

Asking the right questions means that you answer the right question

By [Gillian Rightford](#)

29 Jan 2019

I read an article the other day by Tim Williams, whose wisdom I quote at least three times a week, which suggested that agencies should "Stop Filling Orders and Start Solving Problems".



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[He said:](#)

“ The decline in the perceived value of advertising agencies can be closely correlated with their increasing propensity to dutifully fulfill ‘scopes of work’ rather than proactively solve client problems. An unfortunate number of firms have forgotten that the role of the professional is to probe, question, and diagnose, not simply provide services. Otherwise it’s the equivalent of the patient not only self-diagnosing, but self-prescribing. ”

I nodded my head vigorously. Yes, yes, yes, I thought.

It brought to mind a blog post I wrote in 2012 called the [The Doctor and the Pop Star: Lessons for Ad Agencies and Clients](#), in which I compared the unhealthy relationship between Michael Jackson and his doctor to that of a dysfunctional client-agency relationship, where the one tells the other what to do, and they do it, even though they don't believe in it.



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The result, I foretold, was not going to be pretty.

All these years later, we sit with the same problem. Two things spring out for me that I'd like to explore.

1. The quality of the questions being asked; and
2. The notion of the client-agency relationship being smooth-sailing happiness.

Let's talk about those questions.

Are you asking quality questions?

Williams quotes [Johnny Vulkan](#) from agency Anomaly, who says: "Start with the business challenge, not a marketing channel. We focus on ensuring we are actually asking the right question, often collectively deciding with our clients that the real issue is bigger (or smaller) than first thought."

Simply put, says Williams, "Pushing on better questions helps Anomaly get to better answers."



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I am often asked in my account management training, whether I have a list of questions. Well, [yes I do](#), because I was asked to write them once upon a time. But my answer is usually that you shouldn't need a list of questions. You need curiosity. You need some marketing *nous*. You need to want to ask the why and what if questions. And most importantly, you need to be asking them from the right people.

Often, particularly in large financial or telco companies where marketing is in fact just communication, and product development, pricing and distribution sit in separate silos, the person briefing the agency doesn't know the answers.

And there's a weird sense of impropriety – that if the agency needs answers from somewhere deep in the belly of the building, that's somehow undermining the person who briefs. No, no, and no.

Incomplete or vague information gets mangled into briefs, which then are taken as gospel and rewritten as creative briefs and you collectively paint yourself into a non-productive, frustrating corner. Better questions lead to better answers, which lead to much bigger and better solutions.

Do you aim for good meetings, or good work?

Which leads me gracefully onto the second point: the fact that we think that agency client relationships need to be fun, happy and harmonious. Chatting to [Matthew Bull](#) the other day, he recounted a story about a recent project, where the very positive feedback from one of the senior clients included the statement: "you weren't scared of a bad meeting". I found that quite profound.

There's always a grey area: when does "pushing back" become argumentative and stubborn? One of the biggest reasons why clients leave agencies is creative [intransigence](#). (Great word – look it up. I had to.) So, because agencies don't want to be seen that way, they sometimes aim for good meetings, not good work.

I'm certainly not advocating for rudeness and abusive behaviour because there is already way too much of that nonsense, generally anchored in ego and insecurity. **What I am advocating for is a search for the right problem to solve.** Maybe the problem to solve isn't actually what's been briefed at all. What the briefing session needs is penetrating questions and a commitment to finding the right answers, together.



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What Williams so neatly finishes off with is the nub of it: What do agencies actually sell? And what do marketers actually need?

“ By focusing on solving instead of executing, you underscore that you're not in the service business, but rather the results business. ”

And having said that, solving is only really worth the paper it's written on if it's solving the right problem. Get digging, friends.

ABOUT GILLIAN RIGHTFORD

Gillian's CV is a mix of marketing, strategy, advertising, and leadership. She obtained a Business Science (Honours) degree in Marketing from UCT, worked in marketing strategy consulting, then headed into the creative world, doing account management and strategy for below and above the line agencies, before becoming co-founder and managing director of Hercules/DVB&B, and then group managing director of Lowe Bull...

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