

What clients really think...

PRWeek and Mischief have joined forces to quiz a hundred client companies about their agencies. **Alex Black** reports

As with any client and service provider relationship, there will always be gripes. But are these genuine complaints or just the usual grumbles from people who have little understanding of how a PR agency functions?

PRWeek teamed up with consumer lifestyle shop Mischief to find out what clients think about their PR support. The results were startling. More than a quarter of the respondents claimed their agency failed to deliver set objectives, and nearly 70 per cent thought agencies failed to provide transparent budgeting. More than 75 per cent complained about agencies' lack of industry knowledge and nearly a quarter said they were not getting value for money from PR.

Personnel is another thorny issue. Many respondents grumbled about senior teams disappearing as soon as the ink on the contract was dry – only to reappear within a few weeks of the contract running out.

So, is communication breaking down between agency and client?

Part of the trouble, of course, is that there is no such thing as a 'standard' PR account. Different industries, companies and individuals require different approaches, and misjudging the way a client likes to be handled can be fatal.

'It is so important to find out how clients like to be supported,' says MS&L account director Amanda Kamin. 'For some clients that means waiting until they come to you, and then responding immediately. For others it means checking in five times a day. Get clients to tell you what they appreciate. Otherwise you are left trying to read minds.'

Tailor your service

Simon Avis, formerly EMEA corporate comms manager for Discovery Networks and now head of PR at Entertainment Rights, agrees it is an agency's duty to work out how its clients like to work. 'I don't like having to chase an agency,' says Avis. 'My agency should be chasing me.'

Digging a little deeper, and under the cover of anonymity, the study found plenty of in-house PROs willing to vent their frustrations. For example, there were complaints about inconsistencies in billing. One disgruntled PRO complained a monthly invoice for £7,500 contained 'no details of what [the agency] has done for that fee'. Another simply implored agencies to 'tell the truth!'.
Although spending more than £7,000 a month without any notion of what it is for may be an extreme example, Mischief MD Mitchell Kaye points out that a lack of accountability and trust, whether perceived or imagined, is clearly something consultancies need to address.

'Establishing trust and accountability – especially at a time when people are watching their budgets closely – is a huge challenge for all of us,' says Kaye. 'If an agency's behaviour creates doubt in your client's mind the relationship is obviously weakened.'

Louise Evans, a former media manager at British Airways and now co-founder of Loop Communications, declines to name the agency that once billed her for the use of one of its meeting rooms, but says incidents like this quickly undermine confidence and left her feeling she has to scrutinise every bill. But is it all about providing detailed timesheets and breakdowns? At the root of the transparency issue is trust. If a client does not trust their agency, it will start to find things to question.

'Having the right personal chemistry' was the top requirement of agency personnel for our respondents, something Redhead PR MD Sara Tye reckons is key. 'If it's a supplier relationship rather than a partnership, then it doesn't work,' says Tye, who has held top in-house roles at The Body Shop and Yellow Pages. 'You know when you've got trust and chemistry because you can feel it working. People ring up and say: "I saw your company in the news the other day".'

Another gripe concerns industry knowledge. On a scale of one to ten (ten

70%
think agency billing
lacks transparency

75%
say agencies lack
industry knowledge



Kamin: find out what clients really want



Beckett: market knowledge is crucial

'If an agency's behaviour creates doubt in your client's minds then the relationship is obviously weakened'

Mitchell Kaye, managing director, Mischief

being 'critically important'), the overall response to the statement: 'Detailed knowledge of our business sector is an ingredient to a successful client/agency relationship' was just under nine.

But the unprompted responses made calls to 'improve business knowledge' and 'stay up to speed with industry news', suggesting there are gaps that need to be plugged.

Is it unfair to expect agencies to have an in-depth knowledge of markets they do not spend their whole time working in? The Media Trust head of comms Helen Beckett says when it comes to specialist markets, knowledge is vital.

'It makes it so much easier to talk to journalists and clients if you know what ISA stands for, what a stakeholder pension is and you're aware of the current tax rates,' says Beckett, recalling her time in-house at a financial services firm. 'It also means that your creative ideas are not just fluff.'

While she admits she did not appreciate it at the time, Beckett was obliged to take the same financial planning

exams as financial advisers, something that stood her in 'very good stead'.

Loop Communications' Evans says she has seen agency PROs come into an account with no sector knowledge: 'I spent a lot of time training those people and correcting their mistakes.'

Keep agencies informed

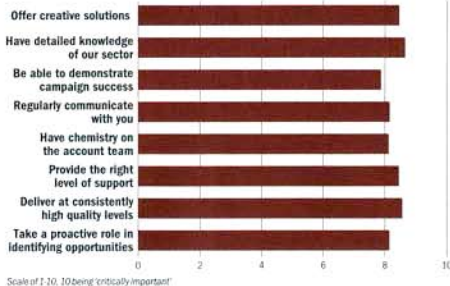
A good agency should know the clients' business inside out, but too often clients can be guilty of assuming specialist knowledge and, even worse, failing to provide vital information.

'There's no such thing here as too much information,' believes former eBay PR manager Charlie Coney. 'In-house teams should do inductions, send over latest plans, company results, strategy - anything that is relevant.'

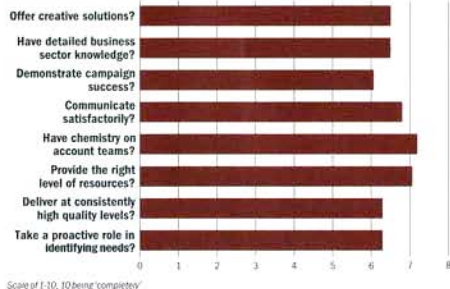
Coney, now an associate director at Golin Harris, agrees with Tye that an agency should be a partner. 'Get the agency along to internal team meetings, make them present at company meetings, get them involved. That way they become more than a mere resource.'

What clients want from their agency

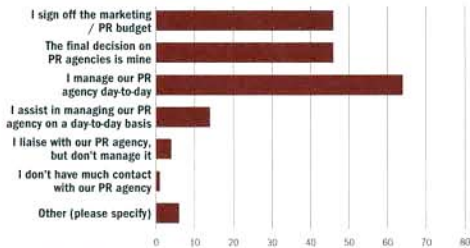
How important is it for the agency to...



Do PR agencies...



Which of the following statements applies to you?



Source: The Mischief Report

'Consultancies must not over-promise and must be open about what the client should expect'

Richard Houghton, PRCA chairman

◀ No-one is saying in-house PROs cannot be demanding, but it is also important they remember what their PR agency can and cannot do.

Rachel O'Reilly spent a number of years at travel shop BGB, before taking the top comms job at TUI Thomson. Now back on the agency side as director of travel and lifestyle at Siren PR, O'Reilly recalls often finding herself being forced to choose between a bigger agency that could offer brand expertise, creative consultancy and news delivery – but not a great knowledge of her sector – or a specialist agency with sector knowledge but without the ability to deliver coverage outside the travel pages.

PRCA chairman Richard Houghton agrees, pointing out a lack of clear understanding of what the customer is buying can only lead to disappointment.

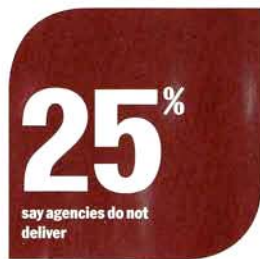
'For commercial relationships to work, it needs to be satisfactory for both sides,' says Houghton. 'Consultancies must not over-promise and must be open about what the client should expect. Both sides need to have the difficult conversations at the beginning of the



O'Reilly: agencies cannot offer everything



Kaye: relationships depend on trust



relationship and document them.'

Many of the issues thrown up by this research are not new, and some comments can be dismissed as in-house PROs simply having a 'good moan'.

But that is not the point. Be it due to perfectionism, inexperience or simply a desire to keep service providers honest, clients are finding grumbles about things that can, and should, be addressed easily.

With a relatively little adjustment to working practices, it seems that

agencies could make a quantum leap in improving client relationships. To not do so now, when the gripes are laid out in black and white, borders on negligence.

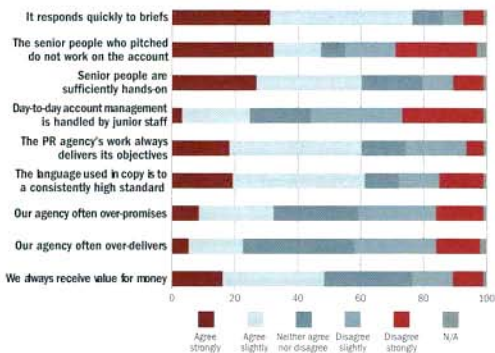
Overleaf we give agency PROs the chance to respond to the criticisms.



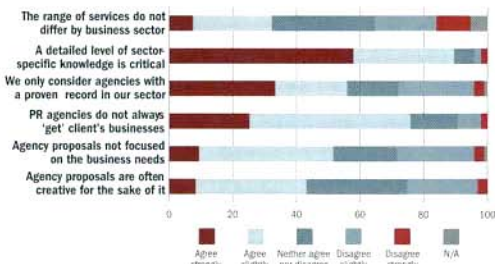
Watch Mischief MD Mitchell Kaye talk about client satisfaction at PRWeek.com/uk

Clients' views on the service they receive

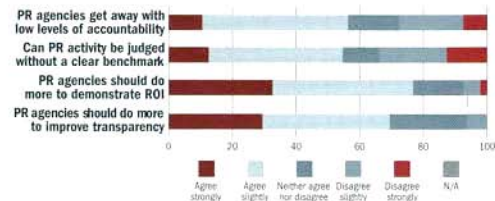
How much do you agree or disagree with the following about the service provided by your PR agency?



How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about sector knowledge within PR agencies?



How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about accountability in PR?



'Sometimes clients don't trust us'

Hannah Marriott hears some leading PR agencies give their responses to this week's Mischief Report

Have you heard the one about the married marketing manager who made advances on a young agency executive? Or the tale of the client who overloaded his agency with hours of extra work, then refused to pay for any of it?

Most PR consultancies have at least one war story of this nature and are blighted by even more common client problems on a daily basis.

After the results of the Mischief survey (see previous pages) came in, *PRWeek* asked agency PROs to respond, and flag up a few grumbles of their own.

The most frequent complaint was in-house contacts did not understand PR and confused it with advertising.

The Remarkable Group's PR director Chris Wotton says: 'No matter how much PR "training" some clients have, we still get the classic "When is that article going in and into which publications?" or, "Why have they used that headline?" from clients.'

Similarly, MediaJems director Jenna Gould – who specialises in features placement – says clients are often disappointed if they do not have instant results from a PR campaign, because they do not understand features usually have a three-month lead-in time.

And as clients tend to think their product or service is the most interesting in the land, they often feel disappointed when journalists do not agree.

This can be tough when working on tech accounts, says EML client services

director David Marsden: 'There often has to be an education campaign, teaching the client about what the media wants and how they can highlight the benefits of their products to achieve coverage.'

One of Watershed PR director Heloise D'Souza's biggest problems is that clients often push for a mention in the national newspapers, whereas articles in niche interest publications actually drive sales: 'Lots of agencies will promise them a mention in *The Telegraph*, but agencies should educate clients and manage their expectations.'

Changing times

Managing expectations is even more important in the digital age, according to Edelman CEO Robert Phillips: 'Lots of clients grew up in an age of demand and control, when they dictated when and how their news was released. Now marketers have to share authority with consumers. Agencies must be able to advise their clients on this change.'

The crux of many of these problems seems to be a lack of trust. Clients are well within their rights to be totally clueless about PR, but they do need to listen to their agency's advice.

'Sometimes clients don't trust you with their most important information. They don't understand that it can make a huge difference to be totally informed on certain matters,' complains Wotton.

Jessica Alexander – director at Yorkshire-based AKA PR – agrees that it



Marsden: clients need to be educated



D'Souza: manage client expectations



Render: clients need to have firm ideas



Phillips: clients must share authority

can be vital for clients to 'let us loose in the business to talk to people and dig out the stories for ourselves'.

Another issue is lack of commitment from the client. Gould remembers a client who wanted 'the fame, the publicity and his company plastered everywhere but was unwilling to put any effort into providing me with relevant content'.

As well as being bad for the client, this can jeopardise PROs' carefully forged relationship with journalists.

Kinross + Render CEO Sara Render believes this can happen because some clients hire PR agencies 'because they feel they have to', without a firm idea of what they want to achieve.

'This makes the relationship fruitless

'NOTHING GOT APPROVED IN TIME SO WE FIRED THE CLIENT...'

'This particular client was based in a remote location in the West Country and meetings were always held at their premises. By the time we had driven there and back and had the meeting, it was a 16-hour day. But our meetings were interminable and nothing ever got decided.

Once, we travelled there ostensibly to discuss the arrangements for a proposed press conference, but ended up spending an hour and a half debating the relative merits of different brands of Welsh bottled water to serve at lunch. We finally agreed to defer the

decision to the next meeting. Press releases were drafted but never approved. That year happened to be an important anniversary for the company, so we penned a profile piece for placement in the trade press. It went back and forth at least 20 times and, by the time it was finally issued, it was no longer their anniversary and the story was spiked.

At our annual review, we had one small press cutting to present despite an over-servicing level of more than 100 per cent.

When the MD thundered that he paid

us for 'results, not effort', the team was so demoralised at the impossibility of achieving anything that I resigned the account on the spot.

We have since inserted a clause into our standard terms of business that puts an obligation on the client to provide us with appropriate and accurate information as well as to approve all materials in a timely manner, otherwise they risk being in breach of contract.'

Starfish Communications joint managing partner Julien Speed



Banks: know when to cut your losses



Speed: make clients stick to the contract

and empty, which is no fun for the agency staff and is also bad for the client,' she contends.

Early Doors director Howard Robinson agrees: 'Clients and agencies often don't set tangible objectives upfront or even discuss what success would look like. You get campaigns that generate media coverage for the sake of it with little commercial direction.'

Some dilemmas are even more difficult to solve. Raimier PR co-founder and MD Stephen Waddington complains some companies are so 'tied by the corporate umbilical cord to the US' they cannot take any risks: 'The biggest frustration in PR is having an amazing idea, having your client kill it through a lack of confidence and then later seeing your rivals doing the exact thing you proposed.'

Some personal problems are also impossible to solve. Buffalo Communications associate director Lucy King points out it is sometimes difficult to find common ground when a vibrant young consultancy works with an austere, old-fashioned client.

But consultants did agree with clients on many issues raised in the Mischief survey, particularly on billing. All maintained that transparency was crucial and many admitted that - instead of agreeing to work harder than is profitable to curry favour in a pitch - it is up to agencies to explain price structures at the beginning of the relationship.

Similarly, agencies swore that those who pitched for the account should indeed work on it unless illness, holidays, conflicts or departures made that impossible.

Interestingly, at least a dozen of the agencies to which *PRWeek* spoke claimed that they had never had any problems with clients. Either they have been unusually lucky, or they are reluctant to admit that clients could ever be wrong. Perhaps this attitude is symptomatic of the problem as a whole.

If the role of a PR agency is to provide expert counsel that will make a demonstrable difference to the client's business, agencies need to tell the bill payers that they can be wrong.

Some clients will not like this - but surely it is better than over-promising simply to win business?

The agencies that are brave enough to challenge and educate their clients will ride the crest of the wave, and may help improve the image and standards of the industry as a whole.

'SCREAMING BANSHEE MADE SITUATION IMPOSSIBLE...'

'Some clients feel that as long as they are paying the bills they can do whatever they like and will really take liberties.

One such character was the PR and marketing manager at a small but successful business based in the Home Counties.

She was obviously used to treating her underlings badly and behaved in a ridiculously temperamental manner - nice as pie one minute and a screaming banshee the next. Managing our relationship with her became extremely difficult.

One day the account executive working on the account rang the client to discuss something fairly innocuous.

I was sitting across the desk from the exec and saw her getting redder and redder in the face as the call went on.

Eventually she put the phone down and burst into tears, having been subjected to an unacceptable stream of abuse.

Sometimes, having a frank exchange of views with a client is the way forward, but in this case it was personal abuse and we were not willing to put up with it.

When we gave the client her marching orders, she was completely nonplussed that we should have decided to choose the wellbeing of our staff over their monthly fee.

But agencies cannot do their best

work when relations are so strained, so it's better to cut your losses. We did so and waved goodbye to a fee of around £5,000 a month but we felt it was an impossible situation.

Yes, we could have tried putting another member of staff on the account but the client's behaviour was outrageous and an agency is only as good as its talent. You just can't have these kinds of disagreements preying on staff's minds, upsetting them and distracting them from the rest of their work.'

Johnson King account director Joe Banks

Agencies and clients need to build trust



Danny Rogers
Editor

PRWeek's new look at the health of relationships between clients and agencies – The Mischief Report – throws up some tasty food for thought.

To some extent the tension between these two sides of the PR industry is inevitable, even healthy.

There are the usual moans about agencies rolling out top consultants at pitches, who then disappear when the real work gets under way. Then there are the complaints from agencies about clients asking for strategic advice yet secretly yearning (unrealistically) for a personal profile in *The Sunday Times*.

But there are more worrying undercurrents here, concerning the levels of trust between client and consultant. These vary enormously, but when clients start expressing concerns about the basis of the way they are billed, the relationship has broken down.

Billing has always been a thorny issue for PR agencies. Should they charge clients for the time their consultants have spent on the account, or on the tangible coverage and results achieved?

There is the famous, possibly mythical, tale of the financial PR agency which, on completion of a successful corporate project, sent in an invoice that simply read: 'For services rendered, please pay £1m.'

Interestingly, there seems to be less of an obsession these days with evaluation and measurement, although more than 30 per cent of clients did agree strongly that there could be improvements in proving ROI.

The emphasis today seems to be on overall transparency and honesty between the two parties.

Finally, there is one contradictory message emerging. On the one hand, clients quite rightly expect higher levels of sector expertise from their consultants while, on the other, we know that clients still object to agencies working with rival companies in the same sector.

This puts agencies, which are increasingly striving to be specialists, between a rock and a hard place.

danny.rogers@haymarket.com

Feature, p24