

# What Clients Think 2025

OUR **11<sup>TH</sup>** ANNUAL REPORT



A report based on 680 client interviews conducted on behalf of creative agencies.

IN ASSOCIATION WITH

**dba**

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# INTRODUCTION



**Jonathan Kirk**  
Founder of  
Up to the Light

Welcome to our 11<sup>th</sup> 'What Clients Think' report. It is, without doubt, the definitive annual snapshot of the client/agency relationship and I'm delighted that the report is so widely anticipated by agencies and so avidly read, both in the UK and around the world.

There is nothing else like it in terms of the number and quality of the interviews. It is important to point out that every interview was paid for by individual agencies commissioning Up to the Light to provide an independent Client Survey for their agency. The interviews are with interested clients who are talking in-depth about their challenges, views on agencies and the relationship with their incumbent agency. They are giving comments in a spirit of constructive criticism. Only interviews are capable of achieving this. In our experience, online surveys are superficial by comparison and not appropriate for the complexity of client/agency relationships.

This year's report is based on 680 client interviews conducted on behalf of creative agencies, our highest ever number of interviews. We have retained the existing format of the report which has worked well. Firstly, 'Client World' looks at wider client pressures and concerns, over and above their day-to-day client/agency relationship. Secondly, 'Winning Clients' looks at agency door openers, new business presentations, pitches and marketing content. Thirdly, 'Retaining & Growing Clients' covers client service and client development issues.

Names of the individual agencies and clients involved are confidential. However, we can share some fascinating statistics when looking across all 680 interviews. As in previous years, it provides important pointers for how agencies can strengthen their client relationships and sharpen their approach in a whole number of ways.

## About the agencies

All the agencies commissioned Up to the Light to conduct a Client Survey with their key clients. The agencies cover every discipline and range in size from 5 employees to over 100. The principal purpose was to monitor the health of their most important client/agency relationships.

### Specifically:

- Understand current perceptions of the agency's strengths and weaknesses.
- Understand which boxes clients are putting them in, whether fairly or unfairly.
- Provide a better understanding of client needs and concerns.
- Identify client development opportunities.
- Highlight client service measures that can improve the relationship.
- Spot any problems early so that they can be dealt with proactively.
- Understand how they are compared to competitor agencies.
- Provide an assessment of client perceptions across areas such as creativity, value for money, ability to add value, proactivity, effective listening and commercial awareness.
- Understand how clients see the market more generally – trends and concerns.
- Assess levels of client loyalty.
- Understand client challenges and how these are likely to affect the client/agency relationship in the future.

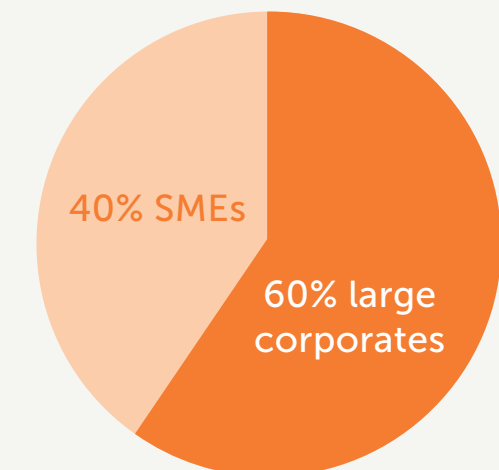
## About the clients

The clients range from Brand Manager level to Chief Executives and Board Directors of major organisations. All 680 clients have responsibility for buying creative services and have relationships with agencies, whether day-to-day or in an overseeing capacity. A very broad range of clients are represented – different industries, UK and international, business to business, business to consumer, not for profit.

### Different areas represented include:

- Food and drink manufacturers
- Financial services
- Pharmaceuticals
- Tech/software
- Mobile telecoms
- Government
- Higher education
- Healthcare
- Charities
- Automotive
- High street retail
- Supermarkets
- Professional services

The interviews were conducted with SMEs and large corporates. The rough split is as follows:



60% large corporates

40% SMEs (turnover of less than £25m, less than 250 employees)

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Arguably, the biggest difference between agencies is not found in the quality of thinking and creative output, but in the quality of their client relationships.

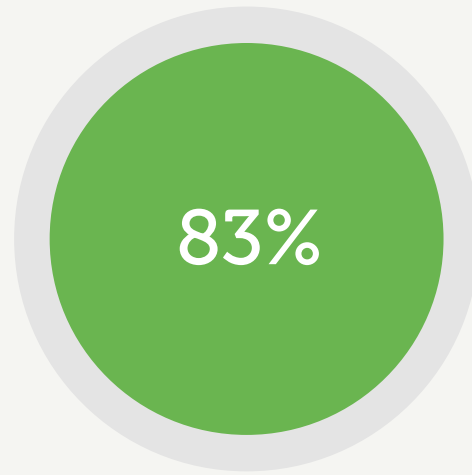
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## 1.0 Client World



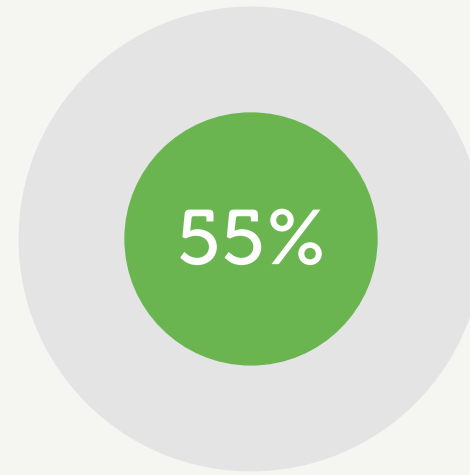
## 1.1 Top challenges

These are clients' broader challenges, over and above their relationships with agencies.



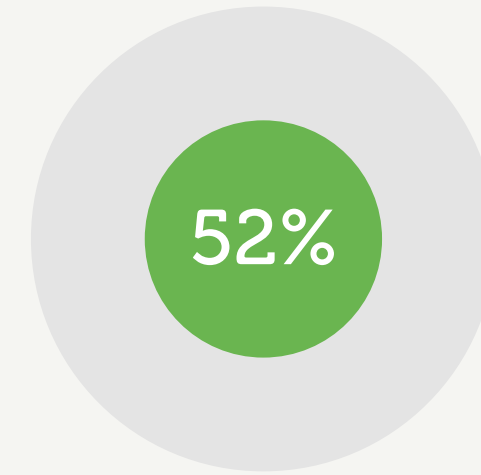
OF CLIENTS ARE FINDING IT  
**'VERY DIFFICULT'** TO PROPERLY  
PRIORITISE PROJECTS

Many clients complain of being time starved and under resourced. Add budget pressures to the mix and the result is a continual headache around how clients can achieve what they want with what they have. More ruthless prioritisation of projects has become a necessity.



OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEIR  
**BIGGEST CHALLENGES WERE**  
INTERNAL NOT EXTERNAL

Commonly cited examples include company restructuring, smaller teams and less resource, convincing internal stakeholders, senior management not necessarily understanding or valuing the marketing function.

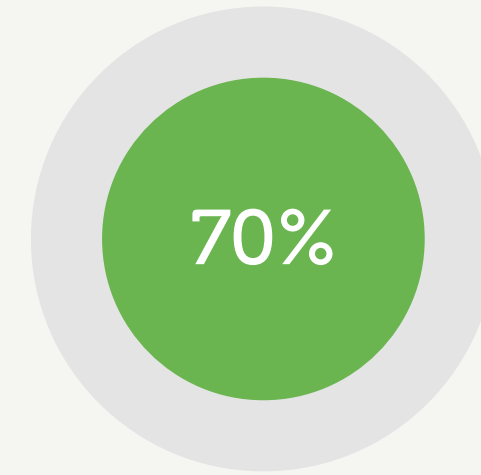


OF CLIENTS LISTED  
**'CONVINCING INTERNAL  
STAKEHOLDERS AND BRINGING  
THEM WITH YOU'** AS AN  
ONGOING CHALLENGE

For these clients, blockers within the organisation are a source of frustration and there is an expectation that agencies should play an active role in helping to build internal ownership and consensus.

## 1.1 Top challenges

The most used words when talking about challenges:



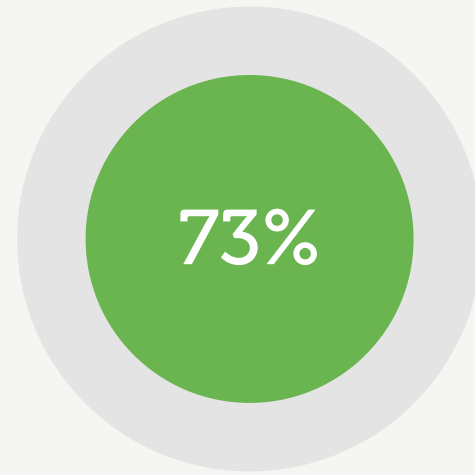
OF CLIENTS ARE OPTIMISTIC  
AND CONFIDENT WHEN  
LOOKING AHEAD TO THE  
NEXT 2 YEARS



Despite the many challenges, marketers remain  
a largely optimistic bunch.

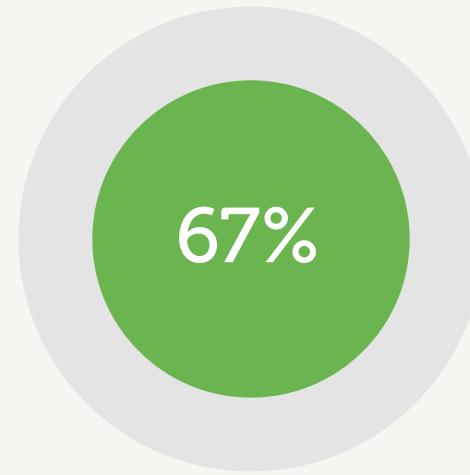


## 1.2 AI challenges



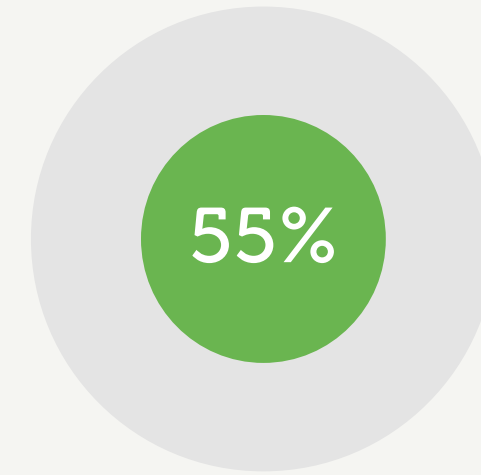
OF CLIENTS EXPECT  
**MARKETING INVESTMENT IN  
GEN AI TO INCREASE OVER THE  
NEXT 1-2 YEARS**

The marketing business function is often leading the way when it comes to gen AI adoption. The value appears more obvious versus some other business functions.



OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT GEN  
**AI POSES SIGNIFICANT RISKS**

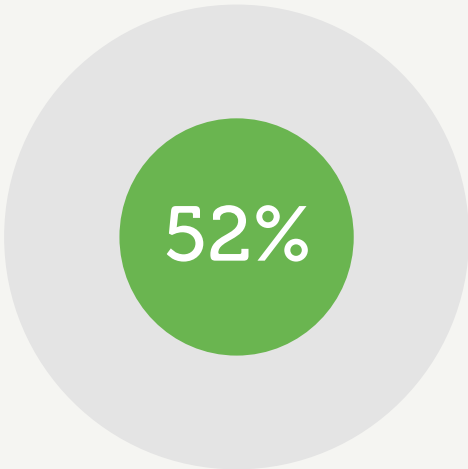
Clients expressed concerns about data management issues, IP infringements, inaccuracy and cybersecurity.



OF CLIENTS ADMITTED THAT  
**THEIR ORGANISATION IS  
FAILING TO ADEQUATELY  
MEET THE CHALLENGES  
AROUND AI RISK**

The negative consequences of gen AI are not easily dealt with and clients generally lack established risk related practices.

# 1.2 AI challenges



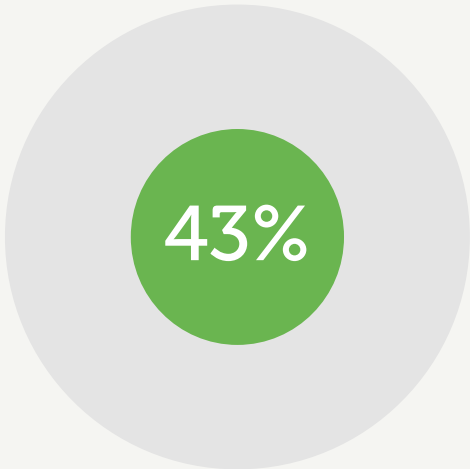
OF CLIENTS STATED THAT  
THEIR ORGANISATION **LACKS**  
**A COHERENT STRATEGY**  
AROUND GEN AI

These clients mention a lack of adequate training and guidance. Individuals are frequently using gen AI without proper corporate boundaries being in place.



MOST COMMON USES OF  
GEN AI IN THE MARKETING  
FUNCTION?

- 1 Content generation
- 2 Translation into multiple languages
- 3 Product descriptions



OF CLIENTS STATED THAT GEN  
AI PUTS **ONEROUS DEMANDS**  
ON QUALITY ASSURANCE TIME


While hundreds of content variations at the touch of a button are cited as a huge benefit, it can also put new demands on client approval time.

## 1.2 AI challenges



80%

OF CLIENTS EXPECT AI TO  
HAVE A **DOWNWARD EFFECT**  
ON AGENCY COSTS OVER THE  
NEXT 1-2 YEARS




An increase from our 2024 report. Clients are expecting agencies to use AI as a tool that can increase efficiency and speed up creative processes. In clients' minds, cost reductions are the natural consequence.



86%

OF CLIENTS AGREE THAT AI  
IS **NOT A REPLACEMENT** FOR  
GREAT STRATEGIC THINKING  
AND ORIGINAL CREATIVITY




The majority of clients see AI as a tool or an augmentation, not a replacement for highest quality agency input.



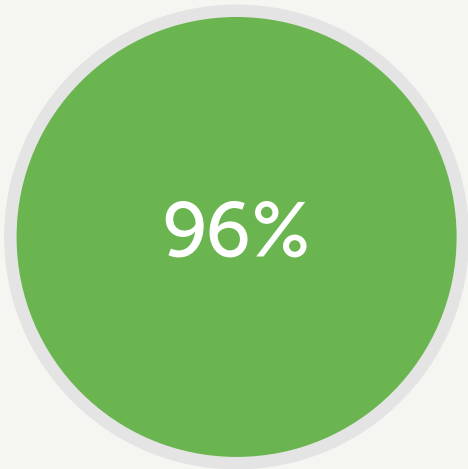
94%

OF CLIENTS AGREE THAT CLIENTS  
AND AGENCIES WILL NEED TO  
ENSURE THAT AI DOESN'T LEAD TO  
**INCREASING BRAND SAMENESS** AT  
THE EXPENSE OF DIFFERENTIATION  
AND UNIQUENESS



The capability for speed and volume should not compromise brand authenticity.

# 1.3 Creativity



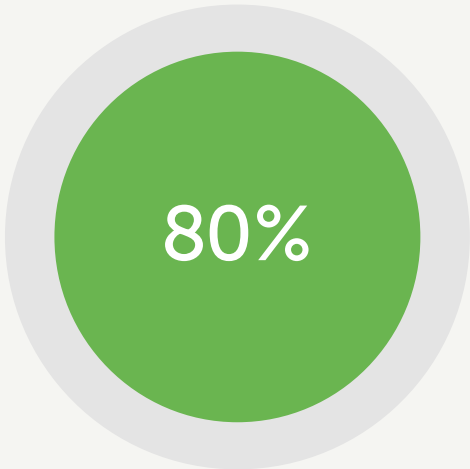
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT  
**GREAT CREATIVITY** HAS THE  
POWER TO POSITIVELY CHANGE  
BRAND FORTUNES

Almost universal agreement about the importance of great creativity and the strength of its impact.



OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE  
THEIR AGENCY TO **'PUSH  
BOUNDARIES'** MORE

An increase on last year. These clients talk about their agency's creative work as being solid but unexceptional. It conforms to expectations and delivers what the agency thinks the client wants, as opposed to more unexpected and interesting solutions. This perception tends to be more strongly expressed by senior clients.

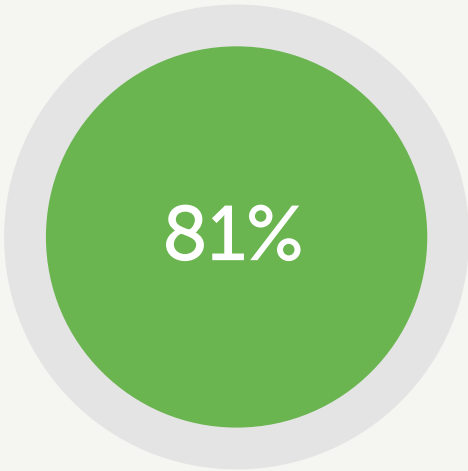


OF CLIENTS WOULD BE **'VERY  
NERVOUS'** ABOUT RELYING  
SOLELY ON THEIR AGENCY'S  
INSTINCT AND INTUITION

Every agency knows the importance of instinct and intuition when it's based on many years of experience. Clients, however, are in the risk reduction business. Their world is one of validation, proof and evidence. For most clients, explaining to the Board that the recommended route is based on instinct and intuition is not an option.



# 1.4 Agencies



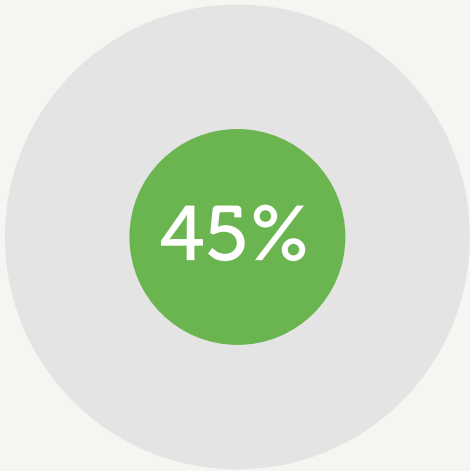
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT **IN-PERSON COLLABORATION**, AS OPPOSED TO REMOTE WORKING, IS AN IMPORTANT INGREDIENT OF GOOD CREATIVE WORK

Most clients believe that remote working is not as conducive to good creative work as when creatives are able to discuss, share and learn in the same physical environment.



OF CLIENTS STATE THAT HOW **THEIR AGENCY WORKS IS THE AGENCY'S BUSINESS** AND WOULD NOT TRY TO DICTATE

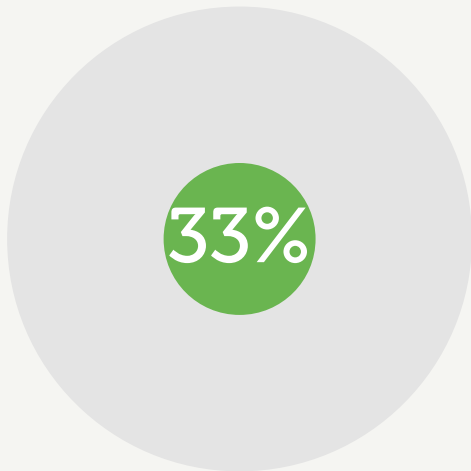
So, although most clients believe that in person creative collaboration is more effective, clients are generally not going to interfere. In clients' eyes, how agencies organise themselves is up to them and only becomes a potential issue when creative work disappoints.



OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR AGENCY TO **BE BOLDER IN THEIR VIEWPOINT**

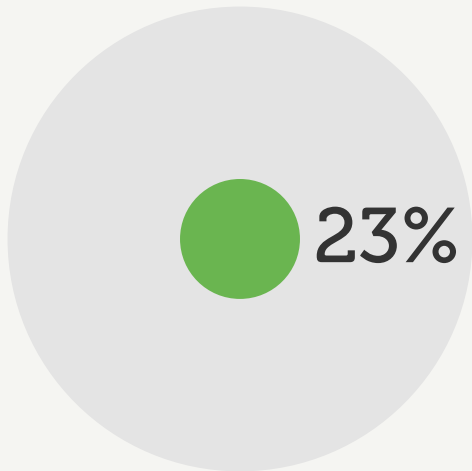
'If they think we're doing something wrong, then tell us'. In other words, don't be timid or just become 'yes' people.

# 1.4 Agencies



OF CLIENTS ARE THINKING  
**'MORE CAREFULLY'** ABOUT  
WHERE AND WHEN AGENCY  
SUPPORT IS NEEDED

It's about getting best value from external agencies – do we really need to do this project, can we do it ourselves, can we combine one project into another one?



OF CLIENTS FEEL THAT  
AGENCIES ARE GENERALLY  
MORE INTERESTED IN **WINNING  
NEW WORK** THAN BUILDING  
REAL CLIENT/AGENCY  
PARTNERSHIPS

It is more difficult to be seen as 'partners' than many agencies think.



OF CLIENTS VIEW THEIR  
AGENCY AS A **'PARTNER'**

A slight decrease from last year. It is more difficult to be seen as a 'partner' if the agency is involved in a narrow task or where the client engages multiple agencies.

## 1.4 Agencies

### TOP 5 FACTORS THAT DAMAGE A PARTNERSHIP PERCEPTION:

1

#### **Decline in proactivity**

The level of proactivity, enthusiasm and interest that was so evident at the start of the relationship has waned. The relationship has become more functional and delivery led.

2

#### **Agency feels stretched**

Emails are not always answered promptly or work is not always delivered on time. Perhaps the agency founders or principals don't check in as much. A feeling that the agency no longer values the relationship in the same way and is perhaps busy with other clients.

3

#### **Too much focus on the day-to-day**

Failing to build in more strategic conversations and formalised meetings where both agency and client step back from the day-to-day and look at the bigger picture.

4

#### **Staff turnover**

The movement of agency personnel, particularly in account management, can cause real client frustration. Knowledge transfer can suffer and there are delays while new team members get up to speed.

5

#### **Limited understanding**

Understanding of the brand and market are a given. Instead, clients often mention that it would be a stronger partnership if the agency knew more about areas such as operations, higher level strategic objectives and how those relate to the work in hand, internal stakeholders and politics. Clients increasingly want agencies to help them navigate internal challenges around stakeholders, justifying costs and explaining return on investment.

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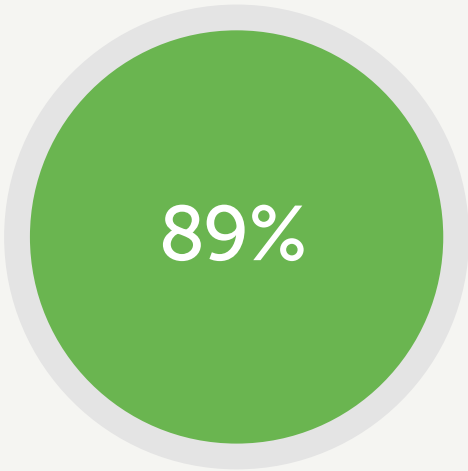
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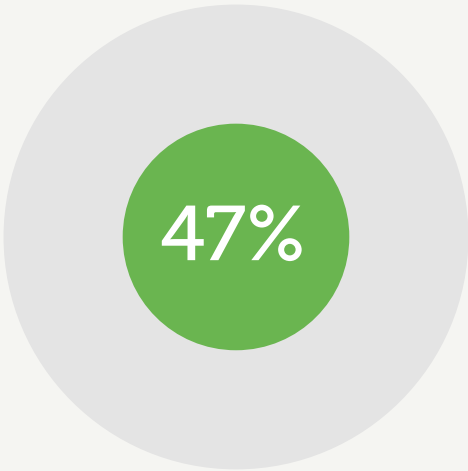
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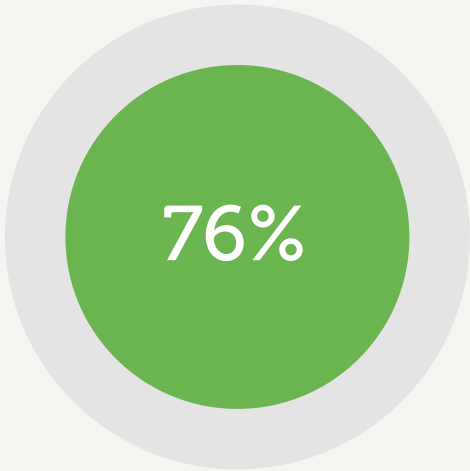
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT WHEN AGENCIES **GROW RAPIDLY**, THEY USUALLY LOSE WHAT MADE THEM SPECIAL

What gets lost? Most mentioned examples are a dilution of skills, founders receding in terms of visibility and levels of contact, staff churn, levels of interest and enthusiasm, more rigid processes and ‘everything becomes about money.’



OF MARKETING DIRECTORS WOULD, IDEALLY, LIKE TO BE **WORKING WITH FEWER AGENCIES**

Managing multiple agencies is seen as problematic for time starved clients.



OF CLIENTS **FAIL TO RECALL** THE NAMES OF MORE THAN 5 DESIGN AGENCIES, OVER AND ABOVE THEIR INCUMBENT AGENCY(IES)

Client knowledge of the design agency landscape can be fairly limited. This may explain the strange agency shortlists that clients sometimes assemble!



## 1.4 Agencies

### QUALITIES MOST VALUED IN AN AGENCY

'IF YOU WERE SELECTING A NEW AGENCY NEXT WEEK, WHAT QUALITIES WOULD YOU MOST VALUE?'

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT ANSWERS TO THIS QUESTION BUT THEY FALL INTO THE FOLLOWING BROAD THEMES:

1

#### People, team and relationship

- A sense of partnership
- Open and candid
- Good collaboration
- People you get on with
- Flexible when needed

2

#### High creative standards

- Consistently high, not great one day and average the next
- Capable of pushing boundaries – surprising the client
- Achieving impact but always staying relevant
- Getting it right first time

3

#### Efficient and organised

- Capable of driving projects not just managing them
- Responsive
- Good communications
- Attention to detail
- Taking pressure off the client

4

#### Understanding and expertise

- Depth of experience
- Brand and market knowledge
- Up to date with trends or technology
- Continuous effort to find out more

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Clients face a  
range of different  
and sometimes  
contradictory  
challenges.

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## 2.0 Winning Clients



## 2.1 Opening the door



92%

OF CLIENTS DISLIKE COLD  
'SELLING' BY AGENCIES

Top of the list of dislikes are cold calls. Clients prefer to feel that they are discovering an agency. The message for agencies is to draw clients to you through high quality content, direct approaches that are tailored and knowledge led not just credentials led, and building networks and communities. New business at its best is like an ongoing conversation.



70%

OF CLIENTS APPOINT AN  
AGENCY AFTER A 1.5 YEAR  
LEAD TIME

A very similar statistic to last year. A reminder that new business is often a slow burn where consistency and patience is rewarded.



67%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT  
SMALL/MEDIUM SIZED AGENCIES  
SHOULD FOCUS ON THEIR  
STRENGTHS RATHER THAN  
ATTEMPTING TO GROW INTO  
MORE OF A FULL-SERVICE AGENCY

Clients are wary of small/medium sized agencies that offer more services than seem feasible. They usually want their agency to grow and be successful but have sensitive antenna for any negative effects of growth like declines in client service levels or new services that are of a lesser standard than existing ones. Growth has to be accompanied by absolute consistency in standards.

## 2.1 Opening the door

### TOP 3 MOST EFFECTIVE DOOR OPENERS

CLIENTS CITED THESE EXAMPLES AS BEING THE MOST EFFECTIVE AGENCY APPROACHES TO STIMULATE A MEETING:

1

**'We've noticed this...'**

Pointing out where and how the client can do something better. It's a specific observation about an aspect of the client's business that makes the client think, 'Are we missing a trick here?' It's a bespoke approach so is more time consuming for the agency and requires the agency to stick its neck out to give a view that may be based on limited knowledge, but when done well it is highly effective.

2

**'I'm going to learn something'**

There are a plethora of agency insight presentations, offered in a spirit of knowledge sharing where the agency hopes it can start a relationship and a dialogue with a new client. There are numerous examples where the presentation has failed to live up to expectations (see next statistic) but, when the issue strikes a chord and is intelligently expressed, it is still an effective door opener.

3

**'A definitive case study'**

A case study that stands above the average. This is a 'game changer' that disrupted a market and set a new standard. There are plenty of agencies that don't have a 'game changer' case study but when you do, shout about it.



## 2.2 New business presentations



34%

OF CLIENTS HAVE BEEN  
**'DISAPPOINTED'** BY AN AGENCY  
NEW BUSINESS PRESENTATION  
THAT CLAIMED TO OFFER  
LEARNING AND INSIGHT ABOUT  
A PARTICULAR ISSUE

This is where the presentation has fallen a little flat versus the new business hype and promise. Typical client comments are that the presentation felt 'generic' and 'round robin' in the sense that it was probably being offered to many other clients. 'I didn't learn anything new' is another typical remark. The message here is that if you are offering learning and insight, then it had better be good. Otherwise, the result is an underwhelmed client and a damaged agency reputation.



71%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT  
AGENCY NEW BUSINESS  
PRESENTATIONS **FAIL TO**  
**ALLOW ENOUGH TIME FOR**  
DISCUSSION

Agencies tend to go into a default screen based 'presentation mode' whereas many clients are equally keen to discuss and ask questions.



78%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEY  
**DO NOT HAVE TIME TO SEE**  
SPECULATIVE AGENCY NEW  
BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS

Clients generally don't have time to window shop. There needs to be a real point to the meeting and a tangible benefit for the client.

## 2.2 New business presentations

### A GREAT NEW BUSINESS PRESENTATION – KEY INGREDIENTS

WHAT MAKES A GREAT NEW BUSINESS PRESENTATION? FROM 680 CLIENT INTERVIEWS, THESE ARE THE TOP 3 MENTIONED FACTORS:

1

#### 'People we can work with'

A complex range of softer factors are mentioned – a consultative style, knowledgeable, enthusiastic but not over egged, confident but not domineering, good listeners, pertinent questions, a team feel.

2

#### 'A stand out case study'

Clients tend not to remember 5 or 6 case studies. Instead, it's usually one particular case study that sticks in their memory because of its direct relevance to the challenges they are facing.

3

#### 'A more strategic approach'

These agencies instil confidence that they are an agency to be consulted, not just briefed. This is mostly conveyed when talking about the work and involves expert setting up of the strategic challenges being addressed and clear explanations of the thinking and insight driving the creative solution. Most clients are more interested in the problem being solved than getting bogged down in details of the typography and shade of teal that was used.



## 2.2 New business presentations



64%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT THE 'ABOUT US' SECTIONS OF AGENCY NEW BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS TEND TO BE QUITE SIMILAR AND UNDIFFERENTIATED

In a very competitive environment, it's challenging for agencies to create a memorable point of difference. Our interviews reveal that the agencies that stand out usually have a consistent ethos and a distinct culture. They also tend to have an engaging agency story, the more emotional part of the sell.



66%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT AGENCY CASE STUDIES **FAILED** TO TELL THEM WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW

This can be a lack of effective set up in terms of the challenge and business problem or a failure to closely align the agency's solution with the strategic challenge being addressed.



45%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT AGENCIES TEND TO SHOW **TOO MANY CASE STUDIES** IN NEW BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS

Relevance is the key. Better to share just 3 totally relevant case studies than pad out the presentation because you think 6 will look more impressive.

## 2.2 New business presentations

What do clients look for in case studies?

These are the top 10 most mentioned factors:


- 1 What is the central strategic challenge being addressed and is it similar to a challenge that I'm facing?
- 2 What is different and special about the project – why are you showing it to me, how is it relevant, what is its claim to fame?
- 3 What is the level of client/agency collaboration and partnership – was the agency just briefed or was there a deeper relationship of real substance?
- 4 What is the level of strategic thinking involved?
- 5 Is there any sort of breakthrough, step change or clever watershed moment?
- 6 Is there an audience insight driving the creative solution?
- 7 What is the central creative idea – is there an idea or is it more about decoration?
- 8 What is the impact of the work – are there any hard results?
- 9 What did this agency bring to the project, as opposed to any other agency – anything specific in the process and approach, the nature of the collaboration, the creative thinking?
- 10 Is there overall clarity – to the point, not an overload of images, not over long?

## 2.3 Pitches



98%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT  
A PITCH IS **GOOD BUSINESS  
PRACTICE** FOR HIGH  
VALUE PROJECTS




In 11 years, this percentage has never dipped below 96%. It is important to stress that 'high value' means bigger budget, brand directional, 'must succeed', more strategic projects. In clients' eyes, not to put such projects out to pitch would be bad business practice.



60%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT  
ASSEMBLING A SHORTLIST OF  
AGENCIES FOR A PITCH  
IS **'DIFFICULT'**




Clients' knowledge of the agency landscape can be relatively limited, and many tend to rely on personal experience of agencies and the recommendations of colleagues. Searching for agencies that are winning awards is another common method. It can be difficult for these clients to accurately distinguish the real differences between agencies and why an agency may or may not be particularly relevant for their brief.



74%

OF CLIENTS WOULD NOT  
**EXPECT TO PAY FOR A  
CREATIVE PITCH**



Despite much agency debate on this issue, the message doesn't seem to be getting through to clients. The majority of clients remain stubbornly resistant to paying for creative pitches.

## 2.3 Pitches

SO, WHY ARE CLIENTS UNWILLING TO PAY?  
THESE ARE THE TOP MENTIONED REASONS:

**1**

### The carrot is big enough

It's a large project and, therefore, it is worth agencies making an investment.  
The prize is worth it.

**2**

### A competitive market

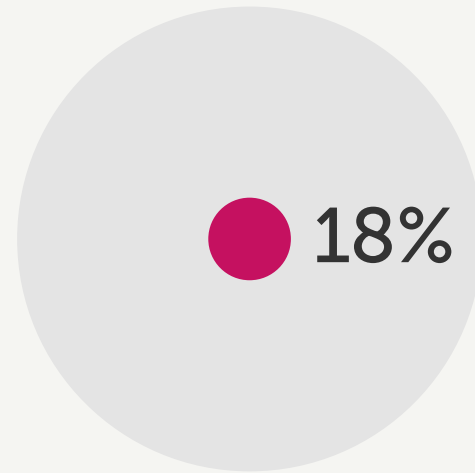
Put simply, there are enough agencies who are willing to pitch for free. It is then seen by clients as fairly standard practice for agencies to free pitch, so why step outside that expectation?

**3**

### Buying a service as opposed to a product is tricky

The 'product' is not there to see. Many clients believe that it is incumbent on the agency to make the intangible more real by revealing a limited amount of actual work as part of the sales process.

## 2.3 Pitches



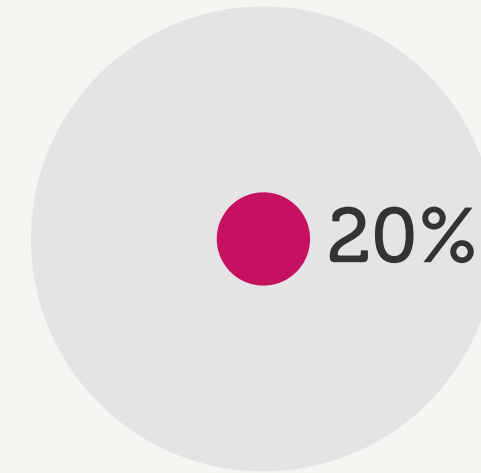
OF CLIENTS HAVE SEEN A PITCH PRESENTATION WHERE THE AGENCY'S APPROACH FELT **ARROGANT**

Clients talk about agencies not listening or believing that the approach adopted for another client is the exact answer to their situation, as opposed to really understanding the nuances. An approach of collaborating with the client to determine what is best for them is preferable to 'We know what's best for you.'



OF CLIENTS CAN RECALL PITCHES WHERE KEY AGENCY PERSONNEL PLAYED A MAJOR ROLE BUT THEN **RECEDED** WHEN THE BUSINESS WAS WON

Most clients now seem wise to this and want to meet the people at the pitch presentation who will actually be doing the day-to-day work.



OF CLIENTS HAVE LEFT A PITCH PRESENTATION **SLIGHTLY UNCLEAR** ABOUT THE ROLES OF THE PEOPLE PRESENTING

A slight confusion about seniority levels, who is leading the pitch, who represents strategy, creative or account management.

## 2.3 Pitches

### TOP CLIENT IRRITANTS IN A PITCH PROCESS:

1

#### Inconsistency of agency personnel

For instance, the person at the Q&A session is not at the pitch presentation or there are different points of contact through the process rather than one person co-ordinating.

2

#### Typos and errors

Clients can get surprisingly animated about some very small errors. They do send out a very poor message, though, at exactly the time when agencies should appear faultless. When clients are seeking to whittle down a shortlist, small errors can become an easy reason to exclude an agency.

3

#### Not checking back against the brief

Asking questions that are already answered in the brief or asking for information that has already been supplied. Some clients pointed out that there didn't seem to be someone internally at the agency asking, 'Didn't the brief say...?' or 'Can we check back to the overall objectives?'

4

#### Lack of engagement in the process

It pays to be super interested and engaged in the pitch process. A keen agency stands out against one that is more remote or seemingly too busy to fully engage.



## 2.3 Pitches

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## 2.3 Pitches



87%

OF CLIENTS ARE OPEN AND RECEPTIVE TO THE IDEA OF AN AGENCY **TEAMING UP** WITH ANOTHER AGENCY(IES) TO BRING DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES TO BEAR ON LARGE PROJECTS

The caveat is that it has to be well handled with a consistent, central contact(s) so that co-ordination is the responsibility of the agency not the client.



68%

OF CLIENTS USE A SCORING SYSTEM WHEN **EVALUATING** PITCH PRESENTATIONS

A pseudo-scientific approach to agency evaluation is widespread. This tends to contrast with how agency shortlists are assembled which can often be more haphazard – asking colleagues for recommendations and Googling awards are common.

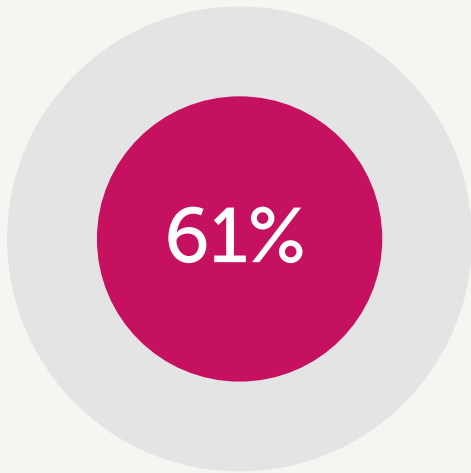


82%

OF CLIENTS STATED IN POST PITCH INTERVIEWS THAT THE WINNING AGENCY WAS CLEARLY THE BEST AND THE **CLIENT'S DECISION WAS UNANIMOUS**

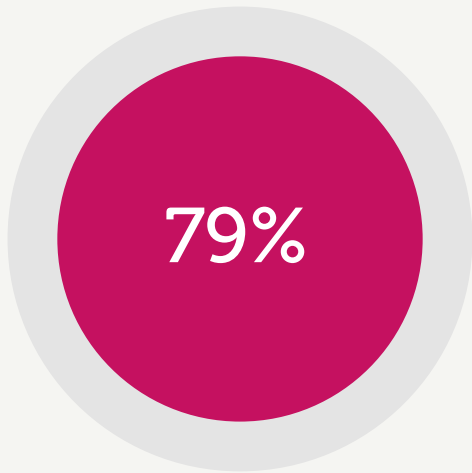
'You came a close second' is rarely true. There is almost always clear distance between the winning agency and the second placed agency.

## 2.4 Websites



OF CLIENTS ADMIT TO FINDING IT **DIFFICULT TO ESTABLISH** WHAT AN AGENCY IS BEST AT WHEN LOOKING AT THEIR WEBSITE

A slight increase on last year. Clients frequently comment that too many agencies ‘like to claim that they can do everything’, rather than being clear and honest about what they are best at.



OF CLIENTS AGREE THAT IT WOULD BE HELPFUL IF AGENCIES **STATED MORE CLEARLY** ON THEIR WEBSITES THE TYPE OF CLIENTS THEY REALLY WANT TO WORK WITH

When clients look at an agency website, they are essentially asking themselves, ‘Is this agency for me?’ This works two ways.



OF CLIENTS EXPRESSED A PREFERENCE FOR **‘REAL’ IMAGES** IN WEBSITE CASE STUDIES, AS OPPOSED TO BEAUTY SHOTS

These clients are keen on real world settings - the new identity on the side of a vehicle, the pack on a supermarket shelf, the ad on a bus etc.

## 2.4 Websites



63%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEY  
**APPRECIATE VIDEO** WHEN  
USED TO BRING CASE STUDIES  
TO LIFE

Clicking on a video is easier than reading lots of copy but it also helps to convey dynamism, excitement and impact.



68%

OF CLIENTS ARE GENERALLY  
**UNIMPRESSED** BY DESIGN  
AGENCY SHOWREEL STYLE  
VIDEOS

Most design work demands some explanation and understanding of the context. Videos with rapidly changing images of work set to music fail to tell the client very much.



70%

OF CLIENTS PREFER A  
STATEMENT ON THE HOME  
PAGE THAT **SUMS UP** WHAT THE  
AGENCY IS ALL ABOUT

There is a level of frustration with Home pages that are full of work examples but no statement that introduces the agency.



## 2.4 Websites



65%

OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE  
AGENCIES TO SHOW MORE  
**BEFORE AND AFTER EXAMPLES**  
OF WORK ON AGENCY  
WEBSITES

A similar statistic to our 2023 report when we last probed this issue with clients. There can be a slight frustration for clients when they don't really know whether the redesign was an evolution or something more radical. The 'before' version gives them something they can judge for themselves.



48%

OF CLIENTS STATED THEY  
WOULD LIKE MORE '**CLIENT**  
**VOICES**' ON AGENCY WEBSITES

For clients, the validation of other clients can be very powerful. Whether that is a client quote or a video testimonial, letting clients speak for you is an effective technique when done well.

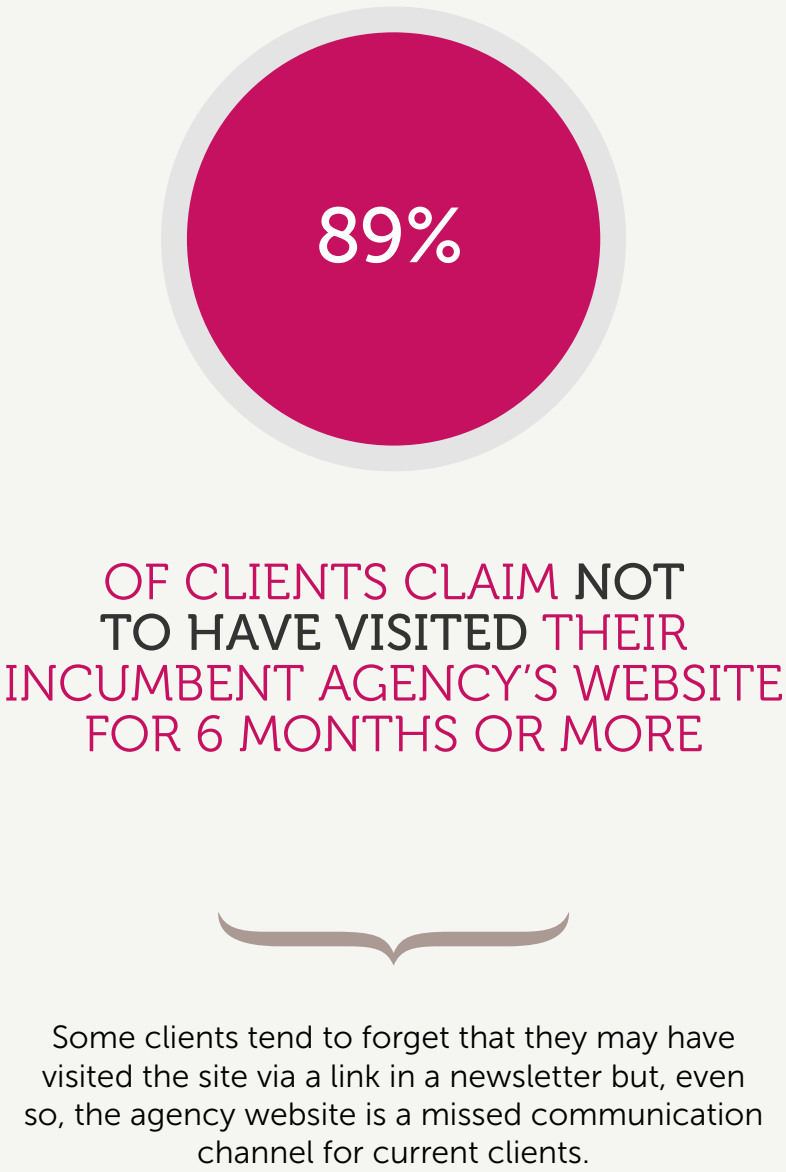


78%

OF CLIENTS FIND IT  
**FRUSTRATING** WHEN PROFILES  
OF AGENCY PRINCIPALS ARE  
NOT ADEQUATELY SHOWN ON  
AN AGENCY'S WEBSITE

Particularly for small/medium sized agencies, people are key. Backgrounds or biographies, not just photos, help to satisfy client curiosity and give a more tangible feel for the agency. Most clients also state that links to LinkedIn profiles can be useful.

## 2.4 Websites



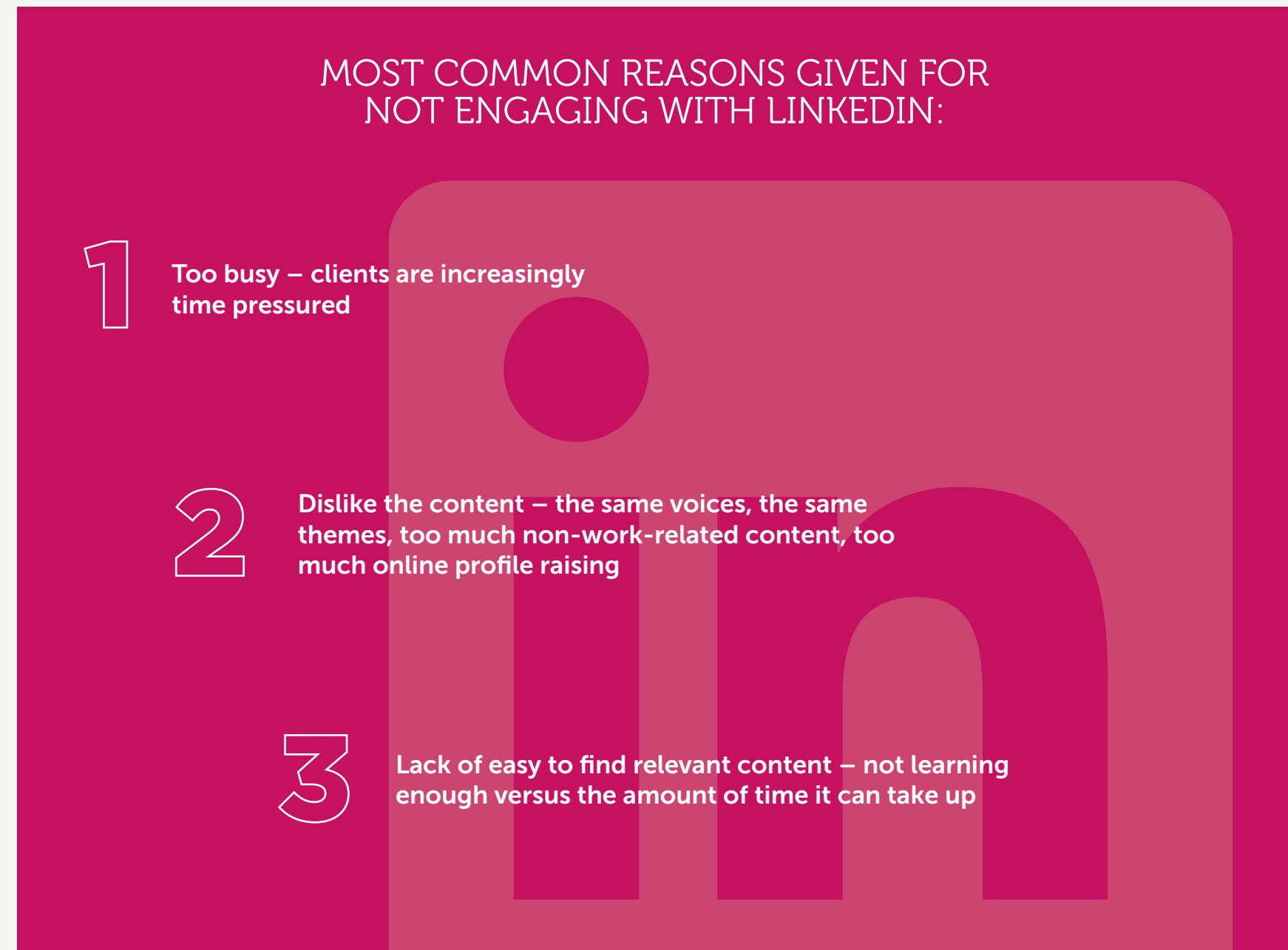
## 2.5 Marketing content



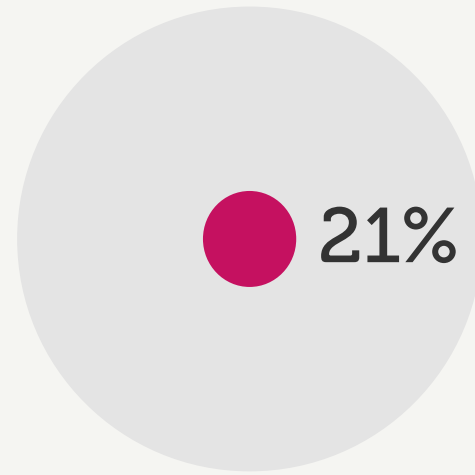
OF CLIENTS HAVE A VERY  
LOW LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT  
WITH LINKEDIN



A slight increase on last year. These clients visit and post very infrequently.

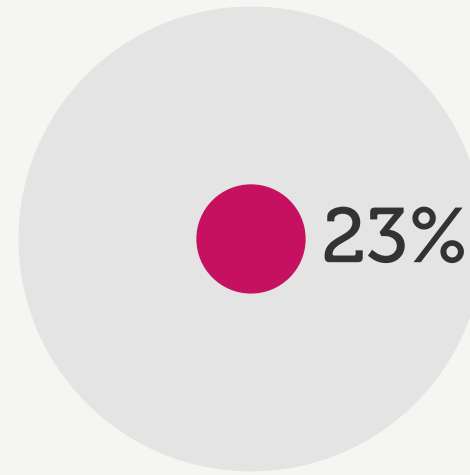


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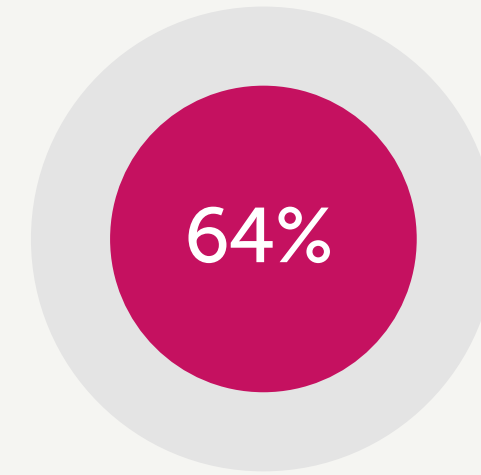
OF CLIENTS **DO NOT ENGAGE**  
ON LINKEDIN OR ANY  
OTHER PLATFORM

Of the 58% claiming to have a low level of engagement with LinkedIn, 21% do not engage at all on LinkedIn or any other platform. These clients need to be reached by other, more direct methods.



OF CLIENTS ARE MORE  
**ACTIVELY ENGAGED**  
ON LINKEDIN

A slight decrease on last year. Most clients are on LinkedIn but that's very different from being 'actively engaged'. Agencies may be overestimating the power and reach of LinkedIn where clients are concerned.



OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE  
THEIR AGENCY'S MARKETING  
CONTENT TO BE MORE  
**'RELEVANT'**

When it comes to knowledge sharing, this means agencies choosing narrower subject topics that appeal to particular audiences. That demands more agency effort to reach a smaller audience, but it may be worth it in order to ensure relevance.

## 2.5 Marketing content



69%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT  
THERE IS TOO MUCH  
AGENCY SELF-PROMOTION  
ON LINKEDIN

This is a difficult balance for agencies because the same clients also like to feel that an agency is dynamic, successful and thriving. Therefore, a mix of self-promotion and knowledge sharing is necessary. These clients, however, believe that the scales have tipped too far towards self-promotion.



67%

OF CLIENTS 'ACTIVELY ENGAGED'  
ON LINKEDIN **STRUGGLE TO**  
**REMEMBER** WHETHER THEY ARE  
FOLLOWING THEIR AGENCY,  
AS OPPOSED TO JUST BEING  
CONNECTED TO INDIVIDUALS

'I might be...' 'I'm not sure' are typical responses when asked, 'Do you follow your agency on LinkedIn?'



74%

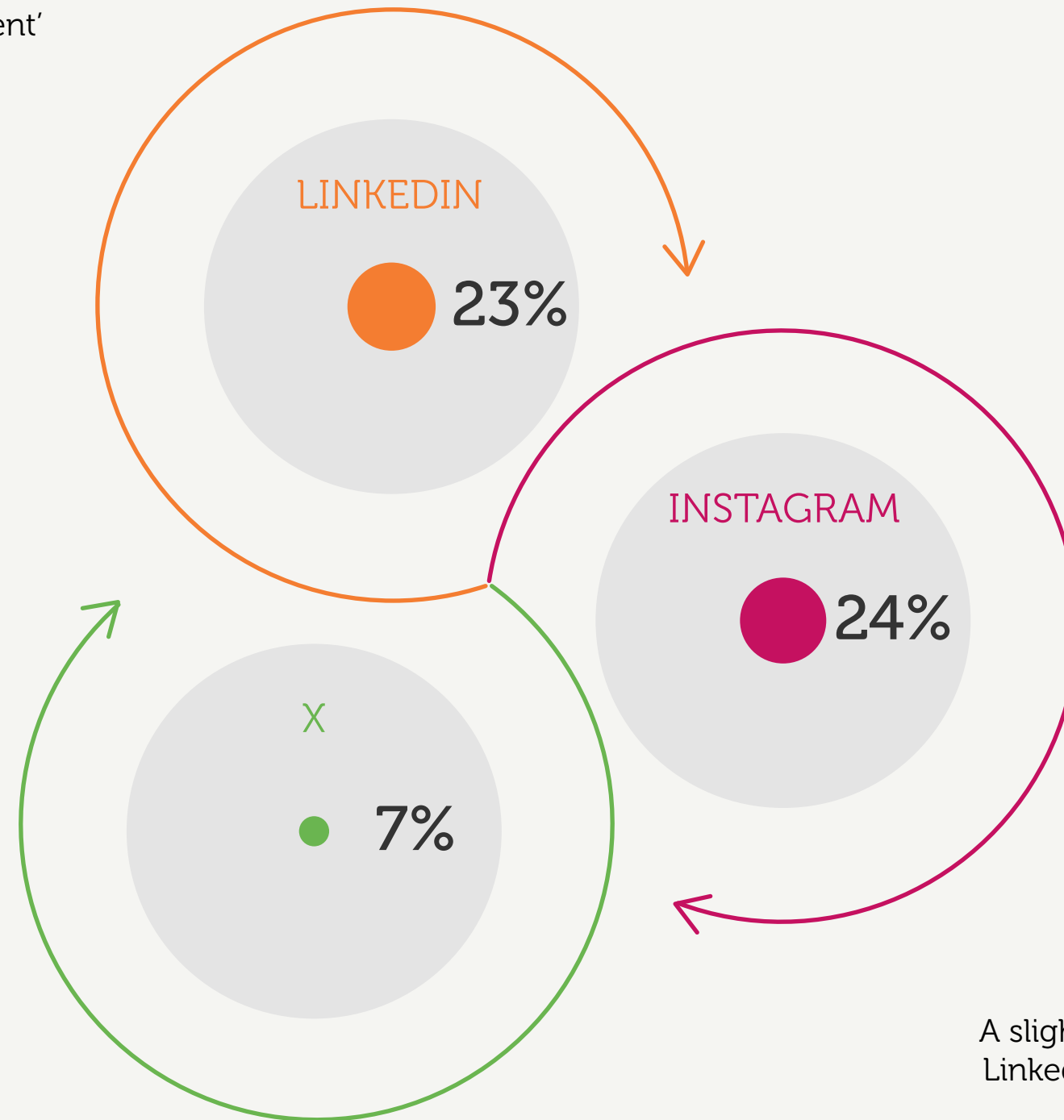
OF CLIENTS ENGAGED WITH  
LINKEDIN **PREFER TO FOLLOW**  
**PEOPLE** RATHER THAN  
AGENCIES

The individual LinkedIn accounts of agency leaders are potentially more powerful than the agency account.

## 2.5 Marketing content

### Active engagement

These are the levels of 'active engagement' on different platforms, as opposed to clients just saying, 'I'm on Instagram' or 'I'm on LinkedIn.'



A slight decline in engagement for both LinkedIn and X. Instagram is the winner with a 6% increase on last year.

---

56% of clients  
believe that agency  
websites lack clarity  
around the agency's  
positioning  
and offer.

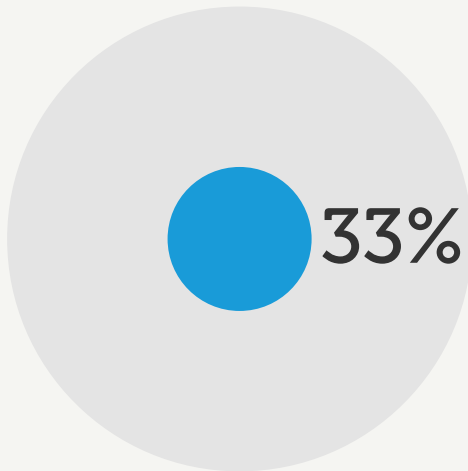
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## 3.0 Retaining & Growing Clients



### 3.1 Client service



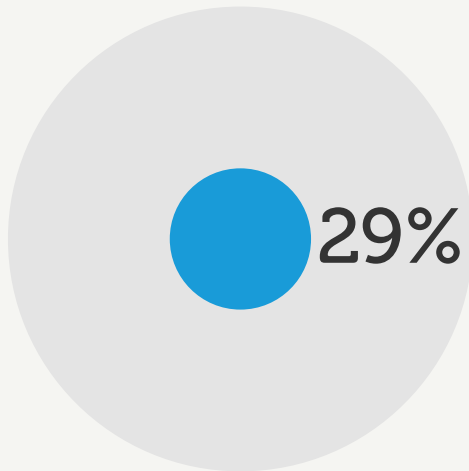
OF CLIENTS HAVE EXPERIENCED SITUATIONS WHERE AGENCIES HAVE BEEN **'OVERLY DEFENSIVE'** ABOUT CREATIVE WORK

There is a balance to be struck between arguing strongly for the agency's creative route and taking account of the client's view and situation. Defensiveness can come across not just in what is said but in body language.



OF CLIENTS **CANNOT RECALL** THE CORRECT JOB TITLES OF THE MAIN CONTACTS AT THEIR AGENCY

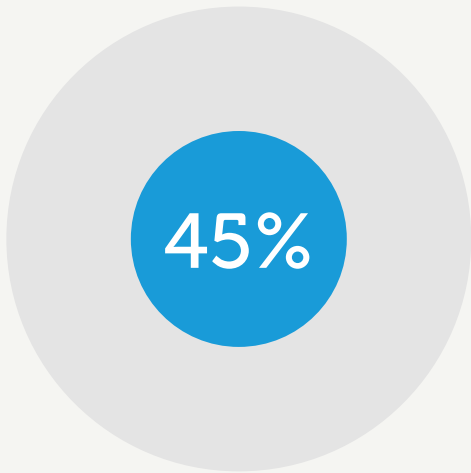
In our interviews clients often refer to the Account Director as the Account Manager, the CEO as the Managing Director or the Senior Designer as the Creative Director. One could argue that none of this matters and that job titles are more about how the agency organises itself. The counter argument is shouldn't clients be clear about agency roles and structure?



OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT AGENCY ROLES AND STRUCTURE ARE NOT QUITE AS CLEAR AS THEY SHOULD BE

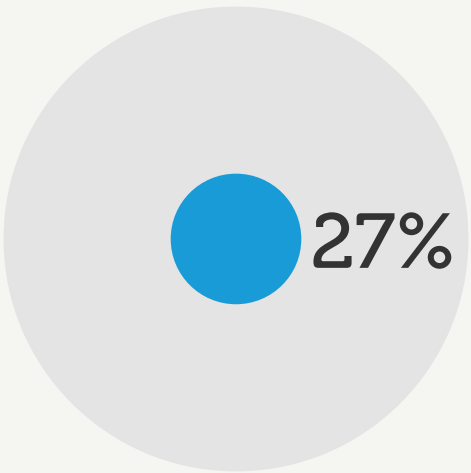
There can sometimes be a lack of clarity about who is leading the project, who to contact about particular issues, or why someone appears for part of the project and then seems to disappear. The agency is usually clear internally about roles and structure but is failing to fully communicate this to the client.

### 3.1 Client service



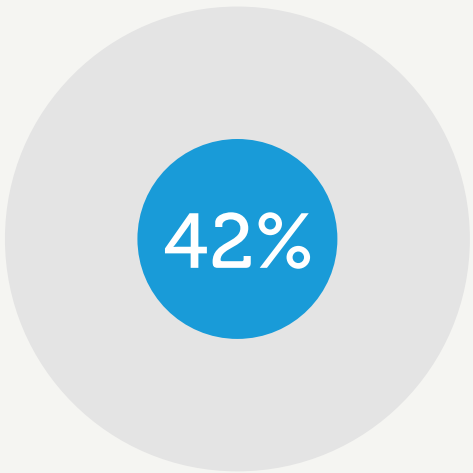
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT  
THEIR AGENCY'S ACCOUNT  
MANAGEMENT IS TOO  
TRANSACTIONAL

A slight decrease on last year but it's still a significant percentage. The most mentioned missing ingredients are proactivity, ability to see the bigger picture, adding value over and above simply carrying out client requests.



OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEIR  
AGENCY CAN SOMETIMES  
BRING TOO MANY PEOPLE  
TO MEETINGS

Too many people at meetings can make the client think, 'We're paying for this!'



OF CLIENTS CAN RECALL AN  
ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT  
'BAD EXPERIENCE'

See next page for examples.



## 3.1 Client service

Some of these can seem relatively minor but clients tend to have long memories for mistakes that make their lives more difficult. Most common complaints about agency account management:

- 1 Missed deadlines
- 2 Not flagging problems early enough or even hiding problems
- 3 Lack of clear and regular updates
- 4 Interest and proactivity have waned
- 5 Not listening effectively
- 6 Lack of attention to detail
- 7 Changes of agency personnel resulting in new people getting up to speed
- 8 Changes of agency personnel not communicated well
- 9 Lack of note taking at meetings
- 10 Not being realistic about deadlines

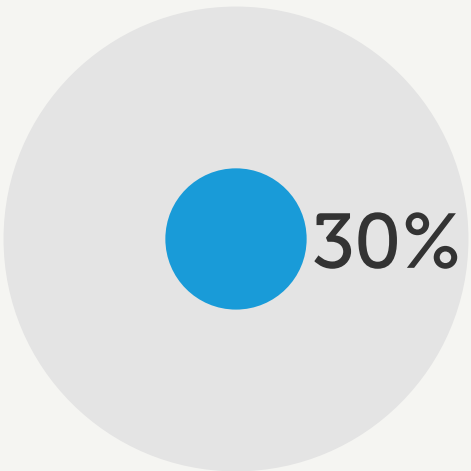
### 3.1 Client service



OF CLIENTS STATED THAT A  
'DISCOVERY' PHASE HAD **FAILED**  
TO ADD ENOUGH VALUE



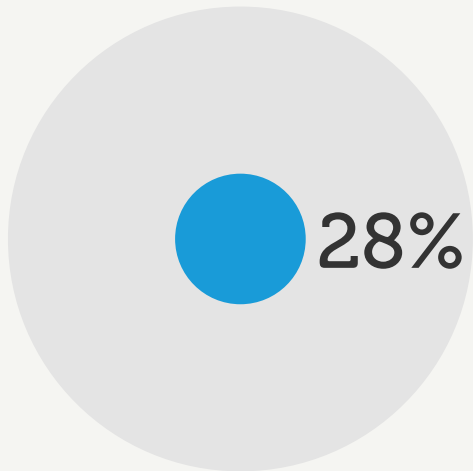
An 8% rise from 2022 when we last probed this issue. Clients are increasingly impatient about paying agencies large sums of money to 'get up to speed'. Instead, clients are looking for earlier and faster insights, more pertinent observations and conclusions.



OF CLIENTS WISH THEIR  
AGENCY WOULD **ASK MORE**  
QUESTIONS AND **DIG DEEPER**



Sometimes agencies can be too willing to accept a poor brief. These clients are asking agencies to be tougher and more rigorous in their approach.



OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE  
THEIR AGENCY TO BE MORE  
**COLLABORATIVE**



A slight increase on our 2023 report when we last probed this issue. Most agencies pride themselves on a collaborative approach so there is a slight misalignment here on what clients mean by 'collaborative' versus what agencies may mean.

## 3.1 Client service

TOP 3 OBSTACLES TO COLLABORATION  
THESE ARE THE MOST MENTIONED:

2

### Always wanting to win more work

Clients realise that agencies are keen to win more work but swiftly become irritated by what they see as a 'sell, sell, sell' approach or when everything seems to have a proposal attached. Clients don't like agency ambition interfering with the project in hand.

### The 'big reveal' model

Clients are increasingly nervous about a relative silence while the agency goes away and prepares the big presentation. Instead, interim meetings and earlier sharing of thoughts and ideas help to reassure the client that the agency is staying on brief.

1

3

### Defensiveness

There comes a point when conviction and putting across a strong argument tip over into 'not listening' and being overly 'defensive'. In clients' eyes, this is the opposite of collaboration.

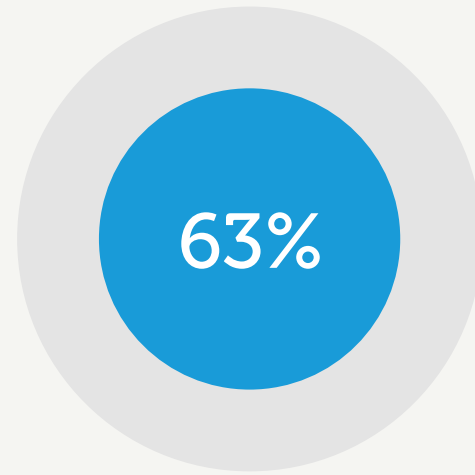
## 3.1 Client service

'If you could choose just one area of your business that you'd like your agency to know more about, what would it be?'  
These are the most common themes:

- 
- 1 Internal stakeholders**  
Better knowledge of internal stakeholders, how to communicate and handle them
  - 2 Sales**  
Closer knowledge of how sales teams sell the products/services can be invaluable
  - 3 Operations**  
For example, how a store or a restaurant actually operates
  - 4 Bigger strategic objectives**  
Understanding how the company's wider strategic objectives relate to the project(s) in hand
  - 5 Sustainability**  
Understanding the company's approach to sustainability and where there is work to be done
  - 6 Target audiences**  
A deeper knowledge of their motivators, purchasing processes and changing needs
  - 7 Other products/services**  
The company's total range of products/services, not just ones being worked on, and how they fit together
  - 8 Changing legislation**  
Keeping abreast of legislative changes and their effect on corporate communications
  - 9 Technical change**  
Keeping up to date with technology changes and their implications for the business

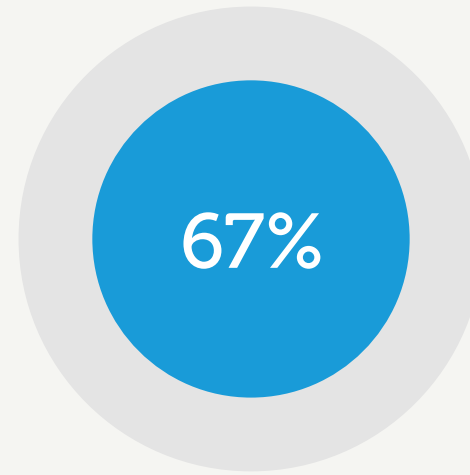


## 3.1 Client service



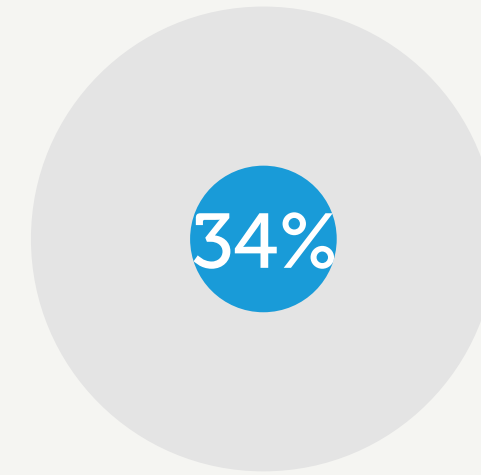
OF CLIENTS INVOLVED IN  
LARGER PROJECTS **DISLIKE**  
ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT  
BY EMAIL

There is a growing demand for centralised platforms that eliminate long email trails where things can get missed. Clients also remind agencies that they can always pick up the phone, rather than defaulting to email.



OF CLIENTS IN WELL-  
ESTABLISHED CLIENT/AGENCY  
RELATIONSHIPS WOULD LIKE  
THEIR AGENCY TO BE **MORE**  
OPEN AND SELF-CRITICAL

These clients believe that when a client/agency relationship is well established and the agency feels secure in its position, then this should lead to more open dialogue about where improvements can be made. This results in a greater sense of collaboration and partnership. Many agencies, however, prefer to accept praise rather than seek criticism.



OF CLIENTS ARE  
**NOT COMFORTABLE** WITH  
THEIR AGENCY PRESENTING  
AT BOARD LEVEL

Presenting at Board level requires a particular skill set and approach.

## 3.1 Client service

### TOP QUALITIES NEEDED TO PRESENT AT BOARD LEVEL:

1

#### **Impressive individual(s)**

A key individual who possesses the experience and gravitas to connect with the Board and command their respect.

2

#### **Ability to crystallise**

The most senior audiences rarely want to get bogged down in the details. It's often more about giving topline clarity and crystallising the main points.

3

#### **Good presentation skills**

Well prepared, professional and polished.

4

#### **Wider understanding of the business**

Demonstrate an understanding of the company beyond the confines of a particular project, however big that project may be. To be able to put the presentation within the context of the wider business.

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#### **Impressive individual(s)**

A key individual who possesses the experience and gravitas to connect with the Board and command their respect.

2

#### **Ability to crystallise**

The most senior audiences rarely want to get bogged down in the details. It's often more about giving topline clarity and crystallising the main points.

3

#### **Good presentation skills**

Well prepared, professional and polished.

4

#### **Wider understanding of the business**

Demonstrate an understanding of the company beyond the confines of a particular project, however big that project may be. To be able to put the presentation within the context of the wider business.

## 3.1 Client service

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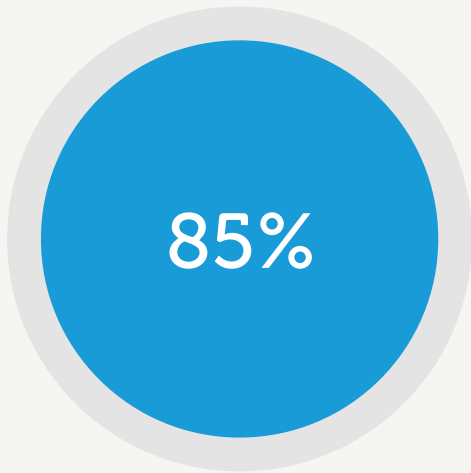
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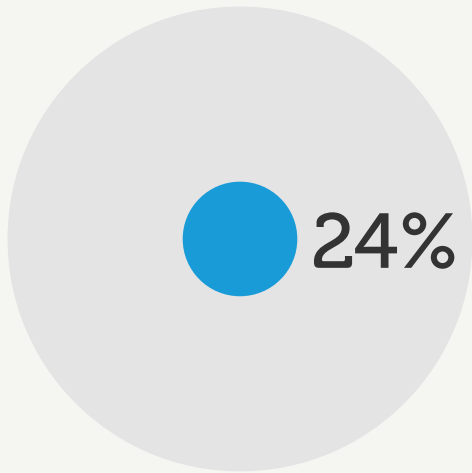
Demonstrate an understanding of the company beyond the confines of a particular project, however big that project may be. To be able to put the presentation within the context of the wider business.

### 3.1 Client service



OF CLIENTS WITH A WEAKER OR MORE VULNERABLE RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR AGENCY CITED **CLIENT SERVICE ISSUES** AS THE MAIN REASON

It's generally not the quality of work that makes or breaks client/agency relationships, but client service failings. These can impinge on client time and make the client's life more difficult. Eventually, they become evidence that the agency is 'not listening'.



OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE **BETTER PLANNING** AT THE START OF BIGGER PROJECTS

Clients talk about timelines, who's who, setting objectives and expectations. A little more planning at the front end can make the whole process smoother.

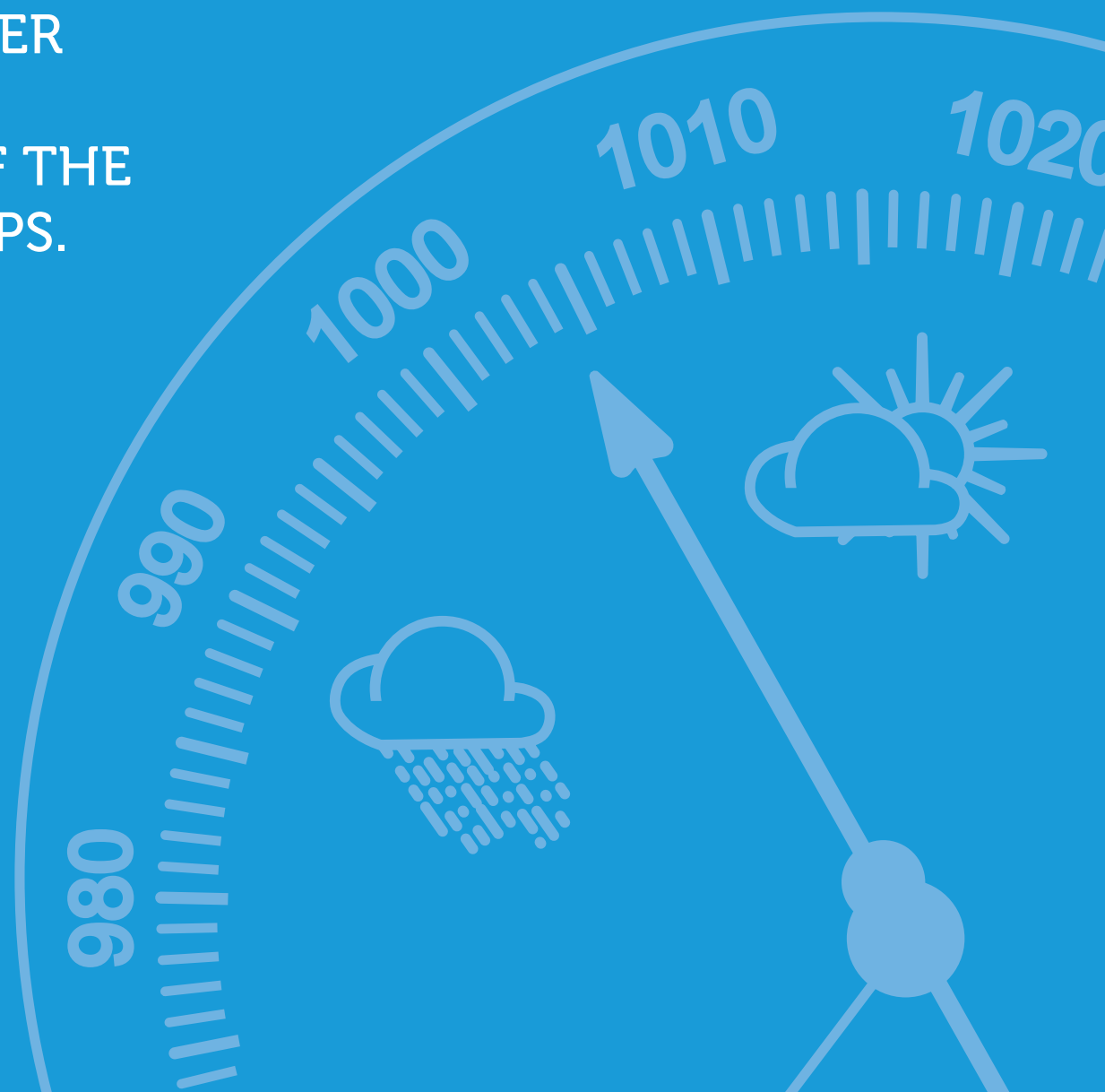


OF CLIENTS HAVE HAD OCCASIONS WHEN THE **LINK BETWEEN STRATEGIC AND CREATIVE WORK** GETS LOST

This is where the bridge between strategic and creative work has failed. The creative work is disconnected or simply fails to live up to the promise of the strategy.

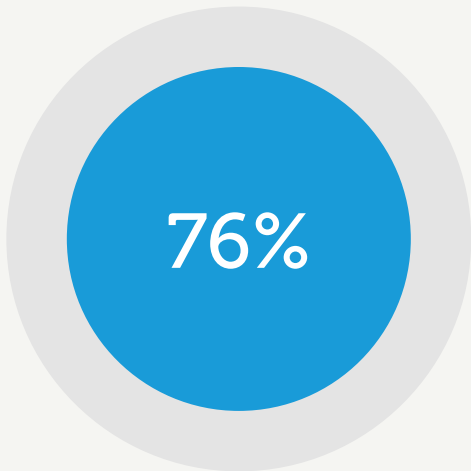
## 3.2 Barometer questions

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF CRUNCH BAROMETER QUESTIONS THAT WE ASK IN EVERY CLIENT INTERVIEW. THESE ARE BASIC INDICATORS OF THE STRENGTH OF CLIENT/AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS.





### 3.2 Barometer questions



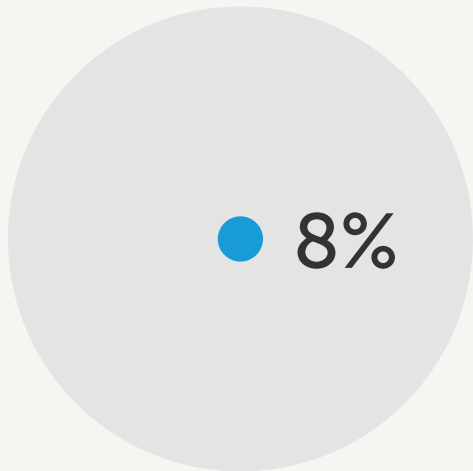
OF CLIENTS DESCRIBE THEIR  
FEELINGS TOWARDS THEIR  
AGENCY AS **'POSITIVE'**

Clients usually have plenty to say and lots of constructive criticisms, but most comments are within the context of a generally positive relationship.



OF AGENCIES WOULD  
RECOMMEND THEIR AGENCY  
**'UNRESERVEDLY'** AS OPPOSED  
TO **'WITH CAVEATS'**

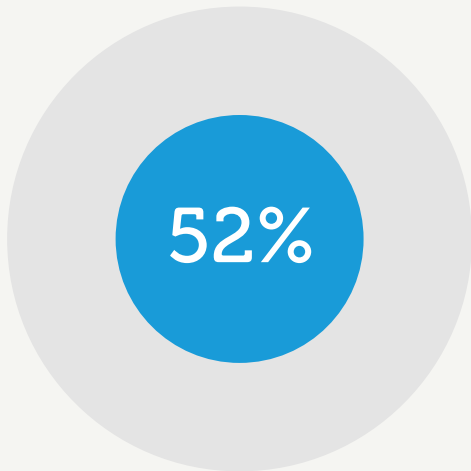
A 5% increase on last year.



OF CLIENTS DESCRIBE THEIR  
AGENCY AS **'THE BEST'**  
**PARTNER/SUPPLIER** THAT THEY  
WORK WITH, REGARDLESS OF  
DISCIPLINE

This is difficult to achieve when so many clients have relationships with multiple agencies.

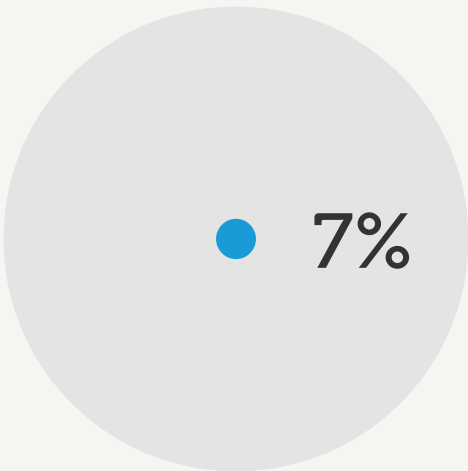
# 3.2 Barometer questions



OF CLIENTS STATED THAT  
THEIR AGENCY **'MEETS AND  
SOMETIMES EXCEEDS'** THEIR  
EXPECTATIONS



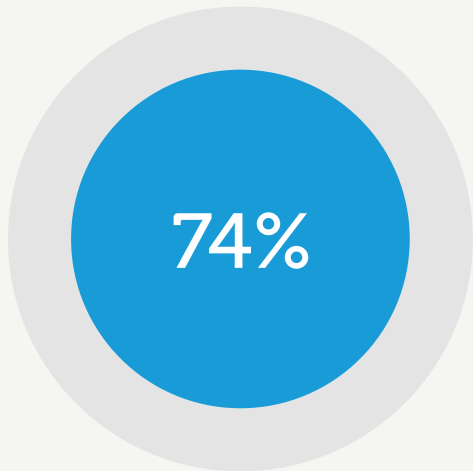
A slight increase on last year. 'Meets and sometimes exceeds' is the gold standard. Client expectations are not just about strategic and creative output, but also include elements such as client service, levels of interest and proactivity, fee levels and transparency.



OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEIR  
AGENCY **'REGULARLY EXCEEDS'**  
THEIR EXPECTATIONS



'Regularly exceeds' is the icing on the cake and very difficult to achieve.



OF CLIENTS STATED THAT  
THEIR AGENCY **'ALWAYS'** MEETS  
AGREED TIMELINES

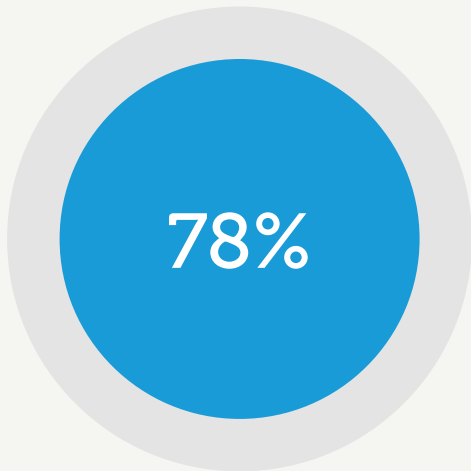


When deadlines are not met, the fault doesn't necessarily lie with the agency. Clients can change the goal posts and put unrealistic demands on agencies. Most clients are fair about admitting when this is the case.

### 3.2 Barometer questions

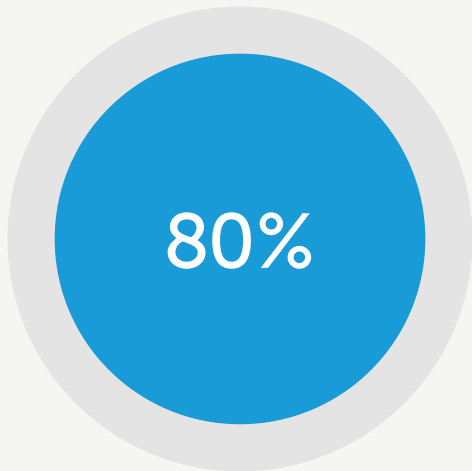


### 3.3 Client development



OF CLIENTS WISH THEIR AGENCY WOULD FOCUS THEIR PROACTIVITY ON **IMPROVING WHAT ALREADY EXISTS**, RATHER THAN COMING UP WITH TOTALLY NEW OR OFF THE WALL IDEAS

For most clients, the best and most useful proactivity is often closer to home. With clients having to do more with less and struggling to prioritise projects, ‘crazy ideas’ are generally not well received. ‘Help us to fix what we’ve got’ seems to be the message.



OF CLIENTS ONLY HAVE **‘PARTIAL KNOWLEDGE’** OF THEIR AGENCY’S FULL OFFER

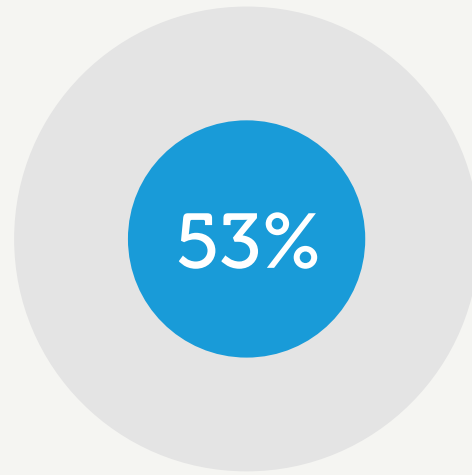
It is a continuous challenge for agencies to ensure that clients are conversant with the full agency offer. There is nothing more annoying for an agency than not being considered for a project they are well capable of delivering.



**2.2  
YEARS**

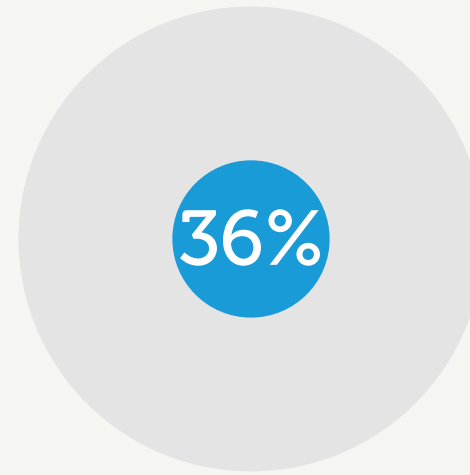
The average time that clients last saw a credentials presentation from their incumbent agency. Many agencies are missing a trick here to update clients on recent projects and capabilities, an important part of client development.

### 3.3 Client development



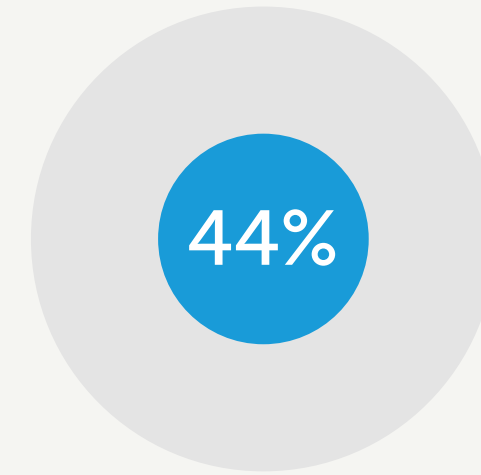
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THEIR  
AGENCY'S PROFILE SHOULD  
BE HIGHER THAN IT IS

A typical comment is that 'the agency should shout about itself more'. They then cite examples such as speaker opportunities, attendance at industry events, consistent agency newsletters and award entries.



OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THEIR  
AGENCY IS **TOO PASSIVE**  
WHEN IT COMES TO CLIENT  
DEVELOPMENT

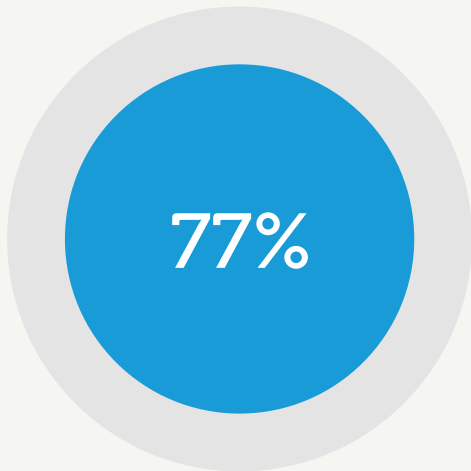
Examples include client colleagues that the agency should be contacting, reaching out to other divisions and teams, shouting about their work more, coming up with more proactive suggestions and proposals.



OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR  
AGENCY TO **SHARE MORE**  
OF THEIR WORK FOR  
OTHER CLIENTS

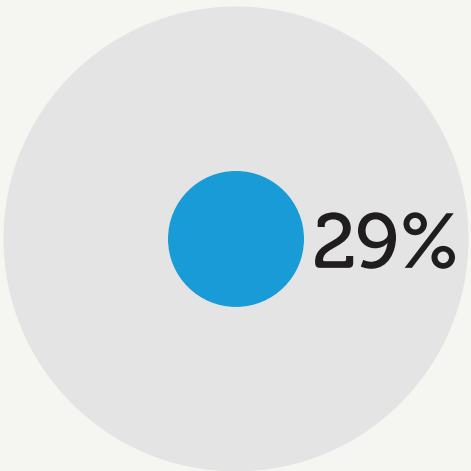
Not just newsletter case studies but sharing learnings – 'What challenges has the agency faced for other clients? How might the thinking and solutions be relevant for us?'

### 3.3 Client development



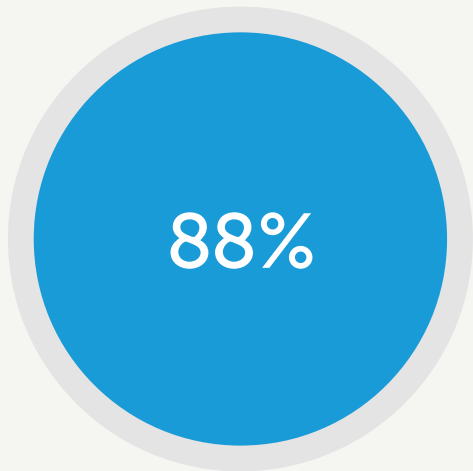
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT  
**GOOD CLIENT DEVELOPMENT**  
STRENGTHENS THE CLIENT/  
AGENCY RELATIONSHIP

The operative word is 'good' - not 'selling' but proactivity that adds value for the client and the agency.



OF CLIENTS HAVE  
EXPERIENCED **BADLY TIMED OR**  
INAPPROPRIATE **AGENCY SALES**

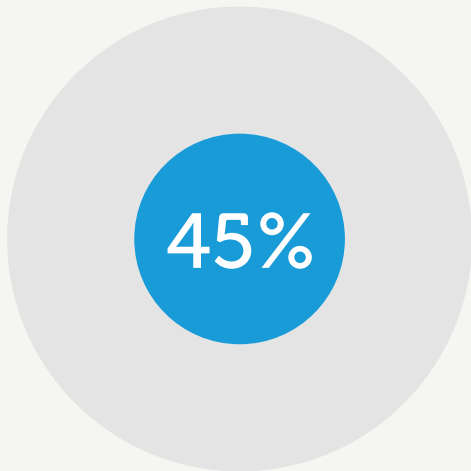
It felt like sales, not good client development. Client development is a sensitive process and needs to be done at the right time, to the correct client contact, while demonstrating real value to the client.



OF CLIENTS STATED THAT  
THEY FIND OR WOULD FIND AN  
**AGENCY NEWSLETTER USEFUL**

There is now an expectation that agencies should have some form of newsletter. Clients sometimes remark, however, that their agency's newsletter is inconsistent. Agencies seem to find it difficult to maintain a newsletter and ensure that it goes out at regular intervals.

# 3.4 Agency costs



OF CLIENTS CONSIDER THEIR AGENCY TO BE GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY



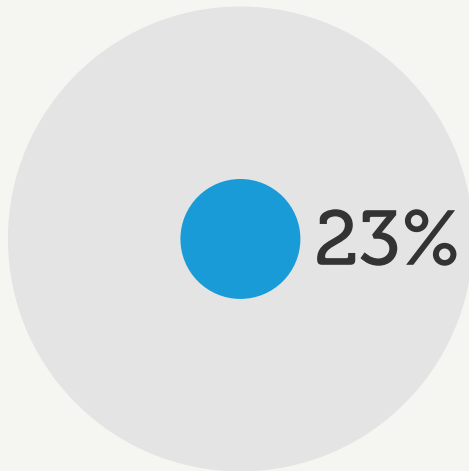
Clients are experiencing budget pressures, and this is transferred to agencies. It’s important to note that perceptions of value for money are not purely about costs. For example, if account management is poor and the client ends up micromanaging, then that is not seen as good value for money.



OF CLIENTS WOULD NOT CHANGE AGENCY JUST ON THE BASIS OF A CHEAPER COST



The exceptions are for more functional, narrower tasks that are less strategic and less creative.



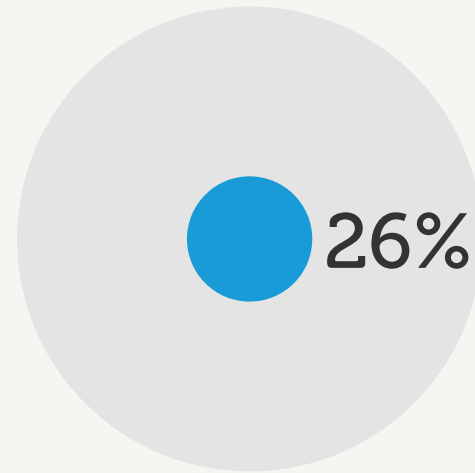
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT AGENCIES NEED TO BETTER JUSTIFY AND EXPLAIN THEIR COSTS



Some clients are genuinely puzzled as to why certain services are more or less expensive than others, and point to a lack of transparency on the part of agencies.

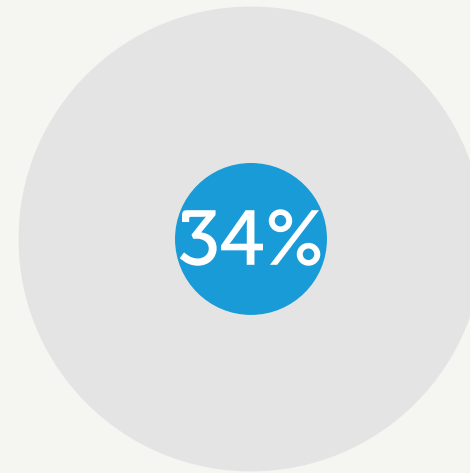


## 3.4 Agency costs



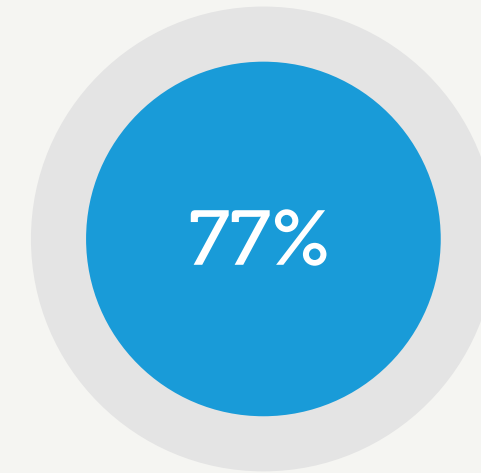
OF CLIENTS HAVE EXPERIENCED  
**'HIDDEN'** AGENCY COSTS

In other words, costs that they weren't expecting or which weren't explained beforehand. In this regard, costs for amendments is a common area of disagreement.



OF CLIENTS AGREE THAT  
NOT ALL PROJECTS NEED AN  
AGENCY **'PROCESS'** AND A  
MORE PRAGMATIC APPROACH  
COULD BE ADOPTED

There is a raft of more straightforward projects that, as far as clients are concerned, are in the 'just get it done' category. Clients view some agencies as being overly wedded to a process that is unwieldy and expensive, instead of assessing when a simpler, more pragmatic approach is needed.



OF CLIENTS STRESSED AN  
INCREASED NEED FOR CREATIVE  
WORK TO **DEMONSTRATE** A  
RETURN ON INVESTMENT

A sharp increase on our 2023 report when we last probed this issue. Clients are increasingly seeking agency help to justify marketing spend to senior management and argue the case around ROI.

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77% of Marketing Directors believe it would be beneficial if their agencies talked to each other more and worked more collaboratively together.

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# About Up to the Light

Up to the Light is the leading provider of client surveys to the UK design industry. The consultancy offers expert, objective and experienced advice for marketing services agencies and professional services firms. The consultancy's approach is to challenge ingrained assumptions and offer more effective, insight-led thinking.

This report is dependent on agencies commissioning Up to the Light to interview their clients. If you've found this report useful, then just imagine how insightful and valuable a bespoke survey with your clients will be. Do get in touch if you'd like to discuss a client survey for your agency.

## Services include:

- Client surveys
- Business development strategy
- Pitching advice
- Business differentiation
- Training & workshops
- Brand positioning & brand strategy for clients

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