



GREAT CLIENTS: HOW AND WHY TO BE ONE

Jared Belsky

There are millions of people out there who manage the relationships

between their companies and the agencies and consultancies they've hired. However, there is very little conversation that centers around how to foster great relationships that in turn generate maximum value. By asking how to ensure you are a great client, the relationship will grow along with your results. Yet, so few pause to ask how to be the best possible client.

Why is this?

The reasons for this are threefold. First, leaders on the client side are rarely, if ever, forced to be great clients because of a complicated power dynamic. Secondly, there is little to no coaching or information on how to be a great client. Lastly, marketing executives too often don't understand or internalize why it's worth the extra effort to be a great client versus a good client.

Don't get me wrong, there are scores of great clients. I am merely suggesting they are less common than they could be if there were more understanding of all the trapped potential. If you searched Amazon for "books about being a great client" you will find zero books, which surprised me but also furthered my pursuit to fill this information void.

What if those people hiring and managing agencies were more curious as to how to be the best possible client and reap the rewards of that excellence? What if there were some practical ways to help them?

When you join a new company, you typically spend days or weeks learning norms, people, rules, processes, and procedures. The idea of course is that preparation leads to success.

For example, when I joined the Coca-Cola Company, they were highly invested in my onboarding in almost every sense. Their onboarding was truly incredible, and I still have many great memories and friends from my time there. I learned the core values. I learned how to use their many systems to pull data on sales trends, and I was trained in how to participate in the many HR and developmental systems and programs.

Though it was a top-notch onboarding experience at Coca-Cola, I recall one notable gap. I was the media steward for the Fanta brand and in charge of a budget that was several million dollars at the time. Specifically, I was put in charge of maximizing the value of working with our media agency. I certainly was trained on our target audience, our goals, and so many other things, but I was not trained in how to manage that agency relationship itself.

On the agency side, there was a team of five to ten people tasked with helping Fanta plan, buy, and measure our media, and ultimately invest the millions of dollars we were budgeted to spend. Perhaps I was supposed to have relied on common sense. Perhaps the agency should have known how to manage itself. In the end, I relied on instinct and did my best (which was not that great).

With the benefit of hindsight and a lot of reflection, it's clear there should be extensive training on managing the relationships between your partners and agencies just as you have training on anything else involving a big expense and a critical outcome.

Since that experience, I have realized that Coca-Cola is not unique in this opportunity gap. This notion of training on how to be a great client is something that just does not exist. It does not exist in the Fortune 500, nor does it exist in the mid-market or the SMB market. It is not common anywhere.

Over the past few years, I have asked over one hundred marketing heads, CMOs, CEOs, and various business leaders one very simple question: *Did you ever train on how to be an effective client for an agency or services partner?*

By asking how to ensure you are a great client, the relationship will grow along with your results.

I chose this question because it provided no space to hide. This question was purposely worded not to judge their intention (i.e., *Do you care about your agency and consultancy partners?*), but to honestly ask them just that. The question is also powerful because it provides a lot of room for introspection.

Just about every colleague replied, after a pause, with some version of “nope, I did not.” After contemplating my question, sometimes staring awkwardly into space, similar versions of these three answers kept getting repeated.

First, they were never mandated to be great at managing agencies.

In other words, regarding their own goals or KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), not once had their boss evaluated them on how they handled their agency relationships. If the old adage is true that “people respect what you inspect,” there was little to no inspection in this area. Therefore, there was little to no incentive to improve if the manager was not watching or expecting them to focus on nurturing these relationships.

Second, they never were trained in how to be great at the art and science of managing an agency.

Literally, not a single person in over a hundred interviews shared that there was dedicated training regarding how to manage this sort of relationship investment.

Think about how profound that is for a second. The vast majority of Fortune 500 companies have media or creative or consulting agencies with annual retainers that can be as large as \$30 million per year in fees, with as much as \$1 billion in media investment under management. Yet leaders are asked to sort of “wing it” in the management and stewardship of that investment. I would challenge you to think of an equivalent.

Third, which was the most honest and telling answer, they felt there were “zero repercussions to not being great.”

The C-Suite in certain situations can be shortsighted with agency dynamics because it is easier to fire an agency than deal with their routines and processes that might be broken or need significant improvement. It’s easier to hire a new agency than address their product issues.

In short, not being great at managing the relationship with your agency partner was not viewed as a failure in the hallways of most companies, even if and when you actually fail your agency. Instead, it gets spun as though the agency is always to blame, and so, you run yet another RFP (Request For Proposal).

I was curious to see if this was the norm across the board or just the consensus of my own sample set of CMO friends. As a result, I commissioned an additional survey of 300 client-side individuals. From their responses, this was the norm in all of their respective companies. Additionally, 86% were interested in learning how to be a better client.

Further, I began speaking with several agency owners I know in media, creative, and analytics and I posed the same questions to them, only to hear similar responses, but from the other side. Interestingly, most agencies invested very little time in training clients to be ideal clients. Sure, agencies created briefs and conducted onboarding rituals, but those are very different from finding real ways and processes for clients to perform their best to serve everyone's collective mutual interests.

So, what *does* make for a great client since we have established that the industry does not incentivize people to step up and focus on this issue?

At the end of the day, a great client is able to motivate, to be firm but fair, to share information freely and generously, and to work to lower the temperature when things go wrong. Navigating those moments are what defines your ability around agency management.

A great client believes in partnership. Partnership, as much as anything, means sharing and having the long view. Sharing generously comes in the form of sharing data, sharing information, sharing specific briefs, and always working toward a feeling that there is one team.

The long view comes into play because, just like an internal marketing team, there are good days and bad days. Good months and bad months. A great client understands and is willing to look at the client-agency relationship in a longitudinal manner looking to understand if things are getting better over time.

Too many clients believe those tough moments are solely the duty of the agency to sort through. The average client-agency tenure is sitting at just under two years. This data point is wilder when you realize that some RFP processes take three to six months.

When you make your agency team feel cared for, human, and part of your team, retention goes up, ideas get better, and overall they dig deeper.

When there are tough moments, the best clients go into a “coach first” mentality and are willing to treat you as though you are part of their team. They dig in and try to help set the right course.

Great Clients Win with Kindness

In 2022, I ran a LinkedIn poll posing the question, “What motivates you to work hard for a client?” Out of 1,005 responses, the top response was “kindness.”

As I followed up via direct message with some of the respondents and did my own research, the overwhelming and profoundly simple theme was, “I will absolutely work harder for a client that shows kindness and energy towards our team.”

While this seems very simple, it’s rarer than you might guess.

If you are reading this, it’s not likely that you need “kindness lessons,” but rather, a kindness why! The why is simple. Agencies are filled with humans, not gearboxes or assembly lines. Humans work at different velocities and different rates based on inspiration.

What I have found is that a great client is able to create a virtuous cycle that reinforces confidence, candor, and ultimately great work. It goes something like this:

1. The client delivers briefs and challenges with clarity, enthusiasm, and a feeling that everyone can win together.
2. The agency responds to the challenge with excitement, candor, and optimism.
3. The agency hits deadlines, demonstrates critical thinking, and shares work. In this, the agency demonstrates a positive “Do:Say ratio.” In other words, the agency builds confidence in the eye of the client by doing what they said they would do.

4. The client loves the work and shows excitement, gratitude, and appreciation. Or the client does not love the work, still shows gratitude, and then gives clarity as to how it can get better.
5. The agency takes feedback non-defensively, goes back to work, comes back to the client, and shows improvement, as well as their ability to listen and adapt.
6. The client acknowledges the changes, shows gratitude and excitement, and specifically acknowledges that feedback was taken into account.
7. The agency team feels proud as heck and barely remembers they stayed late for a few weeks eating takeout.

The clients who create personal relationships with their agency partners will get the most passion aimed back at them and their business.

What really gets interesting is that the above cycle starts to reinforce a second virtuous cycle, as other great things start to happen:

1. Team retention stays high.
2. The best agency talent begs to get on the train.
3. Awards are won and pride grows.
4. Intimacy grows as the agency feels even more like part of the team.

You can see here that kindness becomes not just a moral imperative (i.e. it's good to follow the golden rule and be kind), but it drives an economic benefit. When you make your agency team feel cared for, human, and part of your team, retention goes up, ideas get better, and overall they dig deeper.

A client's biggest, cheapest, and easiest weapon is kindness. The average agency person is treated very badly from when they break into the business to the day when they retire. It's a hazard of the job that sometimes gets accepted, even though it's not right or fair. This means that the low industry standards of "accepted behaviors" can be used to your advantage!

If you can exhibit kindness, and exhibit the most reasonable interpretation (MRI), you can generate your own virtuous cycle with your agency partners.

Every Agency Is Made Up of Humans

These humans have a lot to do in a given day, and money and fear are not motivators that work on a longitudinal basis.

The best ideas flock to the best clients. The best team members flock to the best clients. The greatest velocity of work gravitates toward the best clients. The best and most thoughtfully written contracts and staffing models create the best work for clients.

The clients who create personal relationships with their agency partners will get the most passion aimed back at them and their business. The clients who lead with kindness and the most reasonable interpretation (MRI) get agency teams who are brave and willing to try and experiment because they don't fear reprisal. The clients who take time to contextualize how their business works, and where advertising and marketing rest within that broader context, get agencies who are therefore smarter and are now armed with more holistic and informed thinking.

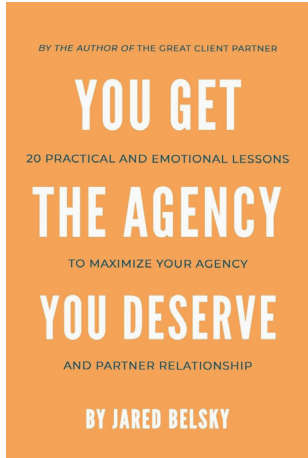
All of this could seem extra credit behavior, right? Well, the goal is to point out how this sort of behavior can not only set you apart but allow you to get more value out of your agency relationships.

Surprise your agency partner today. You won't just bring a smile to their faces. **More so, I promise you will drive huge value for yourself, your team, your brand, and your customers.** 📌

*Adapted from *You Get The Agency You Deserve: 20 Practical and Emotional Lessons to Maximize Your Agency and Partner Relationship* by Jared Belsky, published by Ripples Media LLC. Copyright © 2023 by Jared Belsky.*



Info



Ready to dig deeper into the book?
Buy a copy of [You Get The Agency You Deserve.](#)

Want copies for your organization or for an event?
We can help: customerservice@porchlightbooks.com
800-236-7323

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jared Belsky is the CEO and Co-Founder of Acadia, a powerhouse digital marketing and analytics agency. Previously, he was the CEO at 360i, one of the top marketing and advertising agencies in the U.S. Belsky is the author of *The Great Client Partner*, a leadership guide focused on educating and inspiring around soft skills as a critical component to technical expertise. He is a frequent contributor to *AdAge*, *Adweek*, and *AdExchanger*. Over his career, he has been honored as one of the industry's top leaders. He was named to the Class of 2023 by Campaign 40 Over 40, recognizing individuals for groundbreaking work and outside-the-box thinking. Previously, he had been named to *Ad Age's* "40 Under 40" in 2017, honored as Executive of the Year at the 2016 Bing Agency Awards, and was the only person named in consecutive years to *Adweek's* Media All-Star list in 2014 and 2015.

SHARE THIS

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.

SUBSCRIBE

Sign up for e-news to learn when our latest manifestos are available.



Porchlight

Curated and edited by the people of Porchlight, ChangeThis is a vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest book releases and ideas at porchlightbooks.com.

This document was created on October 25, 2023 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover art from Adobe Stock.