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MEDIA PLANNING & BUYING

## The end of the agency RFP era

By [Bob Wheatley](#)

**Today, you have to pick an agency based on chemistry and human interaction. Here are some tips for revising the current outdated proposal process.**

Perhaps one of the most significant relationship stories in business was devised at the dawn of the new marketing and media communications era in the 1950s. It is the agency/client relationship. For the most part in consumer product categories, one does not exist without the other. Yet the path by which agency and clients come together remains mired in a process that misses some important beats in the inevitable dynamic that will take place once both unite. Agency and client marriages are forged on a performance stage; literally, a form of business theater focused on diagnosis, followed by remedy -- a sort of "can-you-solve-this" challenge game.

Yet in the end, client-side decision makers will confess more often than not that the real reason an agency was chosen had more to do with chemistry and trust than the substance of the creative "pitch." What's going on here is acknowledgement that this truly is a marriage and you want to be doing business with people you like and believe in. Ironically, the common method of finding and picking a PR firm resembles speed dating more than the deep dive needed to determine if the fit will still be strong six months into the new relationship.

### Old world RFP

Requests for proposals (RFPs) are at once clinical, methodical, and perhaps also comfortable because of the timeworn path they've been on. Here's the game as routinely played: Client invites a field of 10 to 15 firms to complete a questionnaire. In some cases this is followed by a capabilities presentation. The

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winnowing continues when a short list receives a document outlining a business problem that needs solving. A verbal download might be included to convey the essence of the brand's position. The show begins in earnest a month or so later when the combatants arrive to unveil their understanding and ideas in 120 minutes of show time.

Somewhere in here the client gets a sense of what's laid out in front of them. Did the agencies discern their needs properly, listen intently, and solve the problem correctly? Maybe, but in this game of inches, it will inevitably come down to gut feelings and instincts about people. It goes without saying the process is also time consuming, lengthy, and perhaps flawed in some serious ways. All agencies have capabilities. The big firms array their office networks and subsidiaries. The smaller ones tout their talent and senior management involvement.

The digital age has opened an entirely new door into the soul of an agency. The depth of intellectual property and thinking found on many agency websites is truly remarkable. In the relative comfort of an office, client-side decision makers can obtain a 360-degree picture of what an agency thinks it is on the planet to accomplish. More often than not, articles written by senior members are also posted for review, offering a glimpse into the agency's thinking, methodologies, and point of view. If a blog exists, you can subscribe to this ongoing display of intellectual property and further understand what's going on in the minds of those who run the place.

### **RFMs (requests for meetings): A better path**

So with all of this information available, is it time to rethink the process upon which we base agency selection decisions? Can we bypass a lot of the procedure that simply regurgitates what's already online? Is the "here's-my-problem-solve-it" method really a good way to assess the agency's collective brains? Business problems are usually not solved by outsiders with limited exposure and experience to a company's plans, processes, issues, priorities, and goals.

Meet with the agencies you're interested in. Have a conversation about your business, brand, or category. I know of no self-respecting agency that won't come to the table prepared with a thought or two about your challenges. You've

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seen their website and looked at the case studies. What questions do you have? Are you worried about some potential weaknesses or gaps in areas you think will be important down the line? Bring it up. Get it on the table. Talk to each other.

Don't stop there. Have others in your organization chat with them too. See how those conversations transpire and find out how other levels of your tea feel about the personalities and potential fit. Have dinner with each other. Some social time outside of the office will help reveal the people behind the resumes and get everyone talking with each other on a deeper level. Do you share interests and common ideas? Do you see the big- and little-picture issues through the same lens? Will you get along well?

The formality of a 120-minute dog and pony show does not facilitate this interaction. It is a beauty pageant, and for all the fun of witnessing five or six attempts to diagnose and cure your problems, isn't human interaction at the core of your decision? It will be obvious quickly if the right chemistry exists and if there is a sense of collegial behavior and thinking that will serve both parties well in the future.

This may feel less scientific in some ways, but you can truly question the science of RFPs and whether or not the information they give you is what you need to make a good marriage. In the end, it is the face-to-face conversations and interactions in a series of meetings, both on and off campus, that will help determine the best combination with less angst and uncertainty for everyone involved.