

Think Through the Box to Deliver Out-of-the-Box Solutions

By Ron Nicodemus, With Kim Sheeter

Consultants promise out-of-the-box creativity. Creativity is always a priority, but respecting the box is the surest way to deliver solutions that are innovative, accepted and sustainable.



Boxes exist for a reason. No client wakes up in the morning eager to thwart every breakthrough, bog down fresh approaches in bureaucracy or mangle a message. Clients support ideas they believe are workable. They have an understanding of their needs and possibilities.

It may be your job as a marketing or communications consultant to broaden their perspective, but you are doomed if your starting point is: “You don’t understand your own organization; leave the creative ideas to us.”

That brand of arrogance is inspirational. It inspires clients to find subtle ways to ensure that you fail.

Many communication consultants have tales of woe featuring watered-down copy, jobs that became hot potatoes tossed between committees, and execution left to “the field” — which was not interested, funded, staffed or incentivized to take on a chal-

lenge no one had really explained to them.

If you pay your respects to the box first — in your own thought process and in presenting ideas to the client — that creative mortality rate drops dramatically.

So what exactly is the box? Think of it as four walls:

1. Corporate culture
2. Past experience
3. Resources
4. Message

• **Corporate culture** includes history, traditions and at least a nod to all those high-flown adjectives that find their way into vision statements and letters from the president. However, the most important aspect of corporate culture is its underlying mechanism that dictates how things actually work.

Discovering who has the power to do what is critical. Talk to the wrong people and you burn daylight and budget. You have to identify the real decision-makers (who may not show themselves until the project is well underway) and the influencers, which may include people who appear to be low on the organization chart.

Territory also can be treacherous. For example, has the champion of your project snubbed someone in the marketing, sales or art department? Is a regional executive going rogue? Are you working with the headquarters of

a nonprofit or non-governmental organization and assuming all its chapters, clubs and regions will automatically fall in line? If so, budget time to work through resistance and resentment.

In facing this particular wall, a consultant must allow more time for outreach to a wider range of decision-makers throughout the entire process.

• **Past experience** is often the first defense against a new idea: “We tried that, and it didn’t work.” Breaking through this wall requires some patient fact-finding.

What are the similarities between what has been done and what you propose? Was the original flaw in the concept or how it was executed? Are different resources available now? Are you trying to reach the same audience? Are you seeking the same response you were before? Find the facts and you may be able to fine-tune your idea based on lessons learned by near-misses.

• **Resources** dictate scope. Most consultants do a good job in matching their proposal to the money, schedule and staffing available. However, a common mistake is to overlook return on investment and sustainability. You will have much more receptive clients if you can show them how you will measure your success and design key elements with repurposing in mind.

Leveraging the use of your materials can help you break

through affordability arguments that keep lots of strong ideas locked in the box.

• **Message** must be crafted into answers. The pitfall that squanders time, money, energy and goodwill is found in instances in which a company fixates on what it wants to say or do. Help clients scale this wall so they get to the other side — which is where what the audience or customers or funders wants to hear lives.

Translate what clients want to say into what people need or want to know. Be the advocate for the people on the receiving end, and you will earn top-box scores for yourself and your customer.

Taking the time to explore the corporate culture, learning from experience, leveraging resources, measuring outcomes and honing messages as an advocate for the end user addresses most of the barriers to new ideas. It frees you to move beyond the box with confidence.

Don’t just indulge in creativity for creativity’s sake. Ground your creative work in a way that delivers measurable results.

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