it comes to improving the way our industry approaches agency selection, so we would welcome any opinions or thoughts on how we can continue to learn and innovate in this space, and work together to encourage an approach to agency selection that is kinder to all. ●



Data-Driven Marketing: Why our industry needs honesty to navigate the next evolution

By Hannah Astill and Vonnie Alexander

Timelines may have shifted and goalposts have been moved, but a cookieless future is looming ever closer. Yet while much has been done within the industry to prepare for this paradigm shift - from a surge in brands becoming **media owners in their own right**, to a complex and evolving picture of **media in-housing** - key parts of the puzzle are still missing.

Whatever the eventual cookie cut-off date, marketers know that not being caught on the back foot (and at a competitive disadvantage) means acting as if we're already there. But for all of us, this is a venture into the unknown - one that's forcing a reappraisal of where we invest, how we work and who we work with, and holding a mirror up to our entire industry.

There is an industry-wide need to bridge the gap between first and third-party data, and to arrive at a more connected view. In reflection of this, AAR's CX & CRM and Media Lead Consultants, **Vonnie Alexander CPCC, PCC, ORSC** and **Hannah Astill**, have teamed up to discuss how clients and agencies can (and should) join together to navigate the complex landscape that is data-driven marketing in a cookie-depleted world.

We need to break down silos

Transitioning to the age of privacy is a joint responsibility between brands and agencies, and this starts with being honest about the extent to which both parties silo data, beginning at the silo between brand and customer and filtering through to everything brands and agencies work on together.

Some of the walls we face are where we may expect them to be - separating brand and performance marketing and creating dividing lines across channels. But they exist even within specific disciplines, such as search, where silos between organic and paid can create wasteful inefficiencies. This then plays out in reporting, which is so often focused at the channel level, rather than laddering back up to wider business outcomes or unified KPIs.

We understand the reluctance to look too closely at the issue - it often reveals a need for operational change that neither brands nor agencies are always enthusiastic about engaging in - but without breaking down barriers and identifying where the gaps are, it will be impossible to meet the age of privacy head-on. This is bigger than cookie depletion but encompasses the need to have a joined-up, connected view of the customer and marketing efforts in the round, working to achieve new levels of integration, and creating a strategy that puts customer-centricity at its heart.

As agencies continue to get a handle on data (how to organise it, use it, and create a through-the-line single customer viewpoint), brands are asking for "a data strategy" that simply cannot exist in isolation. When we're unsure how to approach the problem, it can be easy to default to supplier change to find an answer - a change that ultimately won't land if, internally, brands aren't set up for success.

Placing data front and centre

When we look at data-driven marketing, it's clear that the landscape is fragmented, both throughout the industry and within individual departments and agencies. On both client and agency sides, we've got used to putting our data and analytics experts in a corner, rather than pulling their expertise upstream to ensure that everyone is immersed in more of the right insight that data brings.

Data teams know how to provide answers, but without taking them out of their silos, we are never going to ask them the right questions. If we truly want to place data front and centre, and enable it to fuel, inform and deliver overarching strategies, it needs to be integrated - with data expertise drawn across whole marketing departments.

A call for collaboration

The age of privacy - and the growing pressure to navigate the ever-complex and fragmented customer landscape as a result of data proliferation - is not only an invitation to think differently; it's an opportunity to dive into the unknown and learn. This isn't the time to hang back and stick to the comfort of our own lanes. It's a time for honesty across our industry about what we don't know, the rifts that exist between us and our goals, and how we can bridge those voids.

In this, clients and agencies can help each other. As marketers, we need to pioneer collaborative, open-source ways of navigating this landscape together, with all its confusing data sets and complexities. This is how we'll deliver the best work, and reach audiences in a way that delivers true incrementality.

One of the big implications of breaking down silos and working in a more integrated manner is the scope for agencies to work to more savvy commercial models. When all channels and platforms are integrated and driving towards one north star, agencies can create more value for brands through outcome-based remuneration models, delivering against business outcomes.

Zooming in:

What questions should you be asking of your agency?

We understand that there is a nervousness among some clients over their agency partners' capacity to steer them into this new future. It's no surprise, given the scale of complexity they face, that clients may ask themselves whether their partner is the best in the market at helping them through - and, of course, the need to make cost efficiencies is always top of mind. However, supplier change shouldn't be used as a sticking plaster, and we need to get the conversation started in a productive way.

A growing number of agencies offer full-suite capabilities, and as a result, these agencies are finding it increasingly difficult to demonstrate to clients that they possess the specific and in-depth knowledge required to address their urgent data connectivity concerns. Finding ways to communicate this expertise (and any gaps there may be) helps CMOs populate their ecosystem with the right range of partners who enhance and uplift each other.

From here, the conversation can evolve to ways of working, where the baton should be passed between different agencies, and what clients can consider taking in-house. While the trend of consolidation is ongoing, clients are increasingly turning to agencies for consultation and specialist expertise, complementing and enriching the work of their in-house teams.

Zooming out:

What questions should you be asking of your ecosystem?

Having the right agency partners in place is only effective when the **wider marketing ecosystem** is viewed holistically, encompassing the "how?" and the "what?" of marketing across people, processes, partners and platforms. While the move away from third-party data isn't the apocalypse, client-side marketers need to be across the problem and get their own house in order.

It is only once you are clear on your approach to first-party data - your north star brand strategy, and the operations that will shepherd you towards it - that you can truly understand where to bring in other partners, and which third-party solutions (**such as the innovative Infosum**, providing collaborative first-party data clean rooms) would work best.

The spectre of a cookie-depleted world has hung over marketers for years, and it's time to look it in the face. By being honest about the challenges we all face - and pulling data from the corner it's been relegated to - we can banish the boogiemer and embrace a new era of growth.

Next steps

To open up a dialogue between clients and agencies on data privacy, we have created a freely available resource to help get the conversation going. If the issues raised in this article are relevant to your challenges, then please download "**Addressing Silos in the Age of Privacy: Questions For Brands to Ask of Their Agencies and Ecosystems**" by visiting this [link](#).

Driving creativity: Why process might be the winning spell to unleash magic

By Vicky Gillan

Many years ago, when I was working client side as a marketing director, I was intrigued by how one of my agencies seemed to have some kind of secret elixir to unlock that magic of small team collaboration, but at scale. Their work was consistently outstanding, effortlessly exceeding expectations (or so it seemed to me), with incredible attention to detail. It was like they had a magic formula.

So, I asked if I could spend a couple of weeks with them - a mini-sabbatical, if you will - mucking in as one of them on another brand's work. Green lights all around. I was in and I was intriguingly surprised. A little shocked, actually.

I expected to come away with some kind of mysterious holy grail, a guardian of new secret knowledge... but the truth behind how they achieved it? They had the process nailed within an inch of its life. It wasn't a creative, magical secret. It was the kind of rigorous, structured, formal process that creative marketers usually balk at.

We all know that there's magic in small, collaborative teams. There's a reason why agile teams contain 6-8 people and why, when we talk about clarity and efficiency, we talk about smaller scales, finding root causes, listening more than speaking, the value of preparation and asking the right questions early on.

But while this spark of brilliance is hugely powerful, it's often so much harder to achieve at scale, in complex organisations with more people, teams and sign-off points involved. Is that an inevitable reality or something we should all be pushing back on with a rallying cry?

As brands and marketing functions grow, a fine line develops between the magic of informal collaboration and the 'mystery' of the need for rigour and process. How should we approach this, to ensure our people can continue to achieve their very best work and tap into that collaborative magic, even at scale?

The tipping point

Once a marketing function has reached a certain size, that sense of "oooh, well the magic just sort of 'happens'" isn't sustainable. A tipping point emerges: for everyone to do their roles well, you need more clarity, more specialism, more accountability, and more formality to roles. But you need to do this in the right way if you're going to preserve that wondrous, impressive magic we all want to create, and be judged commercially against.

The most important thing is that organisations need to be forward-thinking, and proactive about this issue. You need to actively cultivate a sense that achieving the balance between magic and process is not something *being done to you* but is something being *done BY US*.

The best case in point: in-housing...

Arguably, nowhere is this issue better exemplified than in the case of in-house teams. In-housing continues to be extremely popular, with 52% of UK businesses having in-house teams, and many intending to in-house more with consideration for media, social, creative etc. At the start of this journey the 'magic' I'm talking about comes very naturally; small studios or teams organically and informally create dynamics that lead to fantastic creativity, and outstanding results.

But as an in-house function starts to scale, and has aspirations for growth, and to move up the 'tiers' ([see in-house agency leaders club for a better understanding of this](#)), you have to start introducing planning, rigour, processes, governance, and all kinds of other words that seemingly strike fear into small creative teams.

The question of 'how do we keep the magic alive' should be asked before this happens and should be woven into the process of scaling from the start.

But there's more...

This is only a piece of the puzzle, though. There are two tensions to address here - that of the in-house team itself scaling up, but then the additional consideration of any external partners and suppliers that make up part of your marketing ecosystem too, as well as different products, different internal teams - data, insight, operations etc. The challenge of 'maintaining the magic' applies when connecting all these aspects together.

This then makes the question of getting the 'fine line' and balance right across the whole ecosystem even more crucial and needs focus and some magic in its own right.

What matters for magic?

So, what should we be thinking about? What issues really matter? What can we do to effectively get this balance right?

At the heart of this is one big question: 'how can we keep things small, active, agile, collaborative and magical, while working at scale and in big ways?' The only way to do this is by being crystal clear and asking the right questions at the right time.

There's not a one-size-fits-all approach, but I think we can cut through all the noise of specific issues like governance, process and structure to one core element of this: ways of working.

Here are some top questions or considerations

- **Ask the HOW questions: talk about how stuff gets done;** ask about blocks and barriers; elevate the smallest of niggles quickly so they can be openly solved quickly and efficiently, drive a continuous improvement culture.
- **Ensure everyone has access to "easy to get" visually interesting process maps and decisions trees;** focus on pragmatic solutions and strawmans, not detailed complex flow diagrams that no one will ever use or need a SAS-style microscopic glasses to read.
- **Focus on repetitive issues** for more detailed analysis and testing radical changes to resolve; consider new roles that can help eliminate blocks and drains at the first whiff that an issue is not a one off.
- **Identify tools and technologies** that can be used to facilitate efficient marketing operations; talk to other leads just ahead of where you are now to pre-empt scale issues.
- **Set clear expectations;** communicate what you expect from everyone and set out the procedures you want them to follow. Be clear on the RACI for each project and collaboration needs (consult) vs co-operation (inform).
- **Make sure knowledge isn't hoarded:** even if you have siloed teams working with specialist agencies, make sure everything is shared and goals are clear to both your internal and agency teams.
- **Accept not all in-house or external agencies are equal:** make an active choice between sessions everyone can attend and will get value from - speed briefings, for example - which are the ones that need to be more bespoke sessions.
- **Make sure your internal processes support collaboration:** this applies to the whole business, not just the marketing department. Anyone who works with marketing - from sales to procurement - needs to know the magic you're trying to achieve.

Final thoughts

Your WOW (because let's call 'ways of working' something more interesting and less formal) and the 'how' are the big things to address here.

They're the nuts, bolts, and keys to unlocking magic at scale, working with both in-house teams and agencies.

Process, rigour, and compliance might all feel like bad words in the context of creative collaboration. But when built in an inclusive, proactive, and collaborative way they can actually nurture creative and commercial magic.

There should be no mystery as to how you create magic, but so often there is, simply because the WOW (said deliberately now...) isn't talked about as much as the WHAT. Too often teams don't talk about it; they shy away from it and focus too much on now. And that's ok if what you are doing is working and you have no plans to scale.

But if you have ambitions to change, to grow, to expand, then please pause and have these conversations NOW. That's the way to protect future magic.

Want a chat to explore how we can help? Drop me a message on vgillan@aargroup.co.uk. My WOW magic wand is at the ready. ●



ABOUT US.

Who we are

AAR: Experts in Marketing Ecosystems

AAR specialises in developing marketing ecosystems that drive growth in the modern marketing age. With over 45 years of experience, AAR works with brands to design marketing ecosystems, build inspiring partnerships and drive commercial performance.

In an age of complexity and disruption, businesses that can explore both challenges and innovative solutions to their marketing operations with a creative mindset will be better equipped to successfully meet the future.

Our purpose is to engineer Creative Capital as an asset throughout the entire ecosystem; across people, partners, platforms and processes, building a culture and an environment that allows creativity to flourish. ●





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