

Building Strategic Brand-Agency Partnerships

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This post was created in partnership with Weber Shandwick

Key takeaways

- Strong partnerships depend on trust, transparency, and the ability to challenge each other.
- Shared ownership helps brands and agencies focus on outcomes instead of deliverables.
- AI is changing expectations, making open conversations about governance and use essential.

Brand-agency relationships are shifting from transactional engagements to strategic partnerships built on shared ownership, trust, and collaboration.

During an ADWEEK House Cannes Lions group chat co-hosted with Weber Shandwick, industry leaders dug into what strategic partnerships look like, why they break down, and how AI is becoming an invisible partner.

(L-R) Unilever's Niek de Rooij, Luma AI's Caroline Ingeborn, Weber Shandwick's Karen Pugliese

Rowing in the same direction

Trust is at the heart of every strategic relationship. If both parties have skin in the game and a mutual understanding that they're building something together, the work naturally flourishes.

"When there is trust and respect and openness, that's when you get to the best ideas," said Karen Pugliese, global president of Weber Shandwick.

To build that level of trust, agencies should think beyond the deliverables clients want to the problems they're trying to solve.

“What are the challenges you’re facing—not just outside-in, with your customers, but internally?” asked Daniel Sills, VP of brand partnerships at NewtonX. “Getting that access demands clients give you permission, greater context, and also the psychological safety to push back.”

For Niek de Rooij, global masterbrand director for Knorr at Unilever, there’s one easy way to tell if you’ve built that trust. “A hallmark of having a great partnership is when an agency starts referring to the brand as ‘we,’” he said. “We’re all in the same boat here, and we’re pushing you toward the same direction.”

(L-R) Doosan Bobcat’s Laura Ness Owens, NewtonX’s Daniel Sills

Building for a lifetime

With trust comes a sense of joint ownership in the work. A brand's challenges are the agency's, and the agency's successes are the brand's. The question is how to build that attitude into the organizational model.

One answer is transparency.

Carolina Cespedes Virquez, general manager of GoGo squeeZ U.S. at Bel Group, proactively involves her agency partners at Horizon in the day-to-day realities of GoGo squeeZ's business. When Horizon invited her team to help pilot its new AI model, that reciprocal transparency took their relationship to the next level. "They never hid anything from us," she recalled. "It tells us that we're special to them."

Weber Shandwick's Karen Pugliese

Sarah Reinecke, SVP of salty portfolio and brand at Kellanova, approaches every project with a long-term view of the agency-client relationship. "We are working on one agenda, one opportunity with our brands," she said. "We are building them not for a transaction but for a lifetime of transactions."

There's also the matter of fit. Caroline Ingeborn, chief operating officer at Luma AI, noted that her company is young and growing quickly, and it needs an agency that can match its energy. "When the time comes that we're launching something, everything moves so quickly," she explained. "We're lucky to find partners that can work at that pace with us."

(L-R) ADWEEK's Rebecca Stewart, Bel Group's Carolina Cespedes Virguez

When transparency and trust fall apart

The panelists had a candid chat about failure, discussing how relationships fall apart and what it takes to repair them. Sills suggested that partnerships begin to falter when agencies haven't built the kind of relationship that allows them to challenge a client's approach.

Laura Ness Owens, SVP and CMO of Doosan Bobcat, compared a fraying partnership to a strained marriage.

"When we stop listening to each other, that's when we start directing each other," Owens explained. "There is no mutual

relationship. There is no two-way. That's the point at which I've thought, 'All right, we've got to step back, reacquaint ourselves, and rebuild that relationship.'"

Responding to Virquez's anecdote about Horizon's AI pilot, Ingeborn pointed to a burgeoning source of conflict: Agencies not being transparent about their use of AI. Their reticence comes from fear, she suggested, and while it's understandable, it's also self-defeating. "Who wants to have a relationship with someone who's not honest with you?" Ingeborn asked.

(L-R) Kellanova's Sarah Reinecke, Doosan Bobcat's Laura Ness Owens, NewtonX's Daniel Sills, ADWEEK's Rebecca Stewart

Onboarding the 'invisible partner'

The conversation turned periodically to AI, which the

panelists see less as a threat than as a new player to manage.

Virguez predicted AI will put global agencies and boutiques on a level playing field, with a new premium on agility. Ingeborn stressed that the best products will maximize human creativity rather than replace it. And from an operational perspective, Sills described AI as “this weird invisible partner” whose role is still up in the air. Because most contracts don’t address AI governance or disclosure, he said, brands and agencies still need to align on how it should be used.

“How do we avoid the threat of its reputational risk if something goes wrong?” Sills asked. “How is it going to scale what we’re doing while maintaining the same quality of creative? Just having a shared, open conversation about how AI is going to be used will be a great step forward for building the next sort of strategic partnership.”

Featured Conversation Leaders

- Carolina Cespedes Virguez, General Manager, GoGo squeeZ U.S., Bel Group
- Caroline Ingeborn, Chief Operating Officer, Luma AI
- Laura Ness Owens, SVP and CMO, Doosan Bobcat
- Karen Pugliese, Global President, Weber Shandwick
- Sarah Reinecke, SVP, Salty Portfolio and Brand, Kellanova
- Niek de Rooij, Global Masterbrand Director, Knorr, Unilever
- Daniel Sills, VP, Brand Partnerships, NewtonX
- Rebecca Stewart, Brand Editor, ADWEEK

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