

# Relationship management: Don't draw the 'divorce card' too quickly

 By [Johanna McDowell](#)

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There's much to be said for long-term relationships between marketers and their creative and media agencies.



Image credit: Kelly Sikkenra on Unsplash.

Understanding each other's roles, requirements and journey into a successful future takes time and the perception that comes with it.



## Challenges facing marketers and creative, media agencies

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Like the partner who knows just when to bring a bunch of flowers home or run your bath for you, good relationships are not all about the initial glow. They have their rough patches and each party may want to stick doggedly to what they feel is right in a particular campaign.

Getting past this requires careful relationship management. Interestingly, Scopen research from 2017 noted that the longevity of a marketer's relationship with their creative agency runs an average of 4.26 years and 4.12 years with their media agency.

The research shows that the creative agency relationship ends largely because of dissatisfaction with delivery; the quality of the team; a lack pro-active behaviour by the team; too many staff changes; and the impact on all of these on costs.

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media agency relationships, however, end when the contract is over. Fair enough. But wouldn't a happy marketer sign a new contract?

## Cost of saying goodbye

In matching marketers and agencies, my experience with relationship management is that if it doesn't happen, someone eventually mentions the “D” word...and it truly can be as painful and costly as a marital divorce.

Besides the parting of the ways, there's finding a new agency, and developing a relationship that can take months to function properly and produce the optimum outputs.

By the time the “D” word is mentioned, it is usually too late to salvage the relationship's trust and strength, which is why managing your business relationship is as vital as any other relationship you wish to grow and succeed with.

To do this, a management structure should be set up from the start but must include the flexibility required to accommodate

market changes over time. Part of this structure must include the evaluation or inventory of self and the other. Each party should have a set of questions they ask themselves about their own company and behaviours, and then about their agency's.



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Once this is done, an independent mediator who is well-versed in industry issues and requirements, as well as sourcing solutions, should analyse the documents to determine areas of satisfaction and areas of concern for both parties.

Then, mediation can begin. While it may not be comfortable, initially, if all parties are undertaking these steps in order to salvage the relationship, they will be present with open minds and optimism.

## Principles lie in the data

For the data given to the independent mediator to be effective, it must be robust enough to support measurable facts. Where companies rate each other purely on feelings, the outcome is unlikely to be positive. Data accumulated over the period of the relationship is impartial and can move discussions from “personalities” to “principles”.

While many organisations set out their SLAs and expectations at the start of their relationships, too few set up the “prenup”; the relationship management structure that could be what may save the arduous task of the breakup and moving on.



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Again, the key to the stability of the relationship structure is solid data – which holds true under any and all circumstances and can rid the business association of the questioning, accusations and resentment that come before some draw the divorce card.

When you see an old couple still holding hands after 60 years of marriage, they probably reviewed their relationships a million times over the years and found reasons why the partner they chose could still be the best one for them.

## ABOUT JOHANNA MCDOWELL

MD of the Independent Agency Search and Selection Company (IAS), and partner in Scopem Africa, with a background that includes being on both the agency and the client side of the fence, Johanna McDowell is well-placed to offer commentary on marketing and advertising in the South African and international contexts. She built her career in marketing and advertising since 1974, holding directorship in both SA and British advertising agencies. She was MD of Grey Phillips Advertising in 1988.

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