Brands Need to Trust Creative Agencies Like They Do Consultancies

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4 hours ago
When McDonald’s awarded its business to Wieden+Kennedy last month, the entire agency world should have celebrated—or at least taken notice. Since when could a creative agency with a clear competitor on its roster (KFC) even be considered for the business? Where were the lawyers? Were the folks in procurement all on vacation?

The truth is that McDonald’s didn’t care about any conflict. Its CMO, Morgan Flatley, who clearly understood that we’re in a talent-based industry, chose the agency she felt would get her the best work and trusted that Wieden would keep the two competing companies’ confidential business information (and chicken sandwich recipes) separate.

Conflicts have long been one of my biggest industry peeves. One look at the largest agencies in the world, and it’s not hard to see why the issue gnaws at me. The largest agency on the list is Accenture, followed by PwC, IBM and Deloitte.

What do they all have common? They’re consultancies that simply aren’t expected to play by the same rules as creative agencies. Accenture, for example, boasts on its website that its clients include 92 of the Fortune Global 100. Something tells me there are a few conflicts among them.

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Why is it that when agencies have two brands in a category it's considered a conflict, but when consultancies do it, it's called a practice? It's a double standard that gets in the way of what most matters: the work. And if you think about it, it's more than a little insane that the rules for conflicts are more stringent for an agency that creates a brand's shelf talker than it is for a consultancy tasked with coming up with the same brand's five-year business plan.

I'm certainly not arguing that Accenture and its ilk shouldn't be allowed to work with competing clients. Clients seek them out in large part because they've established category areas of expertise. Further, they understand that consultancies are more than capable of establishing proper firewalls.

But so are agencies. Conflicts and privacy aren't new issues. Moreover, standards for protecting confidential information have always existed, and creative agencies have always adhered to them.

As the agency and consultancy worlds continue to merge, it's time for all clients—not just McDonald's—to place the same level of trust in creative agencies as they do in consultancies.

What is more, we work in an age where intersecting data and technology to inspire creativity is necessary. If agencies that find ways to bring these together and make the necessary investments in each are not allowed to monetize these investments across multiple clients, we simply won't be able to do what our clients hire us to do: create competitive advantage through ideas. And in the end, it won't be just agencies that lose as a result—it will be our clients as well.

Clients understand that they're best served by accessing the best talent. They get this by facilitating the level of investment we need in technology, trusting that we know how to keep their confidential information confidential and

respecting our ask for fair and equal treatment with the consultancies.

As a result, most of the contracts we sign today tie confidentiality to the individual with detailed security requirements across the agency. They do not restrict the entire agency from selling any liquids globally because there was once a social media post for a new soft drink.

As more and more client-agency relationships are project-based and many of the AOR relationships that thrive are built on talent-based models that tap into teams across a network, we need to revisit the whole concept of exclusivity across our industry. Combine these factors with our increased competition from consultancies and our imperative to continue scaled investments in data and technology, and the path forward is clear. It’s time for more brands to think like McDonald’s when choosing agency partners and trust them to respect their privacy. The result for our clients, I’m sure of it, will be better work and better results.

Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m off to grab a Big Mac and then a Coolatta for dessert.

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