

Three myths about collaboration (and how to get it right)

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Today's marketing is about teamwork. The best ideas and their execution rarely happen in isolation. Matt Mee, MediaCom's Global Chief Strategy Officer, explains the rules of collaboration.

Right now, collaboration is hot. It's often cited by marketers as one major benefit of in-housing or having co-located teams working together away from their respective agency homes.

Proximity, it seems, is the magic ingredient to fostering collaboration. If we work more closely together, we will all spark off each other, act more collectively and create more inspired work. That's the theory, at least.

Unfortunately, it's simply one of the many fallacies that have sprung up about collaboration. To my mind, there are three big myths that need to be slain before we go on to explore what's really required.

The first is that you all need to be in the room together. We have all experienced the lack of focus in big workshops or the tendency for the loudest voices to drown out the most interesting, divergent thinking. The best collaboration is often one-to-one initially before it gets opened up, slowly, to more people. The phone, Skype, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, the channels for collaboration are almost endless. Collaboration is about proximity (mental as well as physical) rather than enforced contact.

The second myth is that you all need to get along. This is so not true because lots of playing nicely rarely sparks brilliant ideas. Like an oyster, you need a bit of grit to produce the pearl and encouraging a level of disagreement can be a good thing. Bringing together a diverse team tends to ensure that a wider range of perspectives can be brought to bear to the challenge.

For [‘Lo Chingón Está Aquí’](#), a collaborative work for Cerveza Victoria, Mexico's oldest beer brand, we worked with a diverse group to focus on the challenges faced by “Morenos” – Mexicans with brown skin. Each different perspective on discrimination helped make the idea stronger because we were able to identify the common ground: making Mexicans feel proud of who they are.

The final big myth is the idea that collaboration requires a leader. In fact, the last thing collaboration needs is a dictator with a single minded-vision. What great collaboration demands is an organiser; brilliant project managers who can bring the threads together, as well as gently bang heads together when partners don't deliver on agreed promises.

‘Lo Chingón Está Aquí’ taught us that what's really needed is the leaving of egos at the door. We understood that different members of the team would take the lead at different times during the campaign and that sometimes we would be at the back to help accomplish the bigger goal.

Getting it right

The truth is that collaboration relies not so much on structure as mindset – primarily a collective sense of responsibility to create something good.

It also requires a great sense of inclusion, both within and outside the team. Every member of the group should feel able to contribute.

When we created the [‘I don’t roll on Shabbos’](#) campaign for Gillette in Israel, for example, which targeted the ultra-religious Orthodox community, our insight came from a member of the team who was connected to that community.

Michal Bar-Tal, the PR manager, mentioned that she spoke to her father, who is religious, about the campaign and he told her that the bible actually forbids praying in an area of foul odour, as it distracts the thoughts and causes the prayers to be ineffective. We immediately realised that we had stumbled upon our golden insight.

We learnt that Jewish laws dictate that believers refrain from anything considered work on Saturday/Shabbat – even putting on deodorants. So, we recruited Judaism’s rabbinical authority to raise awareness of a forgotten biblical decree: “That shalt not pray in an area of foul odour!” We then demonstrated the power of Gillette through an experiential side-by-side battle of synagogues. This campaign required collaboration (and cooperation) between people way outside of our agency.

Likewise, for ‘Lo Chingón Está Aquí’, the solution involved working with government agencies and other bodies to create measures to improve discrimination rules covering the advertising business.

We knew that 70% of Morenos experience racial discrimination, and they are never featured in advertising. So, we helped Cerveza Victoria start a movement to bring attention to this injustice, lobbying the Mexican Association of Advertising Agencies to push for industry-level quotas.

Inclusion around great ideas often means working far beyond the immediate club of advertising capabilities and even technology partners, and that requires a different approach (as well as the determination to ensure that the idea stays at the core of the outcome).

Ultimately, the key to successful collaboration is not about process. It's about being open to ideas, and most importantly, it's about knowing when to take a risk; a risk that may take you out of your comfort zone in terms of your own capability, your usual way of working and the kind of work that you're creating.

Both Shabbos and Lo Chingon involved risks for us as an agency and for our clients, who were investing money and effort behind creating something new that could only happen through collaboration.

When you get it right the results speak for themselves.

[*Quotes from this article were first published by Warc.*](#)

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