

## ‘Some clients use pitches as a sleazy way to trawl for ideas’

### DOUBLE STANDARDS

Pitching was never a simple process, but has it become more complex over time, especially as agencies and clients still seem to be at odds over how it’s best done?



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**If there is a need for pitch intermediaries in Asia, why are there so few of them?**

Quite simply, pitch consultants do what a marketing director should be doing. Most clients here have not worked with pitch consultants and have not experienced how a review could be managed differently and how a consultant can add value beyond search. There are still too many project-based pitches, and agency relationships are still too short-term.

I’m not sure there’s the need in the first place. Pitch consultants can add value if a client is new to a market or needs an added layer of process assurance. But a marketer worth his or her salt should be able to assemble a decent line-up of agency contenders and be savvy enough to select the best.

**What’s the biggest problem with the way pitches are run in Asia?**

Pitches take time to organise. But they are usually delegated to the most junior person on the client team, or to someone who does not understand the industry and has never managed a pitch before. This often leads to misalignment internally, a frustrating process for competing agencies and too much downtime.

Some clients use pitches as a sleazy way to trawl for ideas; others to keep their agency on their toes. There are better ways to motivate your agency. Pitches shouldn’t be a cattle call to all-comers. No more than three serious contenders should pitch. And if a client has no intention of retaining the current agency, he should put them out of their misery, not string them along.

**Do clients tend to pitch their business too often?**

Absolutely. Our research in China indicated that an average client sees 11 agencies for credentials per year, and 30 per cent work on a project basis. The average client-agency relationship in China lasts 2.4 years, compared with 6.5 years in the US and Europe. A pitch is rarely the first solution we recommend to a client.

Some perhaps do. People often overlook the opportunity cost of a pitch. Then again, looking at some insipid campaigns out there, some pitches are long overdue.

**Are procurement people a necessary evil?**

Procurement people with some empathy and understanding of marketing add tremendous value to the process to ensure due diligence. We have, however, worked with companies where the same ‘indirect’ procurement manager also oversees negotiations on hotel rates. But it’s the attitude of the client — not the aptitude — that’s important.

This assumes an antagonistic stance between marketing and procurement. To a point, that’s understandable. Marketing strives for ‘good’. Procurement goes after ‘cheap’ — the classic effectiveness/efficiency tussle. However, I’ve forged some of my strongest partnerships with procurement colleagues. We keep each other honest.

**Who’s the best presenter in a pitch you’ve ever come across, and why?**

I would rate Peter Gallagher from BBH as the best creative presenter I’ve seen. He has a potent combination of great storytelling and high-energy theatre. He went to drama school, apparently. Clients sit through too many Powerpoint presentations. Creative presentation should be much more stimulating and fun.

Rod Pullen (Batey) and Huw Griffiths (M&C Saatchi) for the compelling way in which they led pitches. Chris Foo (Monsoon) for his ‘tough love’ employee pep rallies. Dave Droga (Saatchi & Saatchi), who commanded attention by sheer dint of his reputation. Neil Johnson (DDB) — a whole-brain creative if ever there was one.

**What is the best piece of advice you can give pitching agencies?**

Listen more and understand what the clients are looking for. Then differentiate yourselves, convincingly, throughout the process.

Make the effort to understand exactly why I’m calling the pitch. Don’t spend the first half-hour telling me why you’re so great. Dive into my business problem and answer the brief. Don’t switch-sell me by parading your rainmakers, then saddling me with your B team once you land the account.

## Can Singapore’s MediaCorp hold its own against Yahoo?

### LIVE ISSUE

To anyone familiar with Singapore’s rather homogenous media scene, the thought of comparing the traditional media titan to major online players may sound a little ludicrous.

But clearly, desperation has hit Caldecott Hill. MediaCorp, a company that dominates Singapore’s TV and radio media, recently announced an investment of “several million” to boost its new media offering.

Like the buzzword, details remained vague. Lucas Chow, CEO of MediaCorp, told advertisers to

anticipate an e-commerce platform and major enhancements along all its 30-plus websites, which include some high-traffic portals such as channelnewsasia.com and todayonline.com.sg, according to Hitwise Singapore.

“It’s not a matter of us waking up too late,” says Timothy Goh, VP of new media, MediaCorp. “We have an agenda to make people aware that we’re relevant and mainstream. That we’re value-adding to advertising dollars.”

Unlike its operations in the traditional media spaces, MediaCorp’s non-traditional offerings will compete against longstanding online players: Google, Yahoo, news websites and blogs, to name a few. Even

*Straits Times* publisher SPH, with which MediaCorp enjoys a blurry sort of competition, has hardly made a dent with its two online citizen journals Stomp and Mypaper.

So it should come as no surprise that local advertisers are all but rolling their eyes.

“Given the time people spend on the internet and the maturity of the Singapore market, I don’t think there could have been any other way for MediaCorp to go,” explains David Dahan, BBDO Singapore’s strategic planning director.

“It’s so overdue it’s shameful,” adds another media executive. “But better late than never.”

According to Goh, the strategy is

two-pronged: building content and integrating media. “Soon you’ll be able to read, listen and watch news from the same place,” he says.

“We’ll cross-intersect a lot of our talents as well,” he adds, referring to MediaCorp’s business of managing local celebrities.

But ultimately, according to a source, MediaCorp’s success lies in how the online teams are run. “Its focus has always been traditional, so will it run its online properties like an offline entity?” he says. “Will it have an offline team also selling online?”

Perhaps one need look no further than MediaCorp’s new structure to find the answer. Last year, the company consolidated all its

sales teams, briefing all salespeople to sell across various MediaCorp platforms — TV, radio and print — rather than specialise in one medium. And to fill in the newly-created role of head of all media sales, MediaCorp appointed James Yip, managing director for MediaCorp Radio, rather than someone with proven integrated experience.

Still, Goh appears confident. “We’re going to make ourselves known,” he says, “We’re aggressively pursuing the interactive side to become the only integrated online partner for clients’ marketing strategies.”

By Sara Yin