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News

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Media Planner: New Business Can Nurture New Talent

Pitches Give Senior Managers a Chance to Impart Wisdom to Planners

By Mark Dominiak Special to *TelevisionWeek*

As businesses of all sorts scramble for profitability and new revenue during bleak economic conditions, clients likely will re-evaluate their current agency relationships, creating new opportunities for many in the advertising business.

If you're a planner and are fortunate enough to have new-business pitches arrive at your agency, take advantage of the situation and the multifaceted opportunity it presents for young talent.

Mixing and Mingling

One of the best opportunities provided by new-business pitch situations is the chance for planners to rub elbows with senior managers, with whom they may rarely have occasion to interact. Pitch dynamics require not only contributions from members across all agency disciplines in a short time frame, but also the direct involvement of senior leadership.

Working in proximity to counterparts in other disciplines presents a great opportunity to gather perspective. While it's important to find chances to impress others and network, planners shouldn't overlook the opportunity to learn by osmosis. Listen to others during pitch conversations. How do they approach solving problems? What do they reveal about their frame of reference? What is life like in their discipline?

Insights gained by listening to others can help planners understand how to better speak their colleagues' language. They can also contribute to creation of stronger media ideas—ideas that are not only more media-relevant, but also better able to mesh with the creative message.

New-business pitches also offer a chance for planners to make an impression on senior managers that can influence their career paths. It's incumbent on planners to make the most of the situation. Make time to be available to help with anything a senior manager needs, but don't overdo it; pick your spots and step up with a contribution when you know it will have value. It may be an idea or it may be making copies. Helpful contributions made at the right moment will leave an impression.

Also, don't forget to follow up after the pitch process has ended. Make sure to ask senior managers if there is anything that needs to be completed after the presentation and volunteer to help. And remember to personally thank managers for the chance to participate.

Making an Impact

If younger planning professionals are included in the strategic formulation of or presentation of the pitch, they can make an impact in both areas by keeping two things in mind: chemistry and ideas.

In order to have chemistry work in your favor, start by doing as much research as possible about the client's current situation. Search for recent business news and competitive spending information in the client's category. Determine why the client is looking for a new partner, even if it involves asking a more senior member of the pitch team.

A good knowledge of the client and its business situation is very important in establishing chemistry. Often in new-business pitch circumstances, agencies will invest too much effort in covering credentials and not enough in demonstrating how well they understand the client. Empathy is critical to establishing chemistry.

In order for others to be more open to what you have to say, it is important for you to first show them that you understand their needs and perspective. If all the agency does is talk about its capabilities and awards, the client won't feel well understood or appreciated. Clients would rather hear the agency talk about them.

The best way for a planner to increase the chances of connecting with clients during the media portion of a pitch is to pay careful attention to what is presented. Media plans traditionally contain a terminology all their own, along with plenty of details and loads of numbers. Planners must not allow the arcane lexicon of their work to bog down their portion of the pitch presentation. The planner should be the medium, not slides full of details.

When creating a presentation, favor images versus words and fewer slides rather than many. Media plans generally contain significant levels of data that are used to justify strategic choices or capture execution detail. But it is a trap to attempt to convey that breadth of detail in a pitch situation.

When presentation slides are too detailed, the presenter risks misdirecting energy. Often presenters feel that all bullet points deserve their due, and may even begin to read from the screen. But if focus is on the screen and not the client, connections can be broken and chemistry lost. More images, fewer words and fewer slides creates an environment where the planner invests more time in personal interaction with the client.

From the perspective of idea generation, there are plenty of things a planner can do in a pitch situation to create impact. Be careful not to get caught up in budget parameters that may be laid down in the pitch; parameters are restrictive and it's difficult to create powerful ideas when restricted.

Strive to find and present the best possible ideas that meet the client's needs. Demonstrate how the planning team can think outside of the box. The plan can always address how to scale an idea to fit within budget parameters. It is also possible that the client may have more funds than conveyed or provided an artificial number for the process.

Another idea-related best practice is to remember that the pitch is a team effort. Media insights aren't being generated only to fuel media plans. Share important insights with team members, especially creative counterparts. It is entirely possible that information you provide can lead to powerful creative ideas.

Also, don't discount the possibility of unconventional media forms in a pitch situation. They may be complementary to the core components of the media plan, and they can have great value for the pitch

presentation. Members of the creative team may be able to bring transit, door hanger, in-store or pizza-box executions to life in a way that can potentially communicate the idea.

Another way to generate powerful pitch ideas lies in communicating with reps. Reps may focus on providing only the information they believe is needed for the pitch. However, giving reps a deeper briefing and asking about other related possibilities may turn up information the planning team didn't know was available.

What to Expect

Managing expectations about pitches is a very important best practice for planners. There's quite a bit more to expect than just exposure to senior people.

For starters, expect long hours. Pitch projects don't take the place of client assignments; they simply add to the mix. Planners need to know that much of their free time will be devoured during a pitch. They also must be prepared to manage the priorities of the pitch in addition to whatever current business must be addressed. Adept juggling is a useful skill.

Planners also can expect a significant dose of disappointment. Looking forward to that vacation or long holiday weekend? Pitches have an uncanny way of occurring when extra time off was scheduled. During the process, planners also shouldn't expect personal attention or tutoring; that might not be available until after the pitch is concluded. Tasks need to be completed on tight time frames and all players have their priorities to deal with. Nurturing of a planner might not be possible in the heat of the process.

There is a good chance that as the pitch presentation plays out, the portion devoted to the media plan could end up being last or even cut short. Planners should go into any pitch with an idea of the key points from their portion of the presentation. It is even prudent to consider which presentation slides or pieces are the most key to delivering the media message. In that way, planners will be prepared to impactfully deliver the most important information in the event they get less time than expected.

If new business comes your organization's way in the coming months, volunteer for the pitch team. The opportunities to learn are worth the time and effort required.

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