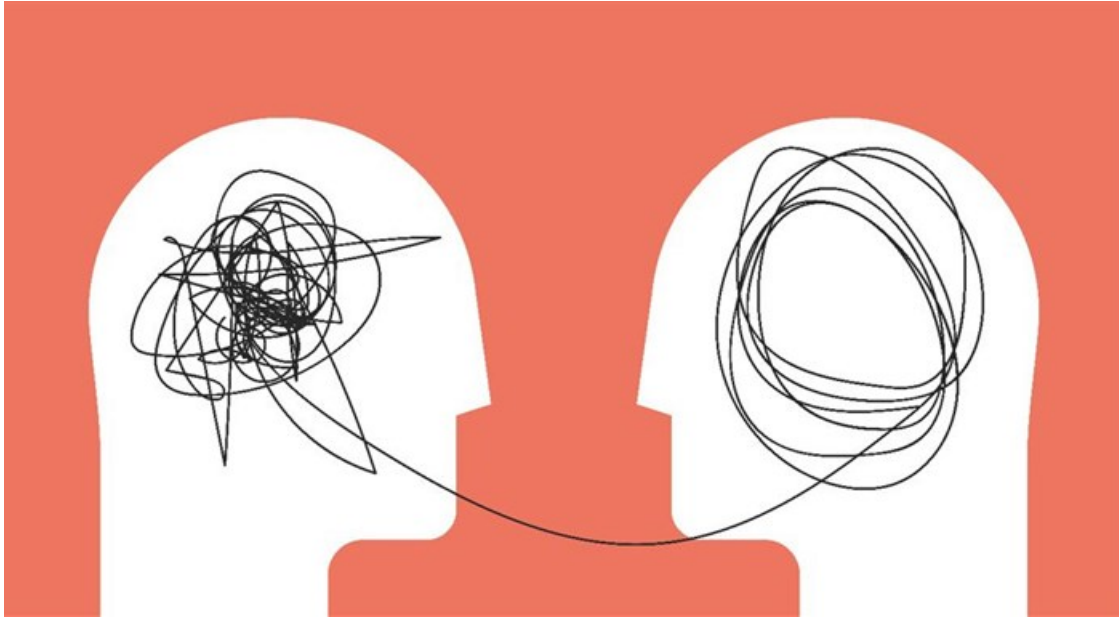


Relationship status: It's complicated

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*The agency-client model is continually evolving, but the past 18 months have shifted the dial, says **Emma Odendaal**, digital director for [John Brown Media](#).*



Every brand has questioned its marketing strategy. In the face of the Covid crisis, CMOs walked a tightrope of building consumer trust versus short-term returns. To lesser or greater degrees, they've adjusted and redistributed their marketing spend, dug deep into consumer loyalty and – for some of the smarter brands – rallied around their consumers and built long-term equity.

In the US and Europe, despite the emergence of new Covid strains and increasing number of cases, the ad industry is showing signs of recovery, with spend set to grow by close to 13% this year*. The picture in South Africa is not as cheerful, compounded by loadshedding, riots and other factors. But data from Nielsen and the IAB shows, that while TV spend flatlined, digital ad spend grew by 21% this year, indicating a significant shift as advertisers align their strategies to consumer behaviours.

As brand in-house teams navigate the unrelenting crisis, their expectations of agencies have changed. "Clients have expected a great deal of agility from partners, which is much harder to achieve than most realise," comments Clare Trafankowska, managing director of Vizeum and iProspect South Africa. "For the better part, most industries are stabilising although the automotive and alcoholic beverages sectors remain challenged, which is where much of the agility is required on an ongoing basis."

Agencies roles have shifted from an executor of strategies to consultative partnerships and Big Idea Generators. The outside perspective that agencies provide to help brands find their story – and turn it into a digital experience – is more important than ever before. "We have to rely on our agency partners to bring innovation and creativity to our marketing strategy," says Vera Nagtegaal, head of marketing and culture at Hippo.co.za. "No-one has all the answers. The pandemic has really highlighted the need for the agency-client relationship to be built on trust to find the best creative and performance solutions possible."

Indeed, clients expect not only blue-sky thinking, but also a deep understanding of the business challenges and the pressure they are under to build their brand and perform. "Agencies need to be incredibly responsive, 24/7. We need to be

better at pre-empt opportunities. Tactical content is absolutely key for us, and we can always be better at that,” says Vera. Agencies need to be in touch where it happens, when it happens.

A Big Idea is one thing, but seeing it come to life across channels, integrating creativity with execution, is another. To be effective, ideas need to engage tech, media and PR in an interconnected ecosystem of cohesive channels, producing outstanding results that span cross-functional teams. This sometimes involves taking a chance. “We have always taken risks. When looking at our pre-Covid strategies versus how we approach marketing today, we are continuing to push the boundaries. Our current Regret Monster campaign is an excellent example of that. If you do the same thing as before, play it too safe, you continue to produce the same result.”

Clare agrees: “While performance and revenue are critical, Covid has allowed us to be more experimental in our approach as the playing field didn’t just change, it was eliminated and re-created. What seemed risky in November 2019 may have been the only way for a brand to remain relevant in December 2021.”

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