6 reasons why client-agency relationships fail

 By Sarah Browning-de Villiers

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Sanlam Reality and Machine have been in a partnership for over seven years. Here, I talk candidly with Sanlam Reality's head of marketing, communications and digital Francois Uys about why client-agency relationships can fail.


Machine_'s Sarah Browning-de Villiers and Sanlam's Francois Uys.

1. You don't share the risk

At their core, agency-client relationships are about trust. Trust is strengthened under the pressure-test of risk. But not all risk is created equal.

'Constructive risk' isn't just the risk of being replaced as an agency if something doesn't work out as planned. That doesn't build trust, it creates fear.

Constructive risk is crafting your agency team's KPIs in line with your client's so that there are mutual investment and shared goals. Constructive risk is standing alongside your client and co-presenting to executives about learning or failure so that your client sees you entrenched in their business.

Constructive risk is being present and iterating in real-time, not just showing up at the beginning and end and then sharing a bullet point list of learnings for next time.

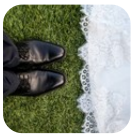
“To be different from anyone else, you have to experiment,” agrees Uys. “If both client and agency are open enough to agree that we’re going to try something, and that it might not work, but that we’re going to not hold back, that is trust for me,” he adds.

“Then, if we fail, we fail together and fail fast. I often find that society doesn’t tolerate failure but it’s because of failure and the ability to learn and adapt that we have seen some of the best innovation.”

> *Failing together is what’s key here. It’s just as important as succeeding together, and it comes with trust.*

“Being open and honest about what we have to achieve together, as client and agency, and what we expect from one another, is crucial,” says Uys. “We have to share the same goals, KPIs, and vision. We have to share what is working and what is failing – we have to be most honest about what is failing, and why.”

Not fearing failure sounds trite, but it’s not – it’s hard, and fundamentally it relies on the hard work put into building trust between client and agency. A sure-fire way to do this? Show, as an agency, that you’re taking on as much risk as your client. This unlocks appetite for experimentation and innovation. That’s where the magic happens.



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2. You tell clients you know better, rather than that you know *different*

This ladders up from the first point: trust and constructive risk rely on shared decision-making. Agencies can fall into the dangerous habit of “we know best”.

Sure, we are hired to be experts and specialists and to share this knowledge with our clients. Clients are seeking our advice and guidance, but co-investment works both ways. “As the client, I feel that I should have a voice – so that when something fails, we fail together – it’s not just the agency who failed,” explains Uys.

Just as clients need to involve agencies in the heart of their business for the best results, so agencies need to closely collaborate with their clients.

This includes the basics: discussing ideas and recommendations with the client in the context of their business environment; asking clients what they think (and really listening when they share); being open to adapting a strategy, idea or budget in order to accommodate the thoughts, concerns and constraints a client may have.

It all sounds obvious, but these basics are often the first to fall away under the pressures of deadlines and accountability (“If I don’t share in this approval, I can’t be blamed if it’s wrong” = disaster!).

The moment you, as an agency, start thinking: “Well, if they sign off on it on email, our ass is covered,” you know you’re falling into this trap. And if you ever find yourself saying – or typing – “As the experts, trust me on this,” you’re also failing on this point.

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3. You forget your number-one role: to innovate

“There’s definitely an expectation that you, as my agency, are fundamentally innovative and at the forefront of what’s new and what’s next,” says Uys. “The challenge is not to get so bogged down by the day-to-day of servicing my account – which is also important – that you forget to look up, think big and suggest a fresh way of thinking or doing.”

Looking up takes time and intention – it’s tough when you’re focused on trying to get your to-do list done.

Say what you want about global conglomerates, but innovation is certainly accelerated by case-study sharing across broad networks. Collaboration is arguably one of the fastest ways to boost transformation and great ideas.

There has been an enormous benefit in sharing learnings and innovations. At a time when digital transformation is a hot topic, these kinds of successes are enormous.

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4. You don’t understand your client’s world

No, this doesn’t mean understanding their target market or quarterly results. It means understanding the reality of your client’s day-to-day: the frustrations and limitations, the people and the politics, the things that will really shift the dial for them and the things that, frankly, won’t – however shiny or sexy.

“Agencies shouldn’t chase big ideas, they should chase big results,” says Uys.

It doesn’t end there, though: you’ve also got to be genuinely interested in your client’s product. “If you’re not actively interested in what I’m selling, what our problems and challenges are, you’re not adding value to the relationship and future strategic thinking,” he explains.

> “*The best way to get this right? Good old facetime. Go sit and work from your client’s office. Understanding the culture and context. Make the effort to travel to them for meetings.*”

“The currency of billing per hour/retainer can often prevent agencies from truly investing in facetime. It may balance the books in the short term, but in the long run, it makes it difficult for an agency to really play the role of a strategic partner with a long-term business view,” adds Uys.

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5. You rely on a written brief

Let’s face it: few have the magical quality of crafting brilliantly written briefs. While written briefs are an important formality, they are by no means foolproof.

I’ve found that our best work is done when we’ve taken the time to understand and unpack a brief in person with the client.

“In my mind, a written brief should always be confirmation of a verbal brief,” explains Uys. “Nothing beats face-to-face: me seeing that you really understand what I mean, you being able to understand context far greater than you’d ever get from an email.”

Of course, there are compromises between email and in-person meetings. WhatsApp, Zoom and the like give increasingly less excuse for conducting business with clients primarily on email.

The secret sauce here, in my opinion? A relationship-led suit who has built such a high level of trust and affinity with your client that they have key decision-makers on speed dial.

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6. You don’t add value outside of your billable hours

Doing the right thing may mean operating outside of billable hours; being agile and offering skills and expertise beyond the retainer. Within reason, of course.

“Look, I get it – some clients can really take advantage of this,” says Uys. “But for me, it’s not about exploiting talent or resources, but rather about getting a sense that your agency really wants to help you achieve your business goals. It’s things like sharing articles, competitor reviews, studies and ideas proactively with your client.”

For me, it comes down to really caring about what you do. Having the right people on your team because if they’re passionate about they do, that kind of stuff should happen organically.

“Being flexible and agile is also important,” says Uys. “It’s something we really value. It shouldn’t be a regular occurrence, but it matters if you can rely on your agency to solve problems fast, under pressure.”

Here's the skinny: great relationships are partnerships; partnerships are mutual; mutuality requires trust; trust is earned. Where authentic trust lives, innovation happens; that’s when making a meaningful difference to your clients emerges.

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