

**bentley
holland**

EVERYTHING YOU EVER
WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT
GRAPHIC DESIGNERS BUT
WERE AFRAID TO ASK.

#5



GET ON BOARD.

> WORK CLOSELY WITH YOUR DESIGNERS



GET ON BOARD

When Jane Torvill and Christopher Dean stepped onto the ice at the 1984 Serajevo Winter Olympics, little did they know that they were about to create sporting history.

Four and a half minutes later, to thunderous applause, they received twelve perfect 6.0s – a world record for a single programme. The Gold medal was in the bag and Ravel’s Boléro was forever seared into the British public’s consciousness.

Their performance was voted the Greatest Ever Sporting Achievement by a pair of athletes¹.

So what made them so good?

Whilst nascent talent is clearly a key ingredient and relentless practice goes a long way towards perfecting one’s craft, there must be something else – something that helps to create greatness.

Maybe it’s intuition; some people seem to have an innate sense of what their partner is thinking – so much so that they can predict their next move.

Maybe it’s creative synergy, recognising that – together – they’re far greater than the sum of their individual parts.

Whatever it is, the indisputable fact is that close and committed partnerships work.

But it’s not just prevalent in sport

It’s also true for many walks of life – and in particular the creative ones.

Take comedy, for instance. Morecambe & Wise were, individually, talented variety circuit performers, but as a double act they were peerless. Or dance? Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were arguably the finest dancers ever to grace a movie screen. And music? John Lennon and Paul McCartney left a body of work that, even today, still has no equal.

The list is endless and clearly shows that, when we work in true harmony, something just ‘clicks’ – and it can generate outstanding and enduring results.

So does it work as well in the commercial world?

Do the same principles apply in business? Can we achieve outstanding results by working better together? Of course we can, but it all depends on the individuals involved. For instance, we’re all familiar with the following successful co-founders:

- Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak (Apple)
- Larry Page and Sergey Brin (Google)
- Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield (Ben & Jerry’s).

¹ Channel 4

They all knew how to get the best out of each other. Even *before* they became household names, they had long-since recognised the importance of partnership working. They learned how to share their successes and work around their challenges. They knew the importance of being each other's sounding board. After all, it can be very lonely (and frustrating) working in a vacuum. Everyone needs another perspective.

Does partnership apply to you?

The above examples are relatively narrow in their scope and only really address partners. Most of us work in businesses that comprise departments and divisions – with reporting lines, managers, profit centres and all the other commercial paraphernalia.

As such, the workplace is a much more complex human environment with lots of distractions. We all have to use our social skills and initiative to develop close and productive relationships with our colleagues. If we do that well, we'll almost certainly add value to our organisations.

But what about suppliers?

Most people – certainly in marketing – will need to develop some kind of relationship with external specialists in order to do their jobs effectively. But do you make the same effort to 'connect' with them as you do with your work colleagues?

I would guess not, because suppliers are not seen as 'colleagues'; they're seen as people who operate *outside* an organisation, as opposed to *alongside* it (or even embedded *within* it). They can be seen as people who add *cost* to a business.

And because of this (not uncommon) perception, a sense of 'separation' can set in. It's not unusual for clients to develop a subliminally *defensive* mindset – one that says "keep the suppliers at arm's length, *just in case*".

Now this may well be a useful mantra for dealing with a faceless energy supplier, a disingenuous bank or an indifferent insurance company. After all, many of these organisations have, over recent years, treated their loyal and 'valued' customers as dispensable cash cows, happy to trade in long-standing relationships for short-term profit. And consequently, any semblance of mutual regard (or trust) has long since disappeared.

But smaller businesses – the independents, the specialists and the owner-managed companies – are totally different. This is certainly the case for most of the designers and creative agencies I know. They really *want* your business. To them it *is* personal. And although it may sound trite, they do actually *care* – especially the ones that work with you on a regular basis.

But for them to really deliver, and to develop an *in-depth* understanding of your organisation, they need to get close to you – to work *with* you, not *for* you.

Inevitably, this takes time and requires intellectual commitment but, in doing so, both parties move away from ad hoc, transactional projects towards a deeper, continuous relationship, founded on delivering ongoing and tangible value.

However, to develop this kind of relationship, a supplier first needs to gain your trust – and this is much harder than you'd imagine.

**“THE MOST
IMPORTANT TRIP YOU
MAY TAKE IN LIFE IS
MEETING PEOPLE
HALFWAY.”²**

² Henry Boye

THE BARRIERS TO A GOOD RELATIONSHIP

When we first started Bentley Holland in 1990, developing client relationships was easy. We could identify a potential client and simply ring them up. More often than not, they'd pick up the phone and talk to you. You'd have a brief chat and the client would decide whether it was worth organising a meeting or not. All very simple and civilised.

Now, however, because we're all bombarded with (mostly useless) information, many people 'protect' themselves with artificial barriers; whether it's a firewall, a junk filter, a receptionist, a PA or an answer machine. Everything is designed to stop the unwanted 'sales' call.

But not everyone calling is pushing cheap energy deals, incessant PPI claims or free money from Prince Okobi of The Central Bank of Nigeria. If we screen ourselves off completely from the outside world, where's the space for the good guys? Do we really trust people so little that we won't take the time to talk to *any* of them?

Of course not. We all want (and, more importantly, need) to meet good suppliers but we're so inured with unsolicited approaches that we tend to switch off – or procrastinate. We erect barriers and retreat into a defensive mindset; convincing ourselves that it's probably best to stick with the status quo (even if it's lamentable).

These are the top five examples of this bunker mentality:

1. **Fear of change**

This is a biggy. Most people are nervous about trying something new, particularly in a large organisation. After all, if it goes wrong, you get blamed for it, right?

This fear manifests itself in myriad ways:

"What if the 'new' supplier is worse than the old one?"

"What if the 'new' supplier is great at presenting, but poor at delivery?"

"What if we get palmed off with junior staff?"

"What if they turn out to be difficult to work with?"

What if, what if, what if... The truth is you'll never know unless you step outside your comfort zone.

2. **Apathy**

"Oh, the current lot will do." That's the spirit! If in doubt, do nothing. If you're that disengaged from your creative agency that a shrug of the shoulders is the best you can muster, then clearly something's wrong. Inertia is not the answer!

3. **Time poverty**

"See new design agencies? Oh, that'll take far too long!"

"I'll have to interview them all and introduce them to my colleagues. Then I'll have to explain the brand guidelines and set them up on our system. Can't someone else do it?" Maybe it's easier to revert to 2.?

4. **Trust**

"They might rip us off!" Whatever the industry, we all suffer from this anxiety, unless we've had someone personally recommended by a friend or colleague. In the commercial world there is a pervasive belief that the 'big bad' private sector is prone to using sharp practices. However, as mentioned earlier, at the SME/micro-business level it just doesn't apply; in the Creative Sector, more

than 90% of agencies employ 10 people or less. And because their livelihoods are dependent on it, they are very focussed on delivering a high quality – and personal – service. As a client, isn't that what you're after?

5. Assumption

This is one of my personal favourites. Without even *talking* to an agency, some clients come to negative conclusions based on very questionable assumptions, such as:

"They look like they'll be really expensive".

"They won't understand our sector; it's far too specialist".

"They have some really big clients; they won't want to work with smaller companies like us".

We've heard plenty like these before and they're all completely unfounded. We have absolutely no idea how anyone would, firstly, assume such things and then believe them to be 'true'.

"IT IS ALWAYS BETTER TO ASK QUESTIONS THAN TO MAKE AN ASSUMPTION, BECAUSE ASSUMPTIONS SET US UP FOR SUFFERING."³

The only way to dispel all the misinformation, and to find out what an agency can actually offer you, is to simply *talk* to them. Don't forget that, as a client, you hold most of the cards, so it should be fun. Invite them in and have an informal chat over a coffee. Ask them how they work, what they've produced and see if they can add value to your organisation. You never know, you might even like them!

THE BENEFITS OF A CLOSE WORKING RELATIONSHIP

Whether you're working with a new supplier or you've inherited an incumbent, how closely are you prepared to work with them? Are you confident enough to trust them? Do you *really* believe that a close relationship will actually deliver tangible benefits?

In the following examples, as well as sharing some agency insights, I will outline how closer working relationships can undeniably benefit your organisation.

Example 1: Cards on the table

As an agency, whenever we begin a new relationship, we always seek to determine how much experience our client has.

Why? Because it helps us to deliver our service at the *correct* level.

For instance, if a client is very experienced at working with agencies, we can get straight down to business. We can talk shop (technical, if required) and tailor our services to their preferred method of working. We also know that they will probably supply thorough briefs and have realistic expectations of what can be achieved within both budgets and timescales.

However, if a client has less, or little, experience then we'll take the time to walk them through the various processes to mitigate their lack of knowledge – advising them on sensible options and likely outcomes. If they trust us to help them (and this is key), we can efficiently co-manage the projects, as they progressively increase their on-the-job experience.

In both instances we are simply trying to ensure that we spend the appropriate amount of time on any given project.

The only difficulty we ever encounter in delivering at the *correct* level is when inexperienced clients pretend that they're not. They often dress up their lack of knowledge with bluff and bluster, trying to show that they are fully 'in charge'. Maybe they fear being taken advantage of? Maybe they think they have to dominate their suppliers? Or maybe they think that this is the way to impress – or possibly dupe – their colleagues?

Whatever it is, it's an unnecessary dance and it rarely contributes towards the smooth running of a project. Throughout my career I've always found that the quickest way to learn is to be honest about your abilities (or lack thereof) and to seek advice from those that know more – colleagues or suppliers. Most people are more than happy to share their knowledge.

As an agency, we only ever have one agenda and it's not of the hidden variety. It's simply to deliver great work that answers the brief and makes our clients look good. That's it – no politics, no egos and no smoke and mirrors.

Example 2. Sharing is good business sense

If we are appointed to help a client over the long term, we will ask if they have a marketing communications plan and, if so, whether they are willing to share it with us.

The reason? Because if we are commissioned on an *ad hoc* basis only (maybe because they think that this is the right – or possibly cheaper – thing to do), we will only ever see a snapshot of the challenges facing the company at that particular moment in time. And we will only ever be able to deliver solutions that address isolated issues.

But if we are given a wider context, we can then offer truly holistic advice – and even help to plan their on-going communications more efficiently and cost-effectively.

For instance, if we knew that a client was to produce x12 ads, some sales aids, a microsite, an exhibition stand and a series of Facebook posts, we would bear all of this in mind when designing the *very first* items. As designers, we naturally plan with future execution in mind. We may, for instance, suggest licensing or commissioning a series of particular images to give all the work a related look and feel, thus underpinning the brand. We may also develop a written narrative that flows through all the ads and posts as they are placed.

**“AS DESIGNERS,
WE NATURALLY
PLAN WITH FUTURE
EXECUTION IN MIND.”**

Not only would this type of approach increase the impact of a client's work over the course of a year but it would stop them buying unrelated images or creating individual messages for each piece of collateral. It would also probably save them a great deal of money, as it would all be rolled out in a controlled manner.

Example 3. We know you better than anyone

The more we work with a client, the better we understand them and their brand. We get used to the quirks of a style guide and the preferences of execution. We understand the pulse of a business and learn to read between the lines.

We often find that, in a long-term relationship, we outlive most of their staff and, as such, we become their de-facto brand guardian. In fact, it's not uncommon for us to know the brand better than a client.

As such we can deliver the continuity that is required for consistent application, which of course benefits our clients. With one particular client, we are trusted to the point that we manage their global brand hub during their holidays. That's how good relationships should work.

Example 4. It's always personal

It's a well-known saying that '*people buy people*'. In other words, if you like someone you are far more likely to buy a product or service from them – or want to work with them.

Although 'sophisticated' procurement processes attempt to relegate human chemistry to a minor consideration, it flies in the face of how we all behave on an emotional level. If you look around you at your work colleagues, you know the people that you like and the ones that you don't (or, to be polite, have a 'cordial' relationship with). The ones you are close to are the ones that you will happily walk the extra mile for.

Well, exactly the same applies to us, your suppliers. When we're working with a client that enjoys the relationship and pro-actively wants us to produce good work, we can't help but to raise our game. Wanting to please is a natural human instinct and we designers are suckers for it. It's a fact that a client's affirmation and warmth helps to deliver better quality work.

Why is this? Because the closeness of the relationship means we:

- design with more freedom and confidence
- aren't afraid to use our initiative
- are encouraged to challenge a brief
- can read between the lines
- can predict problems (and solve them)
- dispense with time-consuming formalities or processes
- understand your audience as well as you do (and sometimes better).

This mutual respect means that you have a supplier that really understands your needs, works uber-effectively and – ultimately – provides you with complete peace of mind.

Surely that is the very essence of value?

SUMMARY

So now you know why good agencies always want to get closer to you.

It's not to be over familiar with you or to selfishly prospect for further work, but to deepen their understanding of your business so that they can deliver a far better service to you.

All you need to do is to have an open mind and be confident enough to trust them to get on with it.

TAKE AWAY TIPS

- 1.** Take that call or read that email/letter. There are agencies out there that are a perfect fit for you – but you'll never meet them if you don't talk to them first.
- 2.** Embrace change. Try new suppliers; they won't bite. As the saying goes, "all real development takes place *outside* your comfort zone."

3. Trust your suppliers. If you've spent a little time vetting your suppliers properly, or you've inherited a good one, you'll enjoy the benefits of a warm and productive working relationship.
4. If you don't know something, just ask for advice; your agency will be delighted to share their knowledge. We see it as a sign of self-confidence and you'll learn that much quicker. (This is particularly important for those with less experience.)
5. It pays to share everything. The more information you give your agency, the more effective their delivery will be. And they can plan with you to squeeze the most out of your marketing.
6. Believe in partnerships. Treat your suppliers well; after all, happy suppliers are often the most productive ones.

Next article

In the next article (*#6 Off brand? Always follow your style guide*), we will be looking at:

- what constitutes a good style guide,
- why your opinion can be damaging, and
- why some guidelines suffocate their own brand.

All this and more will be made clear in article (*#6 Off brand? Always follow your style guide*).



#6

OFF BRAND?
➤ **ALWAYS FOLLOW YOUR STYLE GUIDE**

Articles can be downloaded from bentleyholland.co.uk



About the author

Tim Purvis is a hugely experienced communicator, having worked in the design and marketing sector since 1983.

He is an award-winning chartered designer and has successfully delivered effective and measurable corporate communications for blue-chip clients such as Tate & Lyle, British Airways, Timberland and University College London.

His experience also encompasses the public sector, where he has helped to drive behavioural change programmes for many central government departments, including Education, Health, Transport, Justice and the Home Office.

He is now sole owner and Managing Director of Bentley Holland, a through-the-line communications specialist, offering strategic insights and solutions within the brand development, stakeholder engagement, client acquisition and corporate communications arenas.

All eight articles in the series can be downloaded from bentleyholland.co.uk

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