

A VIEW FROM JOSH KRICHEFSKI

# The art of defence (or how we learned to love the repitch)

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## Six things to keep in mind throughout a review process.

I was recently asked about my biggest learning from the past year – a period during which, as an agency, we've spent much of our time involved in a pitch, and often a defensive one.

I have never been prouder of the team and the work we're producing – not just for the pitches but for clients across the board day to day. When there are so many pitches and repitches going on, it's easy to forget that there's a business churning away, working tirelessly to deliver brilliant work away from the process. Each team will have people sucked into pitches and will therefore be dealing with extra work. Equally, the pitch team themselves can't just drop their other clients. Somehow, we need to balance it all – something that, when you're doing more than a pitch a week, becomes a hugely challenging beast.

Before you roll your eyes at the idea of yet another chief executive feeling their business has it harder than others, I want to make clear that I'm not naïve. I know every agency goes through the same challenge. My point is that we rarely discuss it publicly. There's a begrudging acceptance that this is part of life and a bravado among us that we never struggle with that. The reality is quite different and, as a collective, I think it's helpful to open up discussion about the pressure of a pitch or repitch.

## **That sinking feeling**

We all know pitches can be all-consuming and emotionally and physically draining for everyone. None more so than the repitch.

Luke Bozeat, chief operating officer at MediaCom UK, once said that, when a long-standing client tells you they're putting the business up for review, it feels like your husband or wife is telling you they want to install Tinder. They're not leaving you. They just want to look around, see what's available and then... after a lengthy process, they might leave you anyway.

I wish it didn't hurt, but it does. We shouldn't shy away from that. Any agency, whether they're in media, creative, marketing, PR or otherwise, that doesn't care when a client calls a review has no right to be that brand's agency in the first place.

We should be pouring our heart and soul into our work, not just our skills and experience. We should take pride in it. If that client then calls a review, it's OK to feel gutted.

However, the truth is that this is just business and repitches are part of agency life. But if I've learned anything from the past 12 months, it's that a repitch is not the death knell for a client relationship and the key to retaining it is to treat it as a new start for both parties.

## **Start afresh – not from scratch**

When defending business, there are a few things we've learned that we try to make sure

everyone keeps in mind throughout the process.

These aren't big secrets to success. They are relatively simple concepts that everyone knows they *should* stick to. But, if we're honest, these things can fly out the window (and often do) during a repitch, when there are so many emotions and late nights being poured into things.

### **1 Behave the way you would with a new prospect**

In a repitch, it's a mistake to assume your existing relationship, even if very positive, with a client may well help move the decision in your favour. Relationships can help the mood of the process and create a positive atmosphere. But they alone do not retain accounts. If we link the pitch process too closely to the client relationship, it makes it very difficult to think differently, come at things with an unbiased view and, ultimately, deliver the pitch they really need to see.

### **2 Challenge everything, including the client**

Now is the time to challenge everything: ourselves, the client, team, processes, the established way of working... everything. We force ourselves to do this and we involve the whole team on it. This isn't just about looking at the creative or the execution. It's about reassessing how we communicate with the client, report, the contract itself. The client has called a repitch because they want a change. They may not say they do and they may not even believe they do, but once they have met the competition and seen the shiny and new, change is usually what they want. So we need to challenge every facet of the account and change things up as needed.

### **3 Be honest**

Business is a grown-up world where grown-up conversations are needed. Being so worried about offending a client that we shy away from giving them the advice they need or explaining our concerns about the existing account or the repitch itself will end our chances of winning. We're always respectful but, for MediaCom, and I'm sure our peers, it would be

against everything we believe in to pander to a client if we think something's not in their best interests. Sometimes that means we lose, but losses are more easy to stomach when we know we have done the right thing.

#### **4 Think big and believe**

Now is not the time to do what you think a client wants, it's the moment when you need to say what you truly believe is best for that brand. Sometimes, that isn't going to be welcomed. It's a risk to try to move a client away from their current way of thinking. But the past year has proven time and time again that, if the big ideas come from real insight (there is nothing more important), clients will listen. The key is really in believing in your people, your philosophy and the answer you're presenting.

#### **5 Have perspective and show empathy**

No matter how big the repitch is, the world will continue to turn... even if the client chooses to go elsewhere. My primary concern when this happens is for the people involved. As I've said, I don't believe any agency "doesn't care" about clients. Work is a huge part of our lives and it's natural to be passionate about it. But we make a point of ensuring our people know they are valued and trusted and that their future is not defined by whether we win or lose a client.

#### **6 Enjoy it**

I've been involved in some bleak repitches in my career, where the client team is deemed a failure and is cut out of the process completely and where a repitch is made to feel like you've already lost the account. People will be stressed about the process and it's important to empathise and listen. But, as a team, try to lighten the mood, keep things positive and make sure people have fun!

When I think back over the past 12 months, much of it has been defined by repitches. We've had a great year and I think a lot of that has been down to being brave, having

courage in our convictions and striding into repitches and the process around them.

These six learnings aren't rocket science. I'm sure if you have taken the time to read this piece, you are probably saying: "There is nothing here we don't already know."

But the simplest things are the hardest to remember when the pressure is on.

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