Why agencies should give clients access to their ad accounts

By Cheryl Ingram

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There's a reason why agencies don't want to give clients access to their ad accounts - and it's got nothing to do with compromising data and everything to do with money.

Agencies have a responsibility to be transparent with their clients. Source: 123rf.

It's time to talk about media buying transparency and why many agencies prefer to keep their clients as far away from their ad accounts as possible. This isn't a new issue – this has been around as long as digital media buying has been in existence. And where it remains the case is where clients have failed to educate themselves on media buying best practice and data ownership.

> *Almost 10 years' ago, I was asked to write a Pan Africa media plan for a Telco client whose agency was part of a globally owned group. I did, and my rates were questioned. I was told they were too low and that I needed to adjust my costs and build in a significant agency commission. I walked away from the job.*

Fast forward to 2023, and you would have hoped that things had changed. Surprisingly, they have not. It seems unbelievable that even today, agencies insist that clients can't be given access to Facebook ad accounts as it compromises other client data. This is categorically untrue: access is set at an individual account level and every client should be set up with their own business manager.

In fact, they should own the business manager and partner with their agency for agency access. And even if the ad account sits inside the agency business manager (which it really should not), it's very easy to assign access to a client that allows them to see their ad account info and no-one else's. When clients are told this can't be done, you can bet there is another reason why the agency doesn't want the client in the account – and almost all of the time this is related to the long known, but little talked about, practice of media buying arbitrage.

Getting to grip with KPIs

So why do agencies like to keep their clients out of the ad account? What's there to hide? In short: money. At TDMC, we've taken on many clients over the years who've discovered that what they thought their agency was spending on paid media, and what was actually being spent, was worlds apart.

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So where does the trickery start? Most commonly, it's with KPI setting. While KPIs are an essential measure of success for any digital campaign, all too often they are being set so far off course that it is almost hard to believe they are true. And for naive clients who do not understand how to set KPIs, they are none the wiser. So, what makes a valuable KPI? Knowing what business success looks like for you as the client is the best place to start.

Clients can do this by reviewing past data, understanding their numbers, and knowing what was previously achieved as well as what they would like their teams to achieve now. Of course, this is not so easy without access to the actual data but anyone tale ownership for being up to date on industry benchmarks and for sense checking with your peers and contacts in the industry. KPIs should never be the same year-on-year and they should never be wildly off industry benchmarks. Equally, if your team is smashing the KPIs they have set, you can bet they sandbagged them in the first place!

Manipulating for gain

Here's an uncomfortable truth about how agencies can manipulate client budgets if they are left to set the buying cost KPIs. The story unfolds something like this: Your agency sets the KPI which you accept. Your agency then delivers a buying efficiency that results in an over-delivery on your media volume, and you are ecstatic. You think your agency is brilliant. But beware. What may be happening is that the KPI was inflated 10 times over the actual buying cost. So, while you think your agency is over delivering, in real terms, you are receiving way less inventory than you should, based on your budgets and spend. And the end result is that your agency is slicing a whole lot of fat off your budget and banking it for their Christmas Party.

Not following?

Let's use a YouTube campaign as an example:

You are a Mass Market Brand. You allocate R100,000 to your next YouTube campaign and your agency sets a TrueView KPI of 60c. Based on the KPI they set, they advise you that you can expect to receive 166,666 views on your campaign. At the end of the campaign your agency reports back that they improved the buying efficiency and managed to buy the views at 40c per TrueView.

As a result, you received 250,000 views on your campaign giving you an over-delivery of 83,334 views and you are naturally elated. But the reality is that the actual buying rate is closer to 10c per TrueView, and you should have received 1,000,000 views. What has really happened is that your agency spent R25,000 buying you 250,000 views, and while you are happy because it's a perceived over-delivery, your agency just pocketed R75,000 in unspent budget.

Taking back control

While it is a shocking truth, it is also nothing new. It's one of those things that's laughed about in the corridors of many agencies. And for clients who think their procurement teams are winning the rates fight, it's worth checking just who owns your ad accounts and how much transparency exists over what's actually being spent. Besides the issue of buying transparency, as we move into a world where data underpins everything, there is also that question around who should own the data, and this is where we at TDMC stand firm: the data belongs to the client.

Agencies that act with integrity and who have nothing to hide will undoubtedly support this point of view and will already be working this way. But for clients who remain in the dark, whose agencies refuse to buy through client-owned accounts – it's time to take stock of who you are choosing to partner with and what exactly they are doing with your budgets.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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