

CREATIVE VIBES

AGENCY LEADERS SHARE ADVICE

No business is immune to the confusion of the past couple of years. Creative agencies are eager to navigate the current climate in a positive way and will be looking to dedicated partners to lean on. We sat down with three thoughtful agency leaders and asked them how they see things and what advice they have for anyone serving them. Andi Counts, founder and president of Veridian Design Group in Atlanta; Justin Ahrens, founder and principal of Rule29 outside of Chicago; and Terry Marks, principal of tmarks design in Seattle were gracious enough to share their current views.

What matters most to agencies in the current environment?

Justin Ahrens: We see the greatest success and satisfaction when there are transparent conversations on budget, timing, expectations and approval. With today's timing and budgets being squeezed, the greatest results come with trusted transparency.





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— Terry Marks, Principal, tmarks design

Andi Counts: Authentic connections to clients, employees and partners are always important, but even more so during the past two years of limited face-to-face contact and Zoom fatigue. Ongoing relationships with trust and respect on both sides—and the ability to communicate on a personal level—have become more common with existing clients when we get to glimpse into their home offices, and occasionally see and hear their kids and dogs, but the forced lack of in-person contact has made forming new relationships more difficult.

Terry Marks: What matters most is having a viable marketing and sales program that connects with clients. We want to understand why clients select our firm and lean into that—as long as that is the work we desire.

How has the role of agencies changed over the past few years?

Ahrens: We have seen a steep increase in collaboration and stepping in more from a consultative perspective. We are working more as a part of the team versus an outside vendor. This has included early in-depth conversations about a project's viability, to help form the proper budget and timing. The increase in virtual availability has enabled deeper connections and better communication.

Counts: More clients are bringing creative in house to take advantage of closer connections to their customers and own the total brand experience. Some in-house agencies are able to partner well with outside agencies, but others are more territorial. These partnered relationships can work well for specialized agencies who can navigate the company politics well. Smaller agencies are becoming hyper-specialized while medium and larger agencies are often forced to take on more roles as technology and channels expand. It remains difficult to be all things to all clients, so agencies who know their core strengths and competencies are thriving best.

Marks: While we're being told that the economy is great, I find that it might be a bit more varied across the board. Many client firms are subjected to what is considered hot at the moment while others understand why their clients buy and are addressing what matters to them regardless of the trends. As an agency, we have to cut through guesswork and deliver real answers that address the specific challenges for the client themselves.

What are the biggest challenges your clients face in creating empathy for their target markets?

Ahrens: The biggest challenges are truly being open to look at the validity of defined personas (or even having them defined). Are they being looked at from a dollars and cents perspective only or are they being viewed more holistically? Who is at the center of the story: the company or the client? Most often, when there is a lack of empathy the focus of the brand story is on the company and not their customer and what they ideally need.

Counts: Getting facetime with their audiences to determine true needs and wants. Cutting through the digital clutter to connect authentically.

Marks: Speaking directly to decision-makers rather than gatekeepers. If we're not talking with people who have authority and power, we're just talking.

What do you see as the role of print in engagement?

Ahrens: I see print becoming more valuable and with a more relevant main purpose, especially since there is less print and we get most of our communication from our phones. I see it as a more refined, and possibly interactive, gateway to a new type of online experience while having a tangible "leave behind" quality as well. The scale of print can go from the simple to a more complex VR type experience. Some really amazing things in print are available.

Counts: Print is always a key component in building trust, creating focus, and excels in cutting through the clutter. It's a more important piece of the total picture in certain market sectors than others such as luxury goods and nonprofit direct mail and communications, but equally important in large ticket purchases. Holding a print piece in one's hand engages more senses than any other media, and when combined with personalization, it can truly make an impact. As an example, packaging is an important growth market for print due to its unmatched sustainability.

Marks: I see print as vital. We are more isolated than ever and we are bombarded constantly with digital via email or social. Some industries rely on social media metrics to make engagement decisions. In many cases, a well-crafted print piece delivered to the right person can cut through the noise like nothing else.

Can you share your thoughts on what you need from partners these days?

Ahrens: We have worked so much harder for less and we only have so much time. So, you must find partners you trust and be a good client by respecting the agency just as you want your clients to respect you.

Counts: Quick and thorough thought processes and good communication skills. Ask questions, then ask more questions, and restate your understanding of the tasks at hand. It's basic, but double-check your work and don't waste anyone's time with video calls when a phone call or email will do. Everyone is overloaded and wearing more hats than usual, with more distractions than ever before as work and home life run together.


Marks: Trust and honesty are obvious. But, taking time to discuss what is really at stake and what is necessary to evolve what is on the table. A text or email message doesn't cut it. Each of us can only do so much in a vacuum. But together, we can do amazing things.

Do you have any advice for trying to build a relationship with agencies?

Ahrens: Find an agency that fits you culturally and trust them to do their thing. Have clear goals, detailed creative briefs, and accountability of course, but then let them push you to new heights!

Counts: Be focused, know your strengths and be able to deliver on them. Learn to be flexible as agencies will need you to fit into their workflow rather than you attempting to drive the process.

Marks: My advice is to be authentic, understand what is of concern, and prove your integrity with consistency.



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