



# How and get the best from your digital agency

A Stickyeyes Whitepaper







# Executive Summary

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Making the decision to work with a marketing agency can be a big deal. It is a decision that is likely to take many months of planning, or deliberation and questioning – and that could all be before you issue your RFP.

For most of you who do make the decision to appoint an agency, there is a chance that you are also taking on some degree of risk, not just from a business perspective but on a personal level as well. You need to be sure in your mind that your agency can deliver, and that they can work with you to meet your aims and ambitions.

The relationship that you have with your agency is absolutely crucial to the success of your marketing strategy. The more effectively that you and your agency can work together, the more likely you are to succeed.

So why do some client-agency relationships strain?

There are a host of reasons why tensions can develop in a client-agency relationship. Some of these are the traditional 'old school' reasons that have occurred for some time. Others however are perhaps a by-product of how marketing communications, particularly on digital channels, have evolved.


What this guide aims to do is identify and address these challenges, help you as an agency client understand why they can arise, and how to work with your agency to prevent them from occurring in the first place.

We will also tackle some of the key pain points faced by both sides of the relationship, and suggest ways to not only support your agency, but to challenge them as well.

## What you will get from this guide

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- An understanding into the most common pain-points of client-agency relationships.
- How to identify not only the most common challenges in a client-agency relationship, but also new challenges that have emerged through the evolution of digital marketing channels.
- What your agency should be reporting on, and how they should be reporting it.
- How to ensure that you have the right team not only within your agency, but also within your own organisation to make the most of your partnership.
- Methods to help you measure the effectiveness of your content marketing activity, and demonstrate a return on investment.



# How and why client-agency relationships can strain

## Key painpoints of the client-agency relationship.

Do any of these sound familiar? They're amongst the most common reasons why relationships can hit a few bumps in the road.

### Great expectations

Expectations are perhaps the biggest pain-point in any client-agency relationship, and the problems are often rooted in a lack of communication and unrealistic demands.

But expectations are a two-way street. As much as a client will expect things from their agency, an agency will expect support from their client in order to deliver what they are tasked with delivering. This could be something as simple as access to some design assets, or to sign-off some content ideas, but if it's going to take a client time to deliver those things, then those expectations need to be managed.

Any agency will have plenty of experience at dealing with demanding projects, tough deadlines and tight budgets, but both sides of the table need to come to a mutual understanding of what can be realistically delivered. This is where it is helpful to have expectations documented in clear briefs and RFPs, clear metrics that are agreed in advance, and allocated budgets.

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### Communication

If expectation setting is a two-way street, then communication certainly is as well. Both sides of the table have made commitments to each other, and both need to uphold their side of the bargain for the system to work.

On the side of the client, that will often mean getting the support and cooperation from parts of the business – including some that may not ordinarily interact with the agency, such as sales, customer service and IT. It is important to ensure that this support is available, and this guide will touch on some structural models to support this. There may also be multiple agencies working for you and, if these will be expected to collaborate, a culture of communication needs to be established from the outset.

### Informed partnerships

Client-agency relationships work best when both parties have an understanding of what each one is

doing. Knowledge imbalances in any relationship can be difficult to manage.

Digital marketing, and search engine optimisation in particular, can suffer from this problem. The industry, more so than many others, is full of terminology and jargon that can be difficult to cut through, and the secretive nature of how many search and social algorithms work can leave clients with a perception that digital agencies deal in some form of dark art.

It is important that your agency is as transparent with you as possible in explaining what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how effective it has been. Their reporting should be clear, and spell out the steps that they are taking with as little jargon as possible. They should be keeping you updated with developments in the industry – before you find out about them yourself – and sending you their latest content, thought leadership and guides.



### Trust exercises

Information and education is important to establishing trust between the client and the agency. Most agencies will acknowledge the level of faith that a client has shown in making the appointment, as well as the degree of risk that they have taken on both a personal and business level.

If a client cannot trust that their agency is doing the right things, or if an agency cannot trust that the client is working to create an environment in which they can deliver, then it becomes incredibly difficult for the relationship to prosper.

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Getting off  
on the right foot



## Helping the agency to understand your business

Your agency may have a pedigree and experience in your particular sector, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they know your business inside out. What has worked for your agency in the past with a former client may not necessarily work for you, and there are a host of reasons for this. Every organisation has its own cultural differences, operational differences, legacy issues and resource challenges, and these can all dictate just how successful your brand can be online.

It is important that your agency partner understands your business as well as you do, as they will need to apply this understanding to the strategy that they ultimately implement.

Many organisations will invite their agencies to their premises for an immersion session, where the relevant departments and stakeholders will meet the key agency team members to introduce the agency to the organisation, and to discuss the direction in which the strategy should head.

These sessions are particularly important where a strategy involves a strong creative element, as securing agreement on creative projects can often be the biggest bottleneck in the process. You should therefore use these sessions to guide your agency on what the brand is and isn't prepared to try, and to ensure that the agency understands what your

brand stands for. This helps your agency to keep their ideas on track, saving vital time in the sign-off process.

### **Treat agencies like partners**

It's very easy sometimes for organisations to see their agencies as a separate entity, like any other supplier to the business. This isn't the best mentality for fostering a good relationship. It arguably makes it easier for a client to challenge their agency when times are tough (and that's not necessarily a bad thing), but it isn't always the best approach to maintaining a constructive dialogue.

Instead, you need to see your agency as an extension of your existing team, and your agency should be ensuring that they are making a contribution to support the activity that you are responsible, not just working on what they are responsible for.

Ensure that you are open, honest and transparent with your agency partner. By all means, challenge underperformance and question anything that you don't agree with, but ensure that this is a two-way dialogue that is focused on solving the problem, not on apportioning blame.

### **Build Trust**

Appointing an agency is a huge decision – often one with which people put their jobs and careers at risk – so it is vital that you build trust with your agency partner from the second they walk into the door on their very first pitch.

Trust is a fundamental pillar of any good client-agency relationship. No agency will object to you asking questions and challenging ideas, and they in turn shouldn't fear speaking out if they feel that you are about to make a decision that they don't agree with. A trusting relationship allows both parties to approach matters objectively, challenge ideas, and communicate opinions constructively.

Ultimately, if neither party has this trust, it is going to be extremely difficult to achieve the results that either party needs to keep their respective jobs.

### **Be clear about what you want to achieve...**

Be absolutely clear about your objectives and what you want to achieve. If not, you're going to waste a lot of time and effort going backwards and forwards discussing different ideas and briefs.

Generally, a good account manager on the agency side can spot an incomplete or unclear brief pretty quickly, but don't rely on this safety net. A brief may look complete to your account manager, only for the operational teams to start asking questions when that brief reaches them. Understand not only what you are asking for, but why you are asking for it. The second part is also critically important, as it will be how you measure how effectively your agency carried out the brief.

### **... but be realistic**

"Fast, good and cheap – pick any two". You've all heard that one before, right? Being demanding is fine – all agencies are used to working for demanding clients and

tough deadlines, but you've got to be realistic in what you're asking your agency team to do.

You're unlikely to be the only project that your agency team is working on at any given time, so bear that in mind when you're asking for that super-fast turnaround. Also bear in mind that if your agency is working on an hourly basis, they have probably already allocated hours to your project, so anything extra that you put into the brief is probably going to cause some movement somewhere in the project.

Also remember that, particularly in areas such as SEO, your agency is working against a whole host of external factors that could influence your performance. It's likely that they are fighting factors outside of their control.

**Think about your structure:  
The Digital Centre of Excellence**

Whether you are employing an agency to handle your entire marketing operation or simply hiring one for a specialist skill, think about how many different departments and stakeholders are likely to be impacted by what that agency does. The chances are, it is quite a few.

In many large organisations, digital expertise is being kept in a silo, and not being integrated into businesswide marketing plans. Unfortunately, this isn't how a modern digital marketing strategy can succeed.

Modern digital relies on multiple disciplines, and

this means that your strategy is going to draw upon multiple departments and skills. From technical departments such as technical SEO, market research and development, through to creative departments such as branding, PR, social media and content, your organisation needs to collaborate much more closely on digital projects.

To address this, many brands are rethinking their internal structures to ensure that digital needs are worked into the already busy schedules of these different teams and stakeholders. One such structural model is the 'Digital Centre of Excellence', which your agency can easily integrate into.

The model is discussed in more detail in our free guide, 'Creating a Digital Centre of Excellence'. You can access it at [www.stickyeyes.com/excellence](http://www.stickyeyes.com/excellence)

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A harmonious  
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relationship  
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### Identify the specialists

This is particularly important for clients who are working with multiple agencies, or if specialist individuals on the agency side will be expected to work closely with specialists on the client's side.

This process is about establishing lines of communication between different stakeholders on both sides of the table, and ensuring that the respective parties are working together. If you are asking an agency to provide SEO support to your SEO team, or PR support to your branding team, it is imperative that these people establish a working relationship.

Failing to do this puts undue pressure on your primary point of contacts to relay messages backwards and forwards. In this scenario, messages invariably get lost in translation, the process slows and frustration grows.

### Put a strategy in place

If you're appointing an agency because you are looking for them to build a strategy for your organisation, be absolutely clear about what you want to achieve.

Be open about the position of the business, the direction it is heading and the challenges that it is facing. Provide your agency with as much data as you feasibly can about your customer base and target audience, as all of this will influence the strategy that they develop.

Once this is in place you need to ensure that all stakeholders, on both sides of the table, buy into

that strategy and are agreed on the tactics to deliver that strategy.

### Get the briefing process right

Even the strongest agency-client relationship can be tested by an unclear brief, so make sure that you get this stage right.

For agencies, the brief is often the primary record of what has been requested and it will tend to circulate

around multiple teams, so it needs to be absolutely clear about what you want to deliver. Different people may interpret a brief in different ways, so you need to avoid ambiguity as much as possible.

Different relationships will often require a different type of brief. For example, briefs for creative projects may simply identify the desired outcome, and leave the team to decide for themselves how to best deliver that outcome. Other briefs will be much more prescriptive in nature.

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### **Run things through your primary contact...**

Your account manager is, as the job title suggests, there to manage the account, so be sure to use this person as your primary point of contact.

There will be times when it will be easier or more desirable to go directly to your operational specialists, but do try to keep your account manager up to date. This person will ultimately be responsible for ensuring that enough resource is being allocated to the right areas of your campaign in order to meet your objectives, so they will need to oversee that the resource allocation is inadvertently tilting too heavily towards a particular activity to the detriment of others.

### **...But meet the team**

You are going to want to meet your agency team and, if you're employing a large agency or appointing them for a number of services, that means that you're going to be meeting a big team.

It is important to understand who the specialists are in your agency team, and understand how they are likely to work. Some members of your team may be extremely forward in contacting you and coming forward with ideas, whilst others may be less forward and instead, prefer to communicate through your account manager.

Getting to know the people who are delivering the key elements of your strategy supports the process of building trust and setting expectations.





# Measuring Success





## What your agency should be reporting on

At some point you will need to appraise the effectiveness of this relationship. There are key things that your agency should be reporting on, and key things that you should be asking them.

### Your key performance metrics

Any agency will have had to report on KPIs at some point. Many may not necessarily prefer to report this way, but if KPIs are something that you have insisted on, then your agency should be spelling out performance on these as clearly as possible.

The reason why many agencies might discourage KPIs is because they can often be overly prescriptive and they have a tendency to mask business performance, either positively or negatively. One missed KPI has the potential to divert attention from otherwise above-expectation performance in other areas.

Your agency will often help you to develop KPIs that avoid this sort of problem, by looking at metrics and performance indicators that are aligned towards your overall business goals, but their reporting should still be clear.

### Correlating agency and business performance

Where possible, encourage your agency to map their performance against the performance of your business overall. Whilst it is very easy for your agency to report on the metrics that only they are responsible for, such as traffic or rankings, these alone don't provide any meaningful insight into how effective their activity is. If

your agency is delivering their KPIs, but the impact on the bottom line is minimal, it could be time to rethink just what you need your agency to do.

Admittedly, this can be difficult in certain situations, but try to work with your agency to develop "whole of business" goals, as well as purely digital goals.

### Correlating agency and business performance

This isn't just about keeping score, it's about ensuring that the performance of your campaign can be benchmarked. A 20% growth in organic traffic might sound great, but if your competitors are experiencing 40%, 50% or 60%, then something might not be quite right.

Growth in your industry can sometimes mask poor performance, whilst a declining industry can sometimes make performance look worse than it actually is. It's therefore important that your agency regularly benchmarks your performance against that of your competitors.

### Correlating agency and business performance

Reports shouldn't just be about the past, they should be about the future as well. Lots of agencies are very good at reporting on what they have done, but what does their report say about what they will do next?

Reporting is about how to take your campaign forward, so there should be a sizable section dedicated to explaining how your agency is going to learn from previous activity and take your strategy forward. If there isn't, then ask what the next steps are.

### The long-term strategy

Very few reputable agencies will come to you with the "first page on Google in six weeks" sort of claims that we have all seen all too often. A serious digital agency knows that search marketing is very much a marathon, not a sprint, so any report should focus heavily on the long-term – unless you are only working to a short-term project contract of course.

Remember that search engines will be constantly crawling your site, looking for new content, so you need to have a long-term plan and strategy.

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## **Feedback is everything**

Constructive feedback is the lifeblood of any client-agency relationship. Agencies rely on client feedback to shape their strategies and activities – particularly if you are judging a campaign on any form of intangible criteria or metrics that they may not be able to report on. These could be subjective issues such as your brand tone-of-voice or how likely their ideas are to be signed-off by other stakeholders.

Feedback is also a motivational tool for your agency. Agencies are ultimately people businesses and people are motivated by constructive feedback. If something is

going well, they want to do more of it and if something isn't going well, they want to put it right.

## **Straight talking partnerships**

Client-agency relationships work when parties communicate clearly and openly. Your agency should be using clear and straight-forward language when communicating their activity to you, and not complicating matters to try and cover their tracks if things go wrong. If you, as the client, aren't clear on what you are being told, you need to raise that issue.

Similarly, be open and honest with your agency, and try

to keep the office acronyms to a minimum – your agency probably has enough of them to remember.

## **Celebrate together**

Above all else, make sure that you all share in the success of your relationship. Celebrate together when things go well, and commiserate together when things perhaps don't go as well as you had hoped. No agency should try and hog all of the limelight. Your agency may ask you if they can enter an industry award and, whilst there may be internal policies surrounding such things, these sorts of events can be a great way to get together, reward your teams and celebrate the success that you have shared.



Key  
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Takeaways  
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### **Set realistic expectations**

Unrealistic expectations and ambitions are a recipe for a strained relationship. Whilst any good agency will aim to please, you need to accept that there are going to be limitations to what they can do.

Particularly in digital disciplines, your agency is going to be working against a host of external factors that are beyond their control, and your expectations should reflect this fact.

### **Get your agency close to the business**

Your agency isn't like any other supplier to your organisation, they're an extension of your existing team.

Get your agency as embedded into the organisation as possible, introduce them to the relevant stakeholders and keep them in the loop.

### **Be clear**

Clear language, clear instructions and clear deadlines – those are the ingredients to a happy relationship. Don't try to complicate things with needlessly complicated language.

### **Match the performance of the agency with the performance of the business**

Most performance metrics, in isolation, mean relatively little. The true test of your agency's performance is

how they are contributing to your bottom line.

Even if you are engaging an agency for just one thing, make sure that you are aware of how that one thing affects the rest of the business.

### **Give feedback**

Agencies need feedback. That's not because they are needy or narcissistic, but because they are often trying to work out precisely what their clients like and dislike and what works and what doesn't work for the brands they work with.



# Further reading.

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## **How to create a Digital Centre of Excellence.**

Customers are discovering and interacting with brands on multiple devices and through multiple channels, but it's becoming increasingly difficult for brands to get these channels working together to deliver an effective and consistent brand experience.

This guide will explain how large, multi-national brands are adapting to this challenge and restructuring how they approach digital.

Download it now at [www.stickyeyes.com/dcoe](http://www.stickyeyes.com/dcoe)

## **Get Serious with Content Marketing.**

This whitepaper will give you practical models for developing, deploying and refining your content marketing strategy using our 'Five C' framework.

Download it now at [www.stickyeyes.com/getseriousaboutcontent](http://www.stickyeyes.com/getseriousaboutcontent)

## **Redefining "SEO": What your agency should be telling you in 2016.**

SEO has become much more considered, much more focused on the needs of the end user and, ultimately, much more of an embedded marketing discipline. This whitepaper discusses just how SEO has been transformed from an isolated, technical discipline into a fundamental part of a brand marketing and communications strategy.

Download it now at [www.stickyeyes.com/redefiningseo](http://www.stickyeyes.com/redefiningseo)

## **How to drive ROI from social advertising.**

With click-through rates (CTR's) for Facebook desktop ads more than eight times higher than a normal web ad, how do you ensure you're optimising your social advertising spend?

Using real life case studies, this simple guide will explain how you can increase traffic through social ad campaigns, target the right audiences and increase revenue through social advertising.

Download it now at [www.stickyeyes.com/socialro](http://www.stickyeyes.com/socialro)

# About Stickyeyes.

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## A little about us...

Some online marketing agencies are all style and no substance. Others are so geeky they forget your customers are only human.

We're relentlessly improving our digital specialisms to provide maximum return on investment, whatever it takes. ROI may be an over-used term, but we'll never tire of it, because it's what matters most.

Our approach to digital marketing is made up of the perfect blend of technology, insight and creativity.

Our technology is like no other, with dedicated, proprietary tools that support the creation of digital strategies in organic and biddable media, content and social media. This allows us to remove the guesswork and conjecture in digital marketing, and plot your pathway to success.

We use this data, as well as our leading digital insight, to devise remarkable creative campaigns, engaging content and intelligent paid activity that are focused on increasing your brand visibility, growing your audiences and delivering results.

We have adopted this approach in more than 20 international markets for some of the world's biggest brands, including GlaxoSmithKline, Hilton and Hertz, delivering award winning campaigns that have delivered significant returns on investment.

Want to learn more? Contact:

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GlaxoSmithKline



*Ladbrokes*

*Hertz*





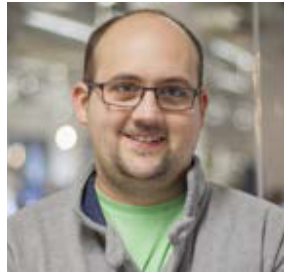
# About the Author.

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Michael is an experienced content marketer and digital journalist, having previously worked for both online and offline publications including Teamtalk Media Group and Newsquest Media Group.



Michael has worked on a number of award winning projects for leading international brands and has been published in several major publications, including Econsultancy, Marketing Magazine, Brand Republic and The Drum.

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