

Another Review Consultant... Really!?!

At last count, there were almost 30 Review Consultants registered with the 4As. I can safely say after 25+ years as a New Business Director, Managing Director, Office & Regional Agency CEO, and finally Global CEO, I have seen practically all 30 of them in action.

Over the years, I have formed opinions about the consultant's world not based on winning or losing pitches, but based on how they have conducted themselves during the entire review process.

My conclusion is that **we do not need another, just better.**

The most amazing part is I am not sure if consultants see the client as the client.

The client, not the agency, is the client. What I mean by that is that most consultants seem to be more worried about their ongoing relationships with the agencies than they do with the guy paying for the review. It is widely known that certain agencies have an advantage when certain consultants conduct their reviews, and some review consultants actually spend more time meeting, entertaining and doing work for an agency's new business department than they do with the actual clients. This may be because a client will most likely be involved with the consultant for 12-13 weeks, but it's pretty much over at that point unless that client calls for another review sometime in their future. But, the review consultant wants to make sure his or her relationship with all the agencies involved remains positive and strong no matter what the review outcome. Review consultants must avoid a conflict of interest with agencies by maintaining a clear, arms-length relationship at all times.

You might say consultants need the agencies to view them in a positive light if they expect agencies to be involved in future pitches.

But, I can't help but think it is more about the money than anything else.

Most consultants are double dippers, meaning review consultants get paid by both agencies and clients. The most egregious are those consultants who charge ten of thousands of dollars to register agencies and to store their materials and information within their library. This is no more than a "pay to play" outdated system that is shameful and unethical.

In this digital age where clients, agencies and the general public can view an agency's work, credentials and other pertinent information, libraries and special registration data (and fees) are archaic. A good overview of an agency's capabilities, resources, client lists and work can be (and should be) found on the agency's website. **The only reason consultants register an agency is for the money.**

Beyond these registration fees, most consultants now work with an agency's new business groups to "help" them fine tune their new business machine. This is served up by consultants to agencies as a post evaluation, audit or even a new business university course. It's none of those things. It is simply a conflict of interest and extortion in making agencies feel that they must participate in these endeavors if they are to be viewed in the most positive light by the review consultants.

The bottom line is that **this sh-- should stop and the 4As should call out those review consultants who are behaving in this unethical manner** and not allow review consultants to work for agencies. Period. Full Stop. It is not allowed in most other industries, certainly not in government and in certain client organizations. And procurement groups should not endorse this preferential treatment. Please don't believe what some consultants love to say about these practices, "it helps us get to know the agencies better." It's all about the money.

Secondly, review consultants need to provide clients with their full and undivided attention and not waste the client's and agency's time. All review consultants have a process and need a healthy list of agencies to participate in any given review. All consultants go through a screening process and questionnaire with the client in advance to understand what a client is looking for in a new agency.

But something happens after that. It all begins to fall apart and the list of potential agencies looks more like the consultant is casting for a Broadway play than finding the right match for the client.

Very few times is a clear-cut brief written for the competing agencies. This brief should clearly identify who, what, when and why the review is taking place. Who the players are and why the agencies were selected to participate – transparency to all parties is key. But, most importantly, the brief should spell out why an agency is being hired in the first place and it needs to be specific to the business imperatives the brand or company is seeking to address. "To do great creative work" is not enough of a reason to call for a review. It is the consultant's job to help define, clarify and put parameters in place so not to waste the client's or potential agency's time and money.

On the topic of wasting time, **all those endless questionnaires seeking important agency information (like billings for the last 20 years), need to be thrown out.** Focus on what is

necessary for the specific selection process. Stop with the cookie cutter approach every consultant takes in a review and don't think that creative reels and case histories (which the agencies lie about anyway) are any indication of what you, the client, can expect in selecting your winning agency. Consultants need to nip it in the bud and quit facilitating the myth that these questionnaires and case histories give the client reassurance that the agency they are picking will replicate the same work.

That all being said, the most puzzling part of the consultancy business I saw over the last 25 years was that many times the consultant or lead consultant was not in the room when the final presentations were made. The excuse that was always given was that this was the client's decision **so they did not want the agency to have to present to two different clients. What? The most valuable contribution an experienced review consultant can make is the advice he or she gives the client in the selection process.** This is where experience comes into play — if the review consultant has the experience of working with world class clients on global or national campaigns. And you've got to be in the room to advise because agencies and new business presentations can be intoxicating. Someone who has been through the process hundreds of times knows how agencies think and perform at the finish line. This is not a time to be absent or send in the second string.

Finally, compensation. I bet half of the consultants out there don't have a point of view on how their clients should compensate their agencies. Some don't even take up the issue at all, but leave it to the procurement department or client to sort out. They see their primary role as matchmaker. **This is because most consultants lack agency financial experience because most consultants only rose to New Business Director or Management Supervisor for the local Subaru account.** They were never involved in agency financials and don't understand agency operations and cost structures well enough to truly advise their clients. They "shooski it" or avoid it completely. Selecting an agency without the compensation portion figured out and determined up front is only completing half of the assignment.

The bottom line is clients deserve better. Better consultants. Not more. A consultancy that is based on fairness, high ethical standards, exclusively focused on the client's business (not the agency's) and with the national and global experience that justifies their involvement and reason for being hired in the first place.

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