

Deep care is the holy grail of client management

By [Lynn Madeley](#), issued by [Havas Johannesburg](#)

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As the Cannes festival closed last month, a number of people summed up hot topics from the now five-day-long event. From all the summaries, 'trust' came up as the most consistent. This discussion is not new but it has a different meaning this time around at Cannes. There's a renewed sense in understanding the link between creativity and business, and therefore, the importance of a platform like Cannes to spotlight that. What's most interesting for me is how that conversation filters down and impacts day-to-day functions within an agency set-up.



Trust of course is central to a solid client relationship. But to build trust, day-to-day client management has to be sincere. To demonstrate this, I'd like to zero in on one aspect of agency process, which is the briefing stage. A good brief is a key part of achieving great creative output and therefore effecting a positive impact on client businesses. But if we take a step back, I think how a briefing process is approached is where that difference starts getting made. And the secret to this recipe is, to borrow from the Kim Scott book, *Radical Candour*, is *Deep Care*.

If you think about it, and go back to your family or best friend, if you really care about them, you will always give them honest feedback. This is not a gateway to be rude or to be inappropriate, but rather is about being sincerely honest with the intention to support and grow. It's about building trust. You don't tell them what you think they want to hear, you tell them what you know they need to be hearing in order to help them grow. And when tough love is required, you ensure that they get it, and it comes from a place of nurturing.

This is the thing that I think is essential when dealing with clients, and as agencies, we often get this wrong. If we look at the continuum of a client relationship, we go from being subservient and unnecessarily compliant on one end, to being selfish and completely self-absorbed on the other. On one end it is complete people pleasing without adding much value to the relationship and on the other end, it is doing only what the agency wants to do generally for awards and reputation. Both polar opposites are not great relationship management, but in the middle of this continuum is a sweet spot where the best of client pleasing, and the best of creative dominance meet. At this sweet spot, you see everything through your client's eyes and that ability to do so, supported by experience and expertise in your field, is the holy grail. And trust is at the heart of it.

When you're at this sweet spot, of deep care, receiving a brief from a client becomes very different. Often we will take briefs from a client with objectives focused on the expected creative's messaging hierarchy. And these briefs, on the surface, may well be solid and sensible and as agencies, we go off and work on them. We create great work, that client likes and approves, and the work goes to market, does well, the sales are good but not great, and we move on.

If you take a few steps back and consider what you really need to do for this client, then the questions that you ask at the briefing session change. Your reference changes. One of the questions that never gets asked is, "What is the business problem that has led to this brief?" That question leads to discussion on the business problem that needs to be addressed or solved. As soon as you start that discussion and as long as you get the right answers, the work you do is so likely to change. Your departure point moves from developing creative solutions that tell people that this soap powder washes whiter than others, to developing solutions that respond to a client's need to shift sales by 10% over three months. It's a different brief. You answer the core of the business problem, and not the symptom of the business problem.

This conversation is sincere. It's about deeply caring for the client and their business. It's about putting the client first. Success is guaranteed.

This also means that you will have candid conversations that may be uncomfortable. But because trust is at the heart of the relationship, you honestly consult and disagree where necessary, coming from a non-emotional place of deep care for the company or brand. You will likely make that relationship better. Challenging people in a positive way means you have their back. It's all about what is absolutely right for the business because you sincerely care, and that level of deep care is sparked and nurtured by trust between yourself and client. It's one of the reasons why agency-client relationships can last for decades, and is always a win-win, for everyone.

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