



Achieving maximum productivity as in-house creative teams may require the strategic use of outside agencies to meet specific needs. It is the job of the in-house creative leader to manage these relationships. Learning from one another's experiences with outside agencies can offer practical tips to avoid potential pitfalls and strive for optimal outcomes.

In-house creative leaders came together for a candid discussion about The In House/ Outside Agency Relationship on July 10, 2013. Facilitated by Kevin Kearns, Director of Marketing for InSource as well as Creative Director at Duke University Development and Adjunct Professor at The University of North Carolina, this InSource Roundtable was hosted at Electricities of Raleigh, North Carolina.

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**Creative Outlets/Hobbies Outside of Work Shared by Our Roundtable Participants:**

"I love to cook." • "I enjoy playing music and golf; I used to play bass guitar in a band." • "I've recently taken up painting as a creative outlet." • "I read a lot, and I go hiking a lot and enjoy the outdoors." • "I write a blog for working moms and enjoy baking, including decorating cookies with children." • "I like to shop. I travel with my husband to interesting places to add to his growing collection of board games." • "In addition to InSource, I've joined the American Advertising Federation, which I'm pleased to report has been successful in developing internships in advertising for talented high school students and awarding scholarships. I also enjoy gardening." • "I like to cook and read, as well as enjoy time with my family." • "I make jewelry, I sing in a jazz band, and I love to hike and read, as well as crafting and painting." • "I enjoy cooking and Twitter." • "I enjoy making pies and gardening."

## InSource provides the following takeaway messages from this roundtable.

### Lessons Learned in Working With Outside Agencies

- Some in-house creative leaders prefer working with a well-known, top-of-the-line, outside agency for new ideas and strategic thinking. Some in-house creative leaders prefer to partner with small outside agencies (including one-person shops) when the need is to work with a phenomenal photographer or videographer. The key is to view outside agencies as extensions of the in-house creative team. It works well to include these individuals in in-house creative team planning meetings.
- If a company has a bad experience with an outside agency, it may take a long time (eg, 10 years) before high-level company leaders will consider working with an outside agency again. It's critical to make a solid case for using an outside agency. The in-house creative team may need to look to an outside agency when people with the right mix of skills and experience are required to meet evolving needs, as opposed to the time lag in training in-house people to acquire new skills that need to mature over time.
- Sometimes working with an outside agency leads to having to rework what the outside agency proposed. Outside agencies need to listen carefully to the client first. Sometimes an outside agency provides solutions that work for the outside agency but has downsides for the in-house creative team who needs to apply these ideas and approaches throughout the organization.
- In-house creative teams (regardless of size) always have more work than resources allow. Outsourcing some of the work is often a better use of resources. However, it's important to have a written agreement that clearly states expectations for deliverables from the outside agency (ie, it's unacceptable for a photographer to provide low resolution images but then require additional payment to provide high resolution images).

### Identifying Perceptions That Are Often Misperceptions

- Clients within an organization may regard "outside agencies as more creative than the in-house creative team." However, it may be poorly understood that the in-house creative team needs to both satisfy the client's need and manage the brand in a consistent way. The outside agency may focus only on giving the client whatever the client wants, not necessarily what is consistent with the brand.
- The outside agency's job is to constantly market itself to the client.
- In-house creative teams often have a tendency to be reactive, rather than proactive, about a client's needs over time. Breaking out of this cycle requires a different mindset, including taking advantage of the opportunity of being on the inside to really understand the business perspective of the leadership team and showcase some strategic thinking.
- In-house creative teams can enter the same

awards competitions as outside agencies as one proving ground to dispel the "outside agencies are more creative" perception.

- When many rounds of approvals are required, along with the demand of tight deadlines, the work of an in-house creative team can be impeded.
- It can be a constant challenge for the in-house creative team to keep the application of the brand standards intact.
- Suggestion: Bring all corporate administrative assistants together and deputize them with what constitutes "bad" versus "good" examples of what comply with the brand style.
- "Blame it on the agency" becomes a handy excuse for those who don't like a new logo when it's created by an outside agency.
- For best results, the in-house creative leader should manage the relationship with the outside agency, not be on the sidelines.
- In an outside agency, one can identify "strategy development" as a line item and assign a high cost.
- Chargeback systems can be problematic in some corporate settings. People can be resistant to having a cost assigned to every task; this can sometimes result in strained interactions. When multitasking, it's difficult to track time. But for those clients who are resource sponges, a chargeback system may be helpful to create a sense of value for the work of the in-house creative team. Adopting a "fair market value rate sheet" can be used as a tool to educate others about estimates for various services and deliverables. It's important for others to see that the work of the in-house creative team is not "free."
- Data collection can be a double-edged sword; it's useful to show gaps but the presentation and use of the data need to be managed.

### Creative Management Challenges

- It's important to uphold the brand even when clients want it their way, which conflicts with good design principles. It can become frustrating when an internal client insists on making changes that do not improve the deliverable. Sometimes it's helpful to do an informal survey among other colleagues to assess if the criticism toward a design is valid. Showing respect to the designer who created the work is also important. The in-house creative leader may want to avoid conflict, but handling the conflict is important so both the internal client and designer come to a resolution. It's important to understand the criticism. It may be useful to bring everyone together for a face-to-face discussion to resolve such conflicts; people tend to soften when they are together for in-person conversations.
- Maintain professionalism at all times when people critique the work of the in-house creative team; focus the conversation on the objectives of a project. Be open-minded to consider someone's critique may be valid. Make adjustments when necessary.
- Explain the strategy behind the design decisions. Educate others that it's not a matter of

being arbitrary. Sometimes a few tweaks do not compromise the overall design.

- At some point the in-house creative leader does need to draw the line and stand one's ground. Allow more time and discussion to calm down.
- When the in-house creative leader develops a relationship that allows for the client's input on creativity up front, that can be helpful later on.
- When a client asks for something specific, don't ignore it. Present what was asked for but also offer an alternate solution that might be better for comparison.
- One way to keep generating fresh ideas is to seek input and insights from other designers outside of the company; sharing ideas with others in the InSource community may be helpful.
- Understand that consideration of fresh ideas needs to be balanced with realistic expectations.
- Figure out how to incorporate playful activities that motivate the in-house creative team to think beyond the in-house corporate mold. We are creatives first, not technical engineers.
- It can be a challenge to find freelance talent that adds something new and fresh to the work performance of the in-house creative team.

### Special Thanks to Our Global Partners and Supporters

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