

GAINING A TOEHOLD



Levering teasers and project work into retained relationships

Project-based approaches are increasingly popular strategies to gain inroads with clients. "Clients, such as Unilever, favour... offering a paid-for project and then extending the relationship to a retainer if suitably impressed with the output. This also cuts out the expense of pitching." (Campaign 15/05/09). We have observed this in our client work too.

But be warned. When a project brief comes your way, it's likely the easiest, most lucrative work will have been snaffled up by incumbents – there may be unsavoury reasons why this brief is smouldering in your new client's in-tray. So be prepared for the task to be: -

- Small (*client thinking: "If the new agency mess this one up no one will notice"*)
- Unusual (*"The big agency looked flummoxed by this – so let's see how the new guys cope"*)
- Difficult (*"No one else can bring this project in on budget or in time, so I've nothing to lose by briefing it out"*)
- Sample / Test (*"Actually, I'm 95% certain this job is allocated. But I need to see how the new guys react, and how much they charge comparatively. Heck, I might even use them!"*)

Then how do you persuade your stressed in-house creative team to respond quickly and effectively to this tricky brief with an unfamiliar client? It's vital to manage relationships internally: -

- Take the brief as thoroughly as possible. Get your designers, creatives and account managers all the information they'll need to respond without to and fro-ing with further requests
- Explain the project is a pitch. Incentivise - let the team know it's a test, but if you can demonstrate dedication and creativity to the new client now, other work will be forthcoming. That's good for everyone's job prospects. Engage senior management and owners. Tell them what you are doing, and why. Explain that responding to one-off or sample briefs may create distractions from established clients so ask for extra resources to be allocated. Accept the burden of polishing the work yourself. Your busy creative team may not have

time to lavish the care and love they reserve for established clients. So be prepared to tidy up rough copy or work up a presentation.

- Be selective - don't chase rainbows. Judge when to insist on engaging your team – when profitable business is likely to follow

But be cautious with your new project client: -

- As any agony aunt will advise - don't stop bringing flowers just because you're discussing marriage. Continue to provide value, insight and creative thought - you're still on trial
- Don't over-promise - your first project for a big client is the long-awaited chance to shine! But nothing will sour a relationship faster and more permanently, than an unfulfilled promise
- Don't pester the client with requests - try to be self-reliant. Don't get over-familiar, bombarding the client with requests for information, favours, and contacts. Just because you've got a first date, it doesn't mean you can start moving in
- Don't set price precedents that undermine later profitability

It's sometimes tempting to offer a first project as a loss leader but it will be very difficult to claw back margins later. Your strategy may offer up-sell or cross-sell to profitable business, but be careful - don't get yourself in a position where if you do get on the roster, you're working at a loss. Having warned on loss leaders, it is getting more common for agencies to offer teaser freebies. E.g., as SEO prices soar, there are now a lot of paid search audits to benchmark against incumbents. Across the board, more are offering health-checks, but these can expose failings in middle management, which can backfire unless you're in at a very senior level.

Lastly, to gain a toehold, don't lose your footing. Many feel they should offer the latest flavours of the month or face extinction. Witness the rush of agencies clambering on the social media bandwagon. Not everyone can or should be a social media expert. Be imaginative in order to get an in, but don't just join the noise – you may lose what makes you special and different.