



In theory, sharing one's passion for excellence in design can be the unifying force in seeking common ground when developing collaborative relationships between in-house creative teams and outside agencies. But, in practical terms, creating efficiencies out of chaos is often the first order of business for in-house creative leaders. That's why it's important to set clear expectations from the start and create accountability for specific deliverables.

A group of in-house creative leaders came together for a lively discussion about The InHouse/ Outside Agency Relationship on June 23, 2013. Facilitated by Andy Brenits, President of InSource and Creative Services Leader at APS, this InSource Roundtable was hosted as part of the InHOWse Managers Conference in San Francisco, California.

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

"I like plants and enjoy gardening." • "I love to dance." • "I'm an avid hiker." • "I devote my creative passion to home renovations—at the moment my kitchen." • "I also enjoy gardening, including vegetables." • "I play golf." • "My creative outlet is spending time with my 4-year-old daughter." • "My passions are dance and gardening." • "I enjoy baking." • "Anything inside—it's cold outside where I live." • "I have plans to pursue a master's degree." • "I'm redoing my house." • "I used to play a lot of golf before my daughter was born." • "I do animation for fun." • "I'm a massive gardener." • "I like to write." • "I do volunteer work, speaking to teenagers about an internship program."

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

- It's important to establish processes for both in-house creative teams and outside agencies to follow. Investing time and attention in building trust has a direct impact on the quality of work that is produced.
- Make it clear who owns the brand and "the agency works for us" to stay on track and avoid runaway trains.
- Common perceptions—including "agencies are more creative," "agencies own the brand," and "it's cheaper to use an outside agency"—are not always true. Sometimes people think the agency owns the brand because it does the media buys. Sometimes the in-house team becomes the production team for the agency. But sometimes internal clients work with an agency that becomes their production team. One reason why agencies are perceived as "so strategic" is that they are always looking for more work from the client to increase revenues for the agency.
- The adoption of new ideas and approaches generated by outside agencies runs much smoother if the in-house creative team is part of the selection, development, and/or review process.
- Working with an outside agency can be perceived as a threat to the in-house creative team when an agency tries to take away the "juicy," high-profile work. The agency does this by circumventing the in-house creative leader to woo internal clients directly.
- Make it clear who is managing the agency relationship. Even when a hybrid approach is used in which the client and in-house creative team are involved, sometimes the in-house creative team may be asked to take a look at the agency's creative work too late to allow for their input.
- One approach when something goes wrong with the deliverable from an outside agency: Tell the internal client specifically what's wrong and "how we can work with the agency to fix it." Take back the creative control, with the agency doing the production work. Say this: "Here's where it makes sense for us to do" versus "here's where it makes sense for the agency to do." Whenever possible, take control of the relationship with the agency.
- Develop relationships with internal clients first so no opportunity exists for the agency to do end runs (that is, an existing relationship can prevent maneuvers from an agency to bypass the in-house creative leader if that person is perceived as an

obstacle to gaining a particular piece of business for the agency). All internal clients need to know what your in-house creative team does. Consider this approach: "Let's review your need with our internal resources first" and then determine the best resource to do the work to meet a specific need.

- Suggestion: Take an inventory of how many outside agencies are used by your company. Make a list of who they are and why they are used. Some internal clients hire their own outside agency for an internal project. When a company has a decentralized structure, one can try to make an argument for centralization. However, that probably won't happen in the short term. Better yet, take the initiative to gather this information, present it to others, and then determine, "Now what? How do we fix this?"
- Take the initiative to build relationships with outside agencies used by internal clients. Make sure the agency knows what the in-house creative team does. Use this approach: "We're both serving the same client. How can we help?" and "If we know more about you and your work, we may be able to send more business your way."
- Suggestion: When developing or reworking a brand style guide, ask your outside agency for input. That helps the agency adopt a mindset for buy-in.
- Suggestion (learned from another HOW Design Conference presentation): Create a video tutorial on the brand. In addition to using this for training in-house staff members, use this when the in-house creative team leader visits the agency to train them on the brand standards. Sit with them and show them how to use the brand style guide; treat them as if you are training one of your staff members.
- Start a conversation with the outside agency: "Here are our strengths and what we can do as the in-house creative team. Tell me your strengths."
- A word of caution: "If you strengthen your weaknesses, you may weaken your strengths." In other words, it's possible to become "too renaissance" in one's approach; it may be better to hire specialists for non-core projects than retrain internal staff.
- Establish a common process for file naming to be used by both the in-house creative team and the outside agency; this taxonomy alone may make a big difference in managing the workflow and for oversight.
- Make a case that "My in-house creative team can be accountable for quality control; let us

manage the relationship with the agency and make sure the company is represented well."

- Some outside agencies are starting to adopt some of the best practices of in-house creative teams in terms of staffing up or down depending on workload.
- In-house creative teams and outside agencies can work as strategic partners over time. Building relationships of mutual trust and respect as well as managing expectations are the keys to win-win outcomes.

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