



# PARTNERING TO PROSPER

As the industry continues to evolve, so must the agency/client relationship. How can pharma clients and their partners collaborate successfully in the face of mounting pressures? **James Chase** chairs a candid discussion of seasoned execs from both sides



**James Chase**  
Editor in chief, MM&M



**Kristin Patton**  
Principal, KBP Associates/  
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**Matt Brown**  
General manager, ICC Lowe



ALL PHOTOS: BILLBERNSTEIN

**James Chase (MM&M):** Each of you has worked closely on at least one side of the client-agency relationship. Drawing on your experiences, what are some of the biggest challenges you've encountered and how has the environment and the dynamic changed?

**Matt Brown (ICC Lowe):** My greatest experiences were early in my agency career, with some really fantastic clients who saw it as an iterative process and a fun process. Over the years, that's really been challenged by pressures from all over.

It used to be that agencies were in a very safe place. It was about creative. That was the environment. But now the pressures of cost, and of timing, and of different dynamics, have changed the environment for creativity and, therefore, the environment for agencies.

If we could go back, I wouldn't do it over, I'd just go back... back to those days when we were free to strut around. And that's not just an agency thing. I think that, for both sides, there was a heyday, and there was a fun time, and it was enjoyable.

**Kristin Patton (contracted to Zogenix):** I grew up in agency life, too, for 20 years and now I've been doing the client side for about three years. Nothing frustrates me more than to sit at a pitch on this side of the fence now, and see nothing but safe, safe, safe. So I wonder where both parties have lost the tolerance for showing both sides of the equation. You have to do a good job, you have to show your client that you heard them, that you're meeting the requisite requirements that were posted to you... but push the envelope, for God's sake. Because, as an agency, that's the only way you're going to stand out.

Whether we like it or not, there is more and more perceived "genericism" among the agencies. It breaks my heart to say it because I was in a lot of those situations trying to pull out something that made us stand out, but I think it's because so many people have lowered the baseline for what's acceptable.

**Shwen Gwee (PharmFresh):** I've had the benefit of sitting on both sides; I spent six or seven years on the client marketing side, and then on the agency side with PR companies doing social media. I think a lot of times the client side tends to have this view of just looking in the box, and I think a lot of agencies hire people that only think inside the box. They think we have this regulatory environment where we can't go outside the box.

Unfortunately, the way that the client side has been bringing up account teams or brand teams is through the sales force, which is not a marketing person, but somebody that has been dropped into that role. They don't think that way [about marketing] and they don't have that exposure to understand how to even manage the right agencies.

When I was on the client side, I met with 14 agencies because that's what was needed to launch a brand, right? If you don't have somebody in place who understands how each one of these functions works across the entire franchise, or across the entire landscape — whether it's managed care, consumer, HCP, how they all work together — then it becomes this skewed view.

I think clients are very much at fault for doing the whole, "I want something new and creative and innovative," and then the minute you show it to them, they go, "Okay, we've done it before, right?"



**Janie Rodriguez**  
Senior manager, primary care, OAB marketing, Pfizer



**Martin Skelton**  
Managing director, global healthcare, Interpublic Group



**Zoe Dunn**  
Principal, Hale Advisors



**Shwen Gwee**  
Founder and host, PharmFresh.TV



**Zoe Dunn (Hale Advisors):** We have spent most of our time, lately, working on the concept of organizational readiness with our pharmaceutical clients. Everybody is wrestling with this idea of the fact that we need to do business differently. Unfortunately, I feel like agencies are often lost at sea a little bit because they are struggling to bring new things to the table. It's like, if you make donuts this way all the time, and then [the client] asks, "Well, can you make me a cookie, too?" you'll say, "No, because we can only make donuts." So something needs to change for that new opportunity to happen, and the way it is right now, it can't. You often still have this scenario of brand folks rotating on and off a brand account after 18 months, and within those 18 months, there are three different jobs on that brand.

So when they come into their agency, and they say, "I want to see something new, I want to see something different," it's because they're throwing the baby out with the bath water of whatever the last person did who was in their job for 18 months, who threw that-guy-before-that's work out with the bath water. But they're only going to be there for 18 months. And the truth is that most really great, big ideas take longer than 18 months to actually get up, get launched, see through and get results. We have to change that.

**“What marketing wants to see is whether you have an ability to understand my business”**

— Janie Rodriguez, Pfizer

**Shwen Gwee:** I think the client-side person really needs to be strategic about the way they work and a lot of times, you can't really learn strategy without being somewhere for a period of time, and doing it, and seeing the results of what you've gotten, and then optimizing on it. So with this rotational schedule, sometimes we lose some of that strategy. It's seeing how all the agencies work together, seeing what agency is best for what purpose, and seeing how something can prolong itself, rather than "let's start from scratch" every single time.

**Zoe Dunn:** This morning, I asked a product director, "What's your advice for everyone in the agency-client relationship?" because she served on both sides, too. She said, "You know, keep the objective foremost in everyone's mind. If you change the strategy, bring it back to the main objective. Sit down together, figure out what the

plan of action is, and then really make sure that everything ladders back to that objective and that will keep you safe."

**Kristin Patton:** I'm not sure that, as clients, we do a great job in the beginning of helping agencies understand the objective up front. Not just the business objective, I think we cover that off, but what's the client's objective? Because we're held to a scorecard, and we expect that our agencies are going to be partners in helping us achieve that. I think that gets held closer to the vest than it should, and if there was transparency in that from the beginning ... well ... any agency who wouldn't rise to that occasion probably shouldn't be your agency.

**Martin Skelton (Interpublic Group):** Because of the churn that you mentioned, the agencies often end up actually being the holders of the brand, they're the brand stewards. So if the marketers come and change everything too quickly without really listening to their agency's advice, then I think they often lose things.

**Janie Rodriguez (Pfizer):** I think that the whole pitching process is broken from the beginning in the way that it's managed. I mean, we have this person that comes from procurement and manages the process, where the client gives input and then the agency's the repository. But there's never really a true dialogue of what it is that the brand is looking for. That discussion never happens. It's this very static document that we complete—this is what we want, this is what we need—but there's no context around what we're doing.

So when the agencies come, it's either something safe, or it's something outrageous. But really what marketing wants to see, regardless of what you present, is whether you have an ability to understand my business. Can you see beyond what's in front of you? Can you help me solve my main problem? Can you identify my main problem beyond what I've just told you? Then, what else can we do? Is this campaignable? Can we push the envelope a little bit more on what you showed me? Does it have legs? And sometimes we just see this one-dimensional snapshot. We don't see the campaignability of what you presented. But it needs to start with that pitch process.

**Martin Skelton:** From the agency side, I agree that often you get an RFP, and you do a pitch, and it becomes apparent that half, or even most, of the people in the room didn't really have any input into the RFP. And so they're expecting one thing, and you're presenting another... and we're very careful, usually, to answer everything in



the RFP, in case we get dinged for missing something. So I think the best pitches usually result when there is a significant amount of time given to having the key decision-makers talk with the agency – not just a Q&A that’s emailed back, but some real kind of qualitative interactions, so the agencies can get it right and meet their needs.

**Kristin Patton:** The other broken part of that model is that you always either issue the RFP, or get the RFP, and it says, “bring the team who will manage the business.” But you can only have five people, and they all have to be available on this day, and it’s Memorial Day.

When I sat on the agency side, that was really a struggle because you can have really great day-to-day people who are maybe mid-level managers, but they might be terrible presenters, you know? That doesn’t mean that they’re not going to be good on the business.

And I don’t care how many times we put it in writing, we have sat in so many pitches where you knew you were not going to see that [agency] person again. Or if you did, you saw them once a quarter, so they could say, “Yes, I promised you I would stay on top of the business.” Or by the time you award the business, the person who attended the pitch doesn’t work there anymore, or they’ve been moved—and that’s not acceptable. Because I think the strength and the foundation of a good agency-client relationship relies on that chemistry. You practically wind up living with these people. Sometimes, you’re seeing them more than your own family.

**Zoe Dunn:** So what’s changed? You know, I’m a big fan of *Mad Men*, and in *Mad Men*, those people who are on the account are on the account. They said, you know, “I want the creative from Don because he’s the best one to give us creative,” and Don really does give them creative. I mean, he’s really reviewing the materials.

But is that real? Because what you’re saying is accurate. There’s this big bait and switch. But it’s not somebody trying to be manipulative, it’s not the agency trying to pull one over on you. It’s rather that it is quite impossible to say this is the team you’re going to get.

I believe that part of it is because billings have really changed. It’s not sustainable for an agency to be able to place a specific team and just keep that team on the account, because the account cannot sustain that team. And if you do that, it has to be a two-and-a-half-times multiple for every dollar brought in for every team member you have. Because that’s literally what the agency budgeting model is. This person costs two-and-a-half times whatever we pay them, and that’s what you, the client, are going to have to pay in order to keep them.

**Kristin Patton:** Right, and then we don’t want to pay.

**Zoe Dunn:** So then we get into a dollars-and-cents thing, and so what do you do? I mean, I’m curious. I don’t even know what you do.

**“It’s not sustainable for an agency to be able to place a specific team and just keep that team on the account”**

— Zoe Dunn, Hale Advisors

**Shwen Gwee:** It’s turned into a numbers game, basically. And with a pitch, you want to see the team that’s going to serve you, but honestly, the best team for you is after they get to know you.

At Vertex, I had the good fortune of partnering with Matt when he was at Ignite Health, and one of the things they did was to hire the main account person after we had gotten to know each other for a while. They basically found somebody who was like my twin or something. We ended up getting along, and I knew why immediately—because he spoke my language.

So it was after they got to know me that they actually hired somebody specifically for my needs because they were my AOR. Again, you have years of data that the agency doesn’t know about, and yet [the agency is] expected to figure all that out over two weeks. And then when you judge them, it’s like, “Oh you missed that insight.” Two weeks versus years of data is very different.

**Zoe Dunn:** Beth, my business partner, spent 10 years at Pharmacia and Pfizer, and spent a lot of that time working with the Center of Excellence, and evaluating agency partners in different areas. When she talks about it, her perspective is that it really ends up being about the person, about the relationship.

If this team comes in, and even if they don’t nail it, if they seem like people you want to work with, that you want to call up every day, if you feel that trust—I don’t know how you get that in 90 minutes at a pitch—but if you feel a connection, you are more likely to hire them than the guys who maybe nailed it, but who you don’t really like.

And that’s kind of critical. So it makes it even worse, then, when those people disappear. Because you’re, like, oh, but I really liked you. You know? I wanted to hang out with you, go out to dinner with you. And now you’re putting this other guy on it.



**Janie Rodriguez:** There's never an interview process, right? We always interview people from whichever agency we're going to work with. But it's after the pitch that you get handed this team of people that you have never seen. You don't know their backgrounds. It's typically, oh, here's your team. And of course, many of them are not going to work out because they may not have the skill sets you need. Or the chemistry is not there. Maybe the trust side takes a little longer, just like any relationship?

So why doesn't that happen? That would be great, from a brand manager perspective, to have that ability to interview whom your team's going to be.

**“This used to be so much fun. I mean, we loved it. But right now, I think it's just a transactional process”**

— Matt Brown, ICC Lowe

**Martin Skelton:** But we need some more wiggle room. I think what has happened, from the *Mad Men* thing—apart from the martinis—is that there used to be wiggle room, so that there was time for people to think about the brand they worked on. Now, agencies are held to utilizations because that's what they have to report to their clients, and the wiggle room is being squeezed out, and we've just got to work on what we've got to get done and deliver it on the day. I think that's a shame, and I don't know what to do about it. But that is the problem.

**Kristin Patton:** And that's what I think is driving sort of the rebound, frankly, of some of the more independent, or smaller, networked, boutique type of shops. I mean, I'm seeing them invited much more into pitches that would have been the big name, big networked pitches, and they win them because they have the flexibility and can do things that the others can't. And I think that's going to happen more and more.

**James Chase:** In other words, personal relationships usually trump agency-client relationships?

**Kristin Patton:** Yes, and I think just the ability to be flexible. It goes back to having an understanding of what the hiring client's

objectives are, and what they have to work with. It's just the nature of the beast that a small independent can do things, investment spend, make sacrifices, push the envelope a little more without having to, you know, try to sell that in, and sort of steer the cruise ship up to WPP or whoever it's going to be, to get the permission to do it.

**Matt Brown:** It's funny, because I think the same thing is true from an agency perspective about the client side, that some of these mid-tier, smaller, new commercial entities that are coming, are much easier to navigate as well.

Janie, I love what you said about the procurement process. I thought it would be an agency that introduced that as being the big challenge, so I applaud it. Because I do think, going back to that statement about the way it used to be, we would never start an entire process by filling out Excel spreadsheets. And I feel like a majority of my time in the pitch process is literally [spent working on] one-pagers, capabilities and Excel documents before I even get to the point of saying to a team, “What do we think about this brand? How are we going to approach it? What's the creativity behind us?” Sometimes, you don't even get there. Sometimes the pitch process ends with the capabilities, because the time doesn't allow... and that's a real shame.

I'm always the idealist in the room, but I feel like we've lost a love for the game. This used to be so much fun. I mean, we loved it. But right now, I think it's just a transactional process. It's a task. Have we checked the five boxes? Then, if we checked the five boxes, don't deviate from those.

**Martin Skelton:** From sitting at the holding-company level, before you even get to the pitch, to get through some of our larger clients—in order to even be invited to the pitch process—you have to already have delivered such competitive rates and rebates that what actually happens is that you have demotivated your agencies from really wanting the business. Because you're asking for our best people and our best thinking for a margin that's barely going to keep the lights on. So, in many cases, the whole process squeezes out the agency motivation to actually deliver.

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*For much more of this candid, lively discussion, including suggestions for overcoming some of the key challenges, you can download a special e-book of the complete dialogue at [mmm-online.com](http://mmm-online.com).*