Agencies and clients—are you looking for direction in the way you partner? A little candid advice from the other side may help you stay on course. **Larry Dobrow** reports

PARTNERING
POINTS

When one asks client- and agency-side people for their broad, hyper-generalized, soaring-bird's-eye-view, biggest-picture-imaginable assessment of client/agency relationships circa late-2013, one hears a lot about trust and transparency. One hears about increased expectations on both sides, fueled by the do-more-with-less mentality that pervades pharma. One hears about the frustrations that come with working within pharma's regulatory framework and about how the industry's reluctance to embrace new technologies and modes of thinking can thwart innovation.

In other words, one hears the same things one's been hearing for the last half-decade. Nobody believes that the business is static, obviously, and nobody suggests that pharma marketers haven't been responsive to the changes in and around it. But for the most part, individuals on both sides of the fence arch a skeptical eyebrow when it is proposed to them that client/agency relationships have shifted as drastically as the healthcare industry itself.

"The types of true partnerships you want and need are still there. You can still find them. That part of it hasn't changed," says Amy West, associate director, patient relationship marketing at Novo Nordisk. Adds Amy Graham, executive vice president, director of client services for specialty marketing at WPP's Ogilvy CommonHealth Worldwide, "In a lot of ways, I don't think that things have changed that much. We're doing more with less, but you see that across the board in every business these days."

At the same time, client- and agency-side people say that they want more—more regular back-and-forth, more candor and more professional intimacy. Each side claims to be open to new ideas and new processes—that is, if the other could overcome its historical inclination to proceed with great caution. And both are far from shy about sharing their headaches and frustrations with one another.

So, to sum up, client/agency relationships are stronger than ever, except in the numerous areas where they're not. Thus for the annual *MM&M* feature on the topic, we thought it'd be instructive to survey the good and the less-than-good—which, as you'll see, exist in roughly equal measure. Take it away, players on both sides of the aisle.

Good: Transparency is more than a pipe dream. Agency people have always openly lusted for greater access to product details, strategic plans/ideas and higher-up execs than clients have afforded them. Similarly, clients have yearned for more insight into agency processes, especially ones pertaining to budgetary matters. The best news is that the competitive pressures felt by every entity in the pharma food chain have prompted an unprecedented degree of transparency. Agencies report the receipt of far more brand and strategy information, and much earlier in the process than usual to boot; clients say that most of the firms with which they work have adopted what amounts to an open-door policy.

Good luck finding anyone who thinks this is a bad thing. "I've been in situations where maybe, from an operational or technical standpoint, I ended up feeling a little taken advantage of [by an agency]," West says. "Now we're getting insight into what we're being charged and why, sometimes even with-

out asking for it." Graham agrees: "We all do our best to manage against timelines and resources, and nobody wants to be blindsided. For my team to best manage those expectations, there has to be a level of honesty and openness.."

Good: That honesty and openness extends well beyond here's-how-we-spent-that-$20-bill-in-the-petty-cash-drawer. In the mind of Bill Drummy, founder and chief executive officer of Heartbeat Ideas and Heartbeat West, no degree of transparency is too extreme. But he cautions other agencies that just because a client professes to want transparency and straight-shootin' in every interaction, doesn't mean the client will respond favorably to it.

"We're having different types of conversations now than we did a few years ago, for many reasons," Drummy notes. "But we've always felt an obligation to tell clients straight up what we think they need to do differently. In the long run, that's the way to get the best result for everybody involved." So, generally speaking, are clients on board with this degree of straightforwardness? "Sometimes they say 'thank you,' sometimes they don't want to hear it and go somewhere else. But I believe this is the only way to operate, for us and for clients."

Less than good: The desire for transparency is still hamstrung by existing processes. Like many of her client-side peers, Eisai marketing director Neema Patel lacks the administrative bandwidth to triple-check every morsel of information she receives from agency partners. That's why it disappoints her when those partners drop the ball.

"Being a part of a company where I don't have a lot of people to do checks and balances, I need my agencies' processes to be spot-on. Even errors in a phone number or something as minimal as that—'You dropped the one? Really?'—I don't know if agencies completely understand how frustrating that is," Patel explains. That's why she now insists that every agency with which she works is a "well-oiled machine in terms of process. That's one thing we can't leave to chance."

West agrees. Asked about working with agencies who experience process hiccups on even a sporadic basis, she responds bluntly, "It's not a factor. If [agencies] are not good with the project-management and process parts of the job, they're gone."

Good: Agencies have become more responsive to client needs. Whether motivated by a sense of professional accountability or by fear that the client relationship will evaporate and take with it a hefty chunk of revenue, agency execs have been more responsive to client needs, demands and whims than ever before, clients report. They make the extra phone call, monitor work email during their kids' birthday parties, you name it. "Maybe it's a generalization to say that, because none of us are going to work with an agency that we don't feel is responsive. But yeah, [the level of responsiveness] is very good," says West.

Maybe it's less that the responsiveness level has changed and more that the world around it has. "Is everybody more willing to listen? Maybe," says Tim Frank, managing

Bill Drummy CEO, Heartbeat Ideas

Timothy Frank Founder, Triple Threat Communications

Amy Graham EVP, director of client services for specialty marketing, Ogilvy CommonHealth Worldwide

partner of Triple Threat Communications. "But I don't think our responsiveness to client demands has changed all that much. I think it's that with technology speeding everything up, we're better, quicker and faster than we were five years ago."

Less than good: Sometimes, too much responsiveness can be as problematic as not enough. Patel isn't about to damn any agency-side individual who goes out of his way to shoulder a heavy load, but she has had as many challenging relationships with over-responders as with under-responders. "There are agencies out there that, regardless of their motive, take on too much," she says. "They don't have the time or energy to do certain things, but they sometimes can't bring themselves to turn something down." Patel's advice to them? "If there's even a small chance you can't deliver, please don't say that you can. That's worse than saying no in the first place."

Good: Client/agency conversations are deeper and occur with greater frequency than they did just a few years ago. Initial talks between a brand team and its new agency used to deal with the basics: What is the program about? How will it be executed? What resources are needed to execute? Now, both client and agency execs report, those conversations delve deeper. "There's a more strategic way of interacting with one another," Drummy says. "We're looking beyond promotion and marketing and getting to a more broad-spectrum view. There's a definite change in the tenor of the relationships and the conversations we're having."

Along those lines, agencies are being ushered into the loop earlier than ever—and they're responding in kind, running even the most rudimentary and preliminary ideas by those clients who are receptive to seeing works in progress. "I'm a big proponent of early concept review. From an agency standpoint, it's great to show a client some of the pieces before you've sunk all that effort into them," Graham says. "It used to be like, 'Don't waste our time until you have something.'"

Less than good: Pockets of resistance remain. For all the talk about better conversations and relationships, the days of the client-as-imperialist-entity aren't completely relegated to history's dustbin. Pharma remains slow to embrace change—and agencies who press reluctant clients to get with the new way of thinking risk annoying or alienating them. "Sometimes it takes longer for reality to hit the broader marketplace" is the way Drummy puts it. Nonetheless, he senses that "a minority, but a growing minority" of clients are willing to rethink the way they go about their business. "In general, clients are looking for [agency] people who have a broader competency and a broader understanding of the issues within healthcare. You're starting to see various agencies aligning a little bit differently. You're starting to see some restructuring in the way teams are managed."

Some losing battles are worth fighting, Graham adds. "If we push

for something new but don't get there, that's not always terrible. At least we've been talking and trying. That strengthens the relationship."

Good: The silos are coming down. It used to be that pharma companies assigned distinct teams to every single possible audience. "There was the HCP team, the managed care team, the lefthanded-wallpaper-hanging team—there was a team for every possible permutation of audience," Drummy cracks. As a result, marketing coherence across larger brands was shaky at best. Happily for everyone who has to navigate this terrain, those self-imposed divisions have largely been eliminated—which is beneficial for just about everyone within the pharma marketing loop. "There are so many different conversations going on: with the patient who has the problem, with the doctor who can solve the problem, with the payer who's paying for the problem to be solved. All the pieces can't work together in harmony if organizations aren't set up in a way that makes it possible," Drummy says.

Less than good: For agencies, there are still myriad touchpoints within a client organization. Graham isn't in the business of telling anyone else how to run his business, but she voices the frustration experienced by many agencies when she notes the ever-increasing number of internal constituencies at pharma companies. "I don't just call on brand team members. I call on procurement, on global people, on so many other people," she says. "It used to be that you'd just call on the most senior person, but there are multiple clients within the client now. It's up and out and across." Still, Graham doesn't bemoan the current state of affairs: "It's not good or bad; it's just a fact of life. In any environment, you do what you have to do."

Less than good: Navigating internal client politics is a challenge for the agencies tasked with doing so. Agency execs have mostly positive things to say about brand-team leaders, especially regarding their newfound semi-willingness to embrace change. But given the range of client audiences, they worry that many of their ideas will be thwarted by individuals without a direct stake in their outcome. "You have to consider the different ways you excite and appeal to different people in [pharma] companies. Changing the incentive and review processes in those companies—that's not an easy thing to do from the agency side," says Janelle Starr, senior vice president, general manager of Heartbeat West.

Graham worries that this challenge could, at some point, serve to thwart innovation. "In the conversations we're having with clients, the brand teams are really enthusiastic about getting that new and innovative idea. But it can be scary—if not for the brand team, then maybe for the legal team or somebody else," she explains. "You'd hate to walk away from a great idea because somebody is afraid to implement it. So that becomes a part of the job: How do we chunk it out in pieces? It's on us to figure out how to sell that idea inward and upward." How do clients respond to this accusation? "Keep coming to us with your ideas! Don't make us have to keep asking you for them!," West says, mock-hysterically.

Neema Patel Marketing director, Eisai
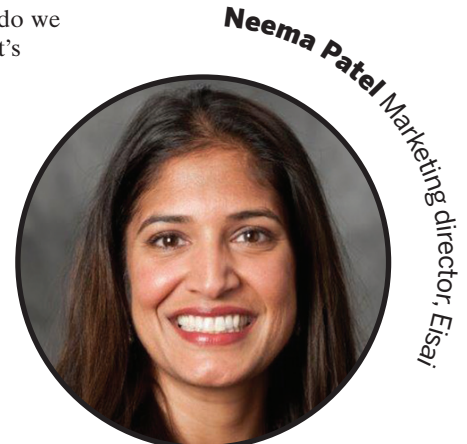
Good: Physical proximity is becoming the rule, not the exception. When agency-world veteran Tim Frank founded Triple Threat Communications in 2004, he hoped to tweak the environment in which he was reared. Having ascended to higher-up positions at two global shops, he bemoaned the lack of what he calls "high contact" with clients. "The further up you go in most agencies, the further away from clients you get," he says. In response to this, one of the defining tenets of Triple Threat's business model is embedding its staffers deeply within the client's base of operations—e.g., at a desk down the hall.

More and more clients are asking for, and getting, that heightened amount of proximity. "When I was at bigger agencies, it was always about being a 'strategic partner.' But really, you can't be a partner unless you're living in what [clients] are living in every day," Frank explains. "There's this line of thought, which we agree with, that marketing is a contact sport. When we're there right beside them, we feel their pain. Sometimes the best work gets done before and after the big meeting." One benefit of such arrangements, according to Frank, is personal: "If you're there, the relationship will become stronger and more bonded. It becomes, 'We want to provide solutions because we like these people. We really, really, really want them to do well.'"

Less than good: The wrong people are still finding their way onto clients' teams. Clients acknowledge that every agency team isn't going to be the pharma-marketing equivalent of the 1998 New York Yankees. They accept that some less experienced staffers will work on their business. They understand that, on occasion, mistakes will be made.

Or they used to. Increasingly, clients tell their agencies that they want the same people who pitched their business to be the ones they see and hear from on a day-to-day basis. And while many agencies have adjusted their staffing policies accordingly, Patel and her client-side peers remain frustrated by the composition of agency teams. "Junior-level people—I can't have them on my brands. They don't have the right level of experience to communicate with me," Patel says bluntly. "Clients are demanding more interface and engagement with senior-level people—certainly that's what I'm asking for, anyway."

West agrees, though she phrases it more delicately: "We need agency teams that can take the ball and run with it. We have a million things going on and can't be worried about somebody who's maybe a little over their head learning as he goes along. Maybe that's why there's sort of a trend to go to the smaller boutique agencies. The turnaround time is much faster and you get more of that senior-level attention."

Good: "Strategic partner" has evolved from well-meaning buzz-phrase to actual thing. For years, agencies cooed about the possibility of being accepted as a true strategic partner by their clients. Alas, they did so with the long-shot hopefulness of a wallflower hoping to be asked out by the prom queen or football captain, and achieved roughly the same level of success. Agencies existed to do clients' bidding; it was a relationship defined by one party's subservience to the other.

Though an eagerness to serve still characterizes many of these relationships, agencies and clients exist on more equal footing than before. The best agencies, client-side people say, become, in essence, co-workers. "The number one thing I look for in an agency is that ability to be a real strategic partner," Patel says. "I look specifically for people who can solve problems and not just think about churning out tactics." Agencies that have advanced a client relationship to the level of strategic partner, she adds, do superior work to those that haven't: "They have skin in the game. They're more actively involved."

Less than good: The "v-word" still gets tossed around more than some parties would like. Clients, if you want to make your agency partners feel underappreciated and marginalized, there's a simple way to do so: refer to them as a "vendor." Yes, by the textbook definition of the word, all agencies are vendors. But labeling them as such degrades them. "It's just a word, but still…," sighs Starr. "We know where you're going and we're along for the ride no matter what you call us, but there's a big difference in 'we are part of your team' versus 'vendor.' 'Vendor' says, 'You're replaceable.'"

Good: More than before, agencies are willing to learn. Clients appreciate agency partners who make the effort to verse themselves in the relevant science. Patel speaks warmly of agency people eager to interact with her sales force and willing to attend conventions and congresses to expand the breadth of their medical/scientific knowledge. "They're not just living in their own little bubble," she says. "I rely on my agencies for their knowledge. 'Hey, I'm doing a senior-level presentation. I could use your help formulating a few thoughts.' Anyone who can provide that is hugely valuable to me." Frank says that this is no accident: "We're all more science-focused. We have to be."

Amy West Associate director, patient relationship marketing, Novo Nordisk

Less than good: All that learning is, in certain corners, a secondary consideration at best. For others, even a keen grasp of the science isn't enough. West says that despite her general satisfaction with the skill level of her agencies—"the good ones are very well-versed in the science and in the competitive landscape"—her desire for agency partners who "understand the customer experience" is prompting her to look away from the type of firms she's worked with in the past.

"We aren't necessarily going to go to traditional pharma agencies anymore," she says. "Innovation is huge for us. What we want to deliver is a customized, personalized experience. Where we're going to be looking is at the Amazons, the Targets, the American Expresses. What are they doing to surprise and delight customers that we can bring to pharma?" ∎

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