

**WORKING**  
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**WITH AGENCIES**  
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**An Insider's Guide**

**MICHAEL SIMS**



John Wiley & Sons, Ltd



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*To all those clients who take the leap of faith*





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# INTRODUCTION

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*Working with Agencies* springs from the work I have recently been doing with client companies helping them to work more effectively with their agency partners. Clients understand their own organizations and their marketing needs very well but they can often regard agencies as a ‘black box of mysterious arts’ or as ‘a necessary evil’. Yet, they are dependent on agencies to help them to produce outstanding marketing communications. If you are a client of an agency, you will want to set the pace for the relationship. This handbook provides guidelines, practical tips and techniques for those who need to get the most from an agency relationship, whether they have been working with agencies for some time or have just started. Companies who understand how agencies really operate and how to work with them effectively can reap the benefits. They will achieve strong marketplace presence, an efficient way of working and, ultimately, the essential associated business results.

We are seeing a transition in how clients and agencies want to work together though I would say that three core ingredients for a productive partnership remain – knowledge, trust and a sense of collaborative adventure. This *Insider’s Guide* seeks to examine the relationship from both sides and identifies how clients can achieve these three key ingredients when selecting an agency, briefing campaigns and developing work.

*Working with Agencies* is designed for all levels in marketing departments and also for those who have the role of managing agency relationships. It is not specific to one sector and it relates to dealing with agencies of any type which produce a creative product. Therefore the common activity could be sales

promotion, design, brand advertising, PR, event management, digital media or direct marketing. I draw on my own experiences, joint industry guidelines, anecdotal evidence from clients and agencies, research into what makes such relationships tick, plus tried and tested training material that has found appeal with companies such as bmi, BUPA, Ericsson, Ford, Lloyds TSB and Xerox.

In our daily lives, we encounter so many examples of marketing mediocrity. This book will help you to create or enhance a relationship where you can avoid such mediocrity. Moreover, not only will you derive immense personal satisfaction from striving together with your agency for that excellence, but you will give your company the best possible chance to make the desired market impact.

## **HOW TO READ THIS BOOK**

In developing the book, I have been conscious that there is very little spare time for those in business to read vast tracts of text. The format has been established to help different levels and those with specific interest areas: it can be read like a novel from start to finish or it can be used like a Haynes Motor Manual to guide you through tricky situations.

Each chapter is peppered with specific tips, comments and anecdotes. At the beginning of each chapter, there is a list of what you will cover and at the end there is a list of short exercises that will help you to analyse your own situation better.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I have drawn on a variety of sources for inspiration and have acknowledged my gratitude by quoting them where appropriate. You will also find a complete listing of the reference literature in the Appendix.

In particular, I would like to thank the IPA, ISBA, MCCA, PRCA and the DMA for their help and permission to reproduce some of their guidelines at various points in the book. I would like to express my thanks to AAR and Express Train for being able to draw on findings from their client/agency research. As I wanted to show recent case studies and methodologies, I would like to thank Partners Andrews Aldridge and BUPA, Lexus, Lloyds TSB and the Art Fund for their cooperation.

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**AGENCIES: CAN'T LIVE  
WITH THEM, CAN'T LIVE  
WITHOUT THEM**



## AGENCIES: CAN'T LIVE WITH THEM, CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT THEM

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Understanding what you want from an agency.
- Understanding the nature of your organization.
- The collaborative spirit: the essential ingredient.
- Starting off on the right foot.
- Ensuring the new team works well together.

**J**ust read the marketing press on one single day; it is difficult to understand what the norm currently is in agency–client relationships. Our world is full of stories of clients and their agencies either having created breakthrough campaigns or failing to spark off each other and going their separate ways. Some companies lead and manage agencies, some agencies drag their clients kicking and screaming into the white heat of creative adventure in the hope of potential business results. We could read one year that the latest phone company is pushing the boundaries of customer communications with its advertising and PR agencies, the next we read it is bitching about the same agencies and

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looking for replacements. Yet, you could cite the longstanding examples of Ford and Imagination, The Economist and AMV.BBDO, Tesco and EHS Brann among others. So, why is there such great diversity? Surely you would think that everyone is looking for the same thing? And, if there is no norm, does this mean that we cannot learn anything for our own circumstances and relationships?

To answer the last point first, I am convinced that there is a lot to learn for our own circumstances despite this diversity. Both clients and agencies are still looking for a mutually beneficial partnership but things have slightly altered. My view is that in the client–agency relationship, we have been undergoing a change of the model in the last 15 years which has resulted in fragmented structures. In addition (since this book deals with those relationships of any agency discipline), it has become clear that the different disciplines, although they have a creative product in common, operate on different business models and in different client contexts. Hence more fragmentation. In fact, we always had complexity: the fact that companies, agencies and market sectors were so different meant that there was always this diversity of relationship.

Juxtaposed against this backdrop, the last few years have seen clients and agencies becoming more experienced and both sides adopting a more confident, practical approach. Both sides are hungry for a new way of working. What it has meant is that now there are better opportunities for partnership if both sides get it right.

Sure, it is always going to be difficult to regard the ideal client–agency relationship as one of real equitable purity for the very reason that one of the parties will always initiate the relationship, pay for the other's services and terminate things when it is desirable. This will undoubtedly affect how both parties view each other and their ensuing existence together. However, I believe it is possible to structure how you work with an agency so that both you and the agency feel that you are reaping the rewards of a mutually beneficial partnership.

As the agency's client, you need to set the pace. In order to achieve the rewards of collaboration, you need to decide what you are looking for from the agency and how your company/marketing department can prepare and maintain the ground accordingly. Obviously you may be working with a number of agencies, therefore your task will be more complex but the same principles will still apply. What follows are the steps to help you to build a

strong platform with your agency by understanding the dynamics of your own operations and matching them to what the agency can best deliver.

## UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU WANT FROM AN AGENCY

You might think that if you are a campaign manager in a UK-based company working with an agency, you would be looking for things very different from the global marketing director of IBM. In fact there are a lot of similarities in the basic elements, it is just that each company will put emphasis and priorities on different things according to their product, market operations, scale and routes to market.

Both the campaign manager and the global marketing director would recognize the following statements:

*'I want an agency that can get the results we need.'*

*'I want an agency that understands my complex company and is willing to think on my behalf and put my company at the centre of the agency's priorities.'*

*'I want an agency to demonstrate a good return on marketing investment.'*

*'I want an agency which both thinks and executes well.'*

*'I want impactful, creative communications.'*

*'I want an agency to come in on budget and on time and never give me nasty surprises.'*

*'I want a down-to-earth agency I can trust to deliver.'*

*'I want an agency that understands my company and my marketplace and can help me with my wider business issues.'*

*'I want an agency to work well with our other departments and agencies.'*

In essence, what your company and many others are looking for is an agency that can deliver:

- understanding of the business issues.
- marketplace knowledge.
- accountability.
- excellent strategic thinking.
- excellent creative expression and implementation.
- cultural/chemistry fit.