

Boat & Motor

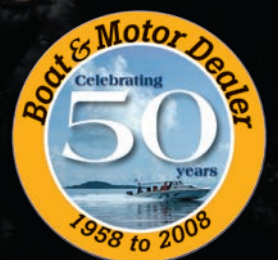
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Working With Your AD AGENCY

BY BRAD KOVACH

Editor's Note: This article is the second of a two-part series.

It's a situation that's familiar to many of us who work at advertising agencies: You make it through the initial selection process, the personal interviews, the brainstorming sessions, the creative presentations, and the contract negotiations. Finally, you sign your name on the dotted line and shake hands with your new client.

Then, when it's time to get down to work and start producing results—rev up the marketing machine, full steam ahead—your client shoots down every idea that your team comes up with, even the ones he was excited about during the preliminary stages of the relationship. What gives?

"We understand that we're not the only creative people on the planet, but we do know what we're doing," said Steve Pizzolato, president of The AVALA Marketing Group. "A client needs to trust its agency. Not letting us do our job is like buying a boat and then not trusting the expert care and maintenance tips of your dealer."

Pizzolato, who has represented companies inside and outside the marine industry for more than a decade, has had his fair share of good—and not so good—working relationships. But, of course, the blame doesn't always lie with the client. We've all heard stories about ad agencies that repeatedly missed deadlines and then, when its work was finally done, failed to deliver what its clients really wanted.

"The client/agency dynamic can be

very rewarding, or it can be quite frustrating, depending on the people and circumstances," Pizzolato said. "As with any relationship, it all depends on the communication of expectations and the execution of those expectations. Both sides need to be open, trusting, and respectful for the relationship to be successful."

Effectively working with your ad agency requires communication and understanding of each other's expectations. This will produce the most successful advertising for your dealership.

Quite simply, in order to work effectively with your ad agency team, you need to know up front what you should expect from them, and what they will expect from you. By monitoring the follow-through of these expectations, you'll be able to judge whether or not you have a healthy working relationship

and ultimately, whether or not you're getting a decent return on your investment.

Your expectations

But before we cut to the bottom line, let's start with what you should expect from your ad agency.

Assuming you picked an agency with prior marine industry experience, you should expect a good knowledge base when it comes to market, challenges, and opportunities. You don't want to spend a lot of time micromanaging your agency team, and with these guys and gals, you shouldn't have to.

If you chose an agency that's new to boats and motors, you should expect the team to have a strong desire to learn, backed by a lot of fresh ideas. The latter is probably why you went outside the industry in the first place. Just make sure your agency team is stocked with quick studies or you face falling behind your competition.

Whether your agency is a big-name firm or a smaller specialist ad shop, you should expect a custom strategy. This isn't the time for your team to dust off the old ideas and add a few "targeted nuances." Demand creative messages that speak to your specific wants and needs.

Your agency should be willing to listen to your thoughts and ideas. It should be able to take your direction without a lot of hand-holding. Beware of prima donna agencies that don't appreciate your opinions.

You should expect that your agency will have your jobs delivered on time and finished—

not almost finished—unless indicated beforehand that the work is only in the "mockup" or "rough draft" stage. All work should be professional looking and accurate to the best of your agency's abilities.

The agency's expectations

Now for the other side of the coin: Apart from timely payment, there are certain

things that your ad agency will expect from you. Listen up, because you may be unintentionally adding stress to the relationship by doing stuff that your advertising teammates don't like.

First and foremost, your agency will expect you to have a clear idea about what you want to accomplish with your marketing/advertising plan. Its ability to help you meet your goals depends upon your ability to communicate clearly. (Knowing what you don't want isn't a good strategy, as it will force your agency to guess what you do want.)

Your agency will expect you to keep an open mind. Don't destroy the relationship by thinking that you have all the right answers. Your agency specializes in what it does. Also, you may make assumptions about your brand that aren't as obvious to someone outside the company. Remember that your agency is an objective voice.

However, your agency still wants to hear what you have to say. No one knows your company better than you, and feedback is important. Because advertising is a deadline-oriented business, your agency team will appreciate hearing from you promptly with answers to questions, changes, and/or approval.

Your agency will appreciate a reasonable amount of time to get a project done. Last-minute assignments don't always produce the best work and can sometimes lead to extra expenses, which you end up paying for.

The results of an ad campaign are not going to be immediate. Creating a presence in the marketplace takes ongoing pressure; it's an investment in your future. Your agency will expect that you give it time to affect change. Before you cut your advertising budget in a soft market, be sure your ads had something to do with your sales going down.

Final steps

So, the next logical question is: How do you achieve all these things? The easiest answer is to have your ad agency work with you, not for you. The first thing you should do after hiring an agency is set up a meeting to finalize creative and media strategies. Come up with an integrated process that incorporates project timelines as well as regular updates and reports. These items will help with com-

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munication and will keep everyone on the same page.

In any business, the flow of information is critical. You should dedicate a special representative to work with the agency and establish lines of approval and authority. Having a "final" decision maker is critical since advertising speaks to different people in different ways. Use your initial meeting to review deadlines for materials and operating procedures, as well as billing and payment procedures. You don't want these things coming back to bite you later on.

Most importantly, you should use the initial meeting to set up subjective and objective criteria that help you gauge the performance of your agency and judge your return on investment. Sales, of course, are the best measure of an ad campaign's effectiveness. Strong messages create positive action, which result in increased purchases. But these purchases can take time to develop and can also be hard to link directly to advertising. You should survey your customer base to determine its satisfaction, which is a good indication of positive word-of-mouth and future sales.

Apart from sales, you need to consider the quality of work and the cost and time savings, as well as the health of the relationship. Did your cost of marketing rise or fall over the course of the review period? Did the addition of your agency allow you and your workers to concentrate on selling boats and motors? Is your agency passionate about its work? Are the ideas fresh and executable? Are you and your agency a good fit?

Remember that advertising is not an exact science. You should not overlook your own satisfaction with your agency. If you are happy with it, if there's good chemistry, and if it's putting out what

you consider to be honest and high-quality work, then chances are you will nail down the right brand strategy and marketing/advertising plan over time.

Inevitably, mistakes will be made on both sides of the conference room table. But if both sides remain committed, these mistakes can be easily remedied. In the end, you'll have a productive, healthy working relationship with your agency. And isn't that why you hired your advertising agency in the first place? ↕

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DID YOU KNOW ?

MarineMax reports first quarter net loss

Clearwater, Fla.—MarineMax Inc., the nation's largest recreational boat retailer, announced a \$6.4 million net loss for the first quarter of fiscal year 2008, compared with a net loss of \$3.8 million for the same period last year. Revenue for the quarter was \$215.3 million, compared with \$234 million in 2006.

The company, which operates 90 retail locations throughout the United States, reported declining same-store sales of about 9 percent or \$20 million, compared with a 14 percent increase last year.

William McGill, Jr., chairman, president, and chief executive officer, said that economic pressures, including the soft real estate and credit markets, contributed to the weakening marine retail conditions. He also cited a decline in consumer confidence and retail industry sales as culprits.