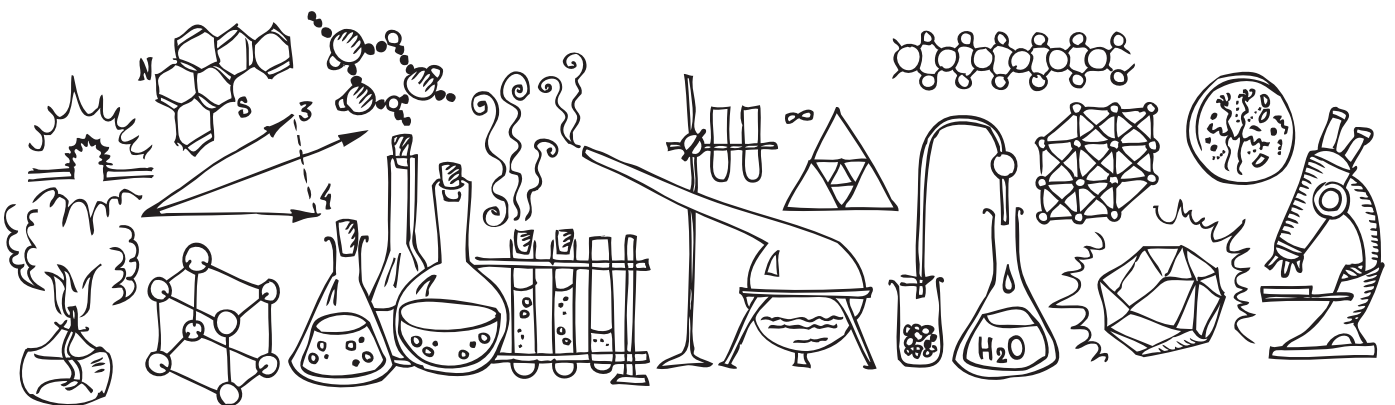


# THE RIGHT CHEM

With specialty players and multiple partnerships becoming the norm, agency-client relations are being tested. **Marc Iskovitz** asks agency and pharma execs about what they need from each other



**AGENCIES** When asked to name the element most essential to improving work with clients, Al Topin, longtime president of Topin & Associates, boils it down to one word—access—and he says this needs to increase on three fronts: “Access to information, to company management, and to participation in the planning process.”

### **We need the whole story**

As for the first of those three, Topin says, “It’s probably more common for clients to limit the information they provide their agencies to what they think the agency needs to know, rather than provide them with the complete picture of marketing, sales, even business issues. As a result, the lack of insight and communication can lead to work that’s not grounded in the overall market and corporate context.”

Getting a full commercial picture from the client usually yields the strongest work, agrees Kimberly Clotman, SVP, group account director, Roska Healthcare Advertising. “The best clients treat the agency as a full partner and they don’t limit us to a narrow focus,” she says. “Our agency can do its best work when we have the room to look at the best interests of the brand and operate from that point.”

Access to key upper management personnel—critical for the agency to become a trusted advisor—is also sadly lacking, laments Topin. “Today the responsibility of managing the agency is often delegated to the brand or commercialization teams, leaving the agency with very little contact with upper management,” he says. “So when upper management questions the strategy or the work, or they change direction, misunderstandings and confusion can be the result.”

### **Tell us where we stand**

How to prevent confusion? Lines of communication need opening, urges Joe Daley, president of inVentiv Health’s GSW Worldwide. “The backbone of any great professional relationship is to have direct and open conversation so your agency knows where it stands. This alleviates the chance of false assumptions or unintended outcomes due to the general lack of communication.”

It starts with a firm understanding of what the “ask” is, adds Becky Chidester, president, WPP’s Wunderman World Health. “The best relationships that I have been a part of have started with clarity around the engagement so that all expectations are appropriately set.”

The benefits of clarity and openness can be exponential for the

# ISTRY

**CLIENTS** With the pharma brand manager’s tenure often measured in months rather than years, it’s not surprising to hear that they prioritize strong agency partnerships. Marketers are not simply looking for agencies who will be there to help them realize short-term gains.

“A great client/agency partnership begins at the earliest stages,” says Bristol-Myers Squibb brand manager Vladimir Castillo, and continues “from strategic concept inception to development to execution... This is the bedrock of our work, and the strategy and tactics flow out of that. There is a healthy give-and-take that happens when the partnership is forged early.”

### **Partner with us on every level**

Castillo, who works on the melanoma drug Yervoy, adds that he looks for an agency team “that will partner with us on every level. Our agency team must be honest, strategic and collaborative.”

Pharma companies need their agencies a lot more these days, says James Sapirstein, a pharma veteran with more than 20 years of experience. Sapirstein recently shifted to the vendor side, joining scientific communications agency Sui Generis Health, but has now returned

to the client side as CEO of Alliqua, a biopharma company focused on transdermal wound care and drug delivery technologies.

His vendor-side tour lasted only about nine months, but it was long enough to give him an inside-out view of pharma companies, and what he observed was a lack of experience among brand managers. “What’s happened in a very short period of time—what’s remarkable to me—is a lot of the folks on the pharma side just don’t have the training that people used to have,” Sapirstein says.

### **Bring us your best leaders**

He explains, “[Brand managers are] not spending three to four years in the basic product-marketing trenches. A lot of them are coming out of school as associate product managers or directors and they’re given these massive budgets and a lot of responsibility. A lot of them have never managed anybody, let alone a product, so partnering with the correct agency now is critical.”

As a result, the smaller agencies in particular, says Sapirstein, need strong strategists in place to help guide pharma companies. That situation—agencies as the trainers, not the trained—is an inverse to what he observed earlier in his career. Time was, the stronger leaders

# THE RIGHT CHEMISTRY

**Mike Boken**  
Senior director,  
Shire



## (AGENCIES continued)

brand, according to Clotman, who says clients must recognize that there is more than one way to get things done. “When clients are open-minded, the agency/client team is empowered to push past the limits of traditional programming and adopt different approaches that best achieve the objectives of the brand.”

**Vladimir Castillo**  
Brand manager,  
Bristol-Myers Squibb



Clotman continues, “The most effective clients are those who find a way to work with the brand/agency team that plays to everyone’s strengths so we can collectively deliver the best outcome.” That requires serious collaboration; the traditional approach—have a meeting then go back to your office and return with deliverables—won’t cut it anymore.

**Becky Chidester**  
President,  
Wunderman  
World Health



As the growth of specialty partners continues—one to handle packaging design, one for branding, one for PR, etc.—the need for collaboration seems to be increasing. But there’s a danger: “Agencies and clients have become hyper-focused on collaboration,” Chidester cautions. “Often this results in too much consensus building and a dulling of ideas in the spirit of integration.”

**Kimberly Clotman**  
SVP, group  
account director,  
Roska Healthcare  
Advertising



However, she believes much of the resulting fragmentation and inefficiency that comes from having multiple partners will be addressed by more holding company consolidations.

**Joe Daley**  
President,  
GSW Worldwide



## (CLIENTS continued)

within the agency business went to the bigger clients, he says. “So many times, at a small biotech, you were left with training some very junior people on the agency side in how to do things.”

Has talent on the agency side kept pace with demand? Agencies have had to develop multifaceted capabilities or die, says Castillo. “Generally speaking, agencies typically have an expertise in a specific area (e.g., digital, strategy, creative, etc.),” he says. “Relationships have evolved because clients need so many things, and agencies needed to develop multiple areas of expertise.”

Indeed, agencies have had to raise their game. Overall strategy and creative skills are critical, Castillo adds. “The need to excel in digital marketing, and staying innovative is also a huge requirement for a successful agency/client relationship. Clients need an agency that can truly wear many hats.”

**James Sapirstein**  
CEO, Alliqua



## Help us go beyond our silos

Communication has evolved, too, but there’s still work to be done. Though the siloed approach doesn’t yield the best thinking, some agencies still meet with the client to go over a creative brief, for instance, then return to their offices and come back in a few weeks with a brief to present.

**Al Topin**  
President,  
Topin & Associates



## Remove the shackles

Once the foundation is in place for a strong partnership, the team must push the creativity envelope. “It’s more important than ever to take calculated risks that allow the combined team (agency and client) to learn from their mistakes and successes,” says GSW’s Daley.

“We need to foster an environment that engenders innovation by allowing risks and new ideas to be tested/implemented,” adds Wunderman’s Chidester. “Marketing managers tend to fund proven tactics and channels because they are on the hook to deliver numbers. There is little incentive to break out and try new things.”

The pharma regulatory environment also crimps the ability to be innovative. “Senior executives need to remove internal barriers to innovation, then charge agencies to bring a steady flow of ideas,” she says.

Topin flags trust levels as another target for improvement. “Some clients treat agencies as vendors, bringing them in too late in the process after much of the strategic work is already done,” he says.

Clients must trust their agencies enough to give them a say on strategy. Those clients that don’t do so “lose out on their agency’s experience and fresh perspective that comes from being outside

“It works better when the agency and the brand team work together from the outset on the creative brief,” says Castillo. “By working through the approach and the plan for execution together, there are no surprises.”

The same can be said for project management. “The work flows far more smoothly and effectively when the lines of communication are open to daily interaction, instead of the weekly reports that are industry standard,” he says.

Transparency is also essential, says Sapirstein, so everyone knows exactly what their roles are. “I’m finding that’s not always evident anymore; there’s a lot of grey.”

“Where the client/agency relationship frequently goes wrong,” says Castillo, “is when an agency wants to establish a relationship so they tiptoe around and give the client the answers they think we want to hear. What we really want is an agency to tell us what they really think is best for the brand, and be willing to make a case for their recommendations.”

## Leave the cookbook behind

Sapirstein, who has led or participated in nearly two dozen product launches for companies like Hoffmann-LaRoche, BMS and Gilead Sciences,

the company,” Topin argues. “Those who do bring their agencies in during strategic planning not only get an agency perspective early in the process, but I’ll guarantee they get better work later on.”

### Go ahead, outsource; we can handle it

GSW’s Daley is seeing a positive evolution in that regard. As client-side marketing teams have downsized, they’re making it a premium to get brand decision makers engaged with the agency, he says. In addition, “we’ve encountered more situations where agencies are assuming roles and responsibilities once held by the brand team.” The evolving array of alternative media options has also prompted clients to lean harder on agencies for communications strategies.

Still, Wunderman’s Chidester would like to see more time spent understanding the whole consumer — “how they behave as critics, conversationalists, champions and creators of content. As you accept the consumer as participant, you have to create opportunities for engagement.”

Daley calls for another manifestation of agency-client commitment: “Set a high standard for your agency and then ask your own [client] team to match that standard. There’s nothing more demotivating than if the client doesn’t put the same skin in the game.”

says companies in launch mode need strong positioning work “to really see what the clinical data dictates and to brand compounds accordingly.”

Where can agencies provide value? “Part of it is coming up with unique ideas,” he says. “Too many agencies have the cookbook approach and don’t come up with really different, strong ideas. And likewise, the pharma companies need to be more open to see how the environment is changing.”

Regulatory requirements differ from country to country across Europe, as do cultural norms and opinions. What do clients working on global brand ideation need from their agencies?

Significant differences in disease state “standard of care” can be seen across countries. “Because of this, physicians in Germany may have different educational needs for a new product introduction compared to physicians in Denmark and/or Sweden,” says Mike Boken, senior director of Vyvance EU launch marketing effectiveness in Germany and the Nordics for Shire Pharmaceuticals.

### Act globally, think locally

What global marketing clients need from agencies is local market insight. “If the agency can bring this knowledge to the global marketing team,” says Boken, “these local market variations can be

Provide consistent, thoughtful direction, urges Topin. “Too many times,” he observes, “input during a project shifts... Take the time to think through agency input. Have the strategies and briefs discussed and get signoff by all decision makers... It will save time, dollars and sometimes careers.” Last but not least, he recommends, give the agency’s development process time to evolve.

### We’ll do our part

For their part, agencies must be willing to ask the tough questions: “How are we doing? How can we do better?” Clotman advises. Sometimes this perspective comes from unlikely places. Pharma procurement teams are evolving to incorporate more players with experience in marketing. They are more involved in the process during the life of the brand, says Clotman.

“[Procurement teams] can offer perspective about best practices not only on your brand, but also best practices they’ve seen with other brands within the company,” she says.

“Honesty and partnership help us to hone the process and keep our focus on the bigger objectives,” concludes Clotman. “It’s like being in couples counseling... you address the issues head on so you can deal with them and minimize the potential for problems.”

considered during the development and marketing research efforts around brand messaging.”

Because global marketing wants to have consistency and uniformity across their campaigns, messaging is tested considering the most conservative country’s regulatory requirements. Most pharma companies do not provide flexibility at the country level to modify the product messaging, except to translate into the local language. While this does make sense for various reasons, lack of flexibility at the country level may reduce overall message impact. “With the help of the advertising agency,” says Boken, “a consistent messaging platform can be developed for implementation, with flexibility based on the local market needs.”

### Don’t oversell yourself

“When you have agencies come in and pitch, they’ll tell you, ‘We have this broad range of experience and have launched 30 products in this area,’ and I just know that’s not true,” says Sapirstein. “In essence, many times people have had this kind of experience many, many years ago and were carrying the notebook for somebody and they put that on their resume. In today’s agency world, there are very few people that have really strong strategic experience in putting these programs in place.” ■



