A Call to Arms

Twelve Proclamations of a Win Without Pitching Agency

-by Blair Enns

The forces of the creative industry are aligned against the artist. These forces pressure him to give his work away for free as a means of proving his worthiness of the assignment. Clients demand it. Industry associations deride it but offer alternatives that are just as costly and commoditizing. Agencies resign themselves to it. Search consultants, business development consultants and out-sourced business development services firms all earn their living by perpetuating it. And business development conferences put the worst offenders from all sides on stage and have them preach about how to get better at it.

It is a mistake to look to the industry to deal with this issue. Speculative creative – free pitching – will only be beaten one agency at a time, with little help and much loud opposition from the creative industry itself. This battle is but a collection of individual struggles, the single artist or creative services firm against the many allied forces of the status quo.

But while collectively the battle may seem lost, some individual firms are fighting and winning. What follows are twelve proclamations of a Win Without Pitching agency - a manifesto for firms that have made the difficult business decisions and transformed themselves and the way they go about getting new business. These firms have resisted the industry-wide pressure to tow the free-pitching line; they have gone from order-takers to expert advisors and then forged a more satisfying and lucrative way of getting and doing business.

The Twelve Proclamations

1. We will specialize. We will acknowledge that it is the availability of substitutes - the legitimate alternatives to the offerings of our firm - that robs us of power and allows the client to ask us for, and often compels us to give away for free, our most valuable product. If we are not seen as more specialized, more creative or otherwise more expert than our competition then we are viewed as one in a sea of many and we have little power in our relationships with our clients and clients-to-be.

2. We will replace presentations with conversations. We will break free of our addiction to the Big Reveal and the adrenaline rush that comes from putting ourselves in the win-or-lose situation of the presentation. When we pitch we are in part satisfying our craving for this adrenaline and we understand that until we break ourselves of this addiction we will never be free of the Pitch. 'Presentation,' like 'pitch,' is a word that we will leave behind as we seek conversations and collaboration in their place.

3. We will do with words what we used to do with paper. We will understand that proposals are the words that come out of our mouths and that written documentation of such proposals are contracts-items that need be created only once an agreement has been reached. We will examine all the reasons we ask, and are asked, to write unpaid proposals and we will never again ask documents to propose for us what we ourselves should propose.

4. We will seek to better understand the client. We will search for the client's motivation in asking us to pitch and once we understand this motivation we will develop new means to

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address it. We will remember that the purpose of meeting with clients-to-be is not to pitch, impress or persuade, but to determine a fit between the two parties. The basis of determining this fit is in understanding the client and their need.

5. We will build expertise rapidly. We will position ourselves as narrowly focused experts and we will develop skills, capabilities and processes to deepen our expertise and put distance between us and our competition, for if we are not seen as expert advisors we will be seen as order-takers, with the commensurate remuneration and respect. In pursuit of developing our expertise we will not be lured into the trap of aspiring to 'partner' with our clients, for we understand that partners are merely likeable order-takers - firms that have not yet achieved the status of expert advisor.

6. We will make continuous learning mandatory. In our firm all principals and personnel will endeavor to continually deepen their expertise and management will recognize its obligation to support such efforts. We will ensure that everyone in the firm understands that the market is evolving quickly and if we are not evolving apace then we are being left behind, as individuals and collectively as a firm.

7. We will be selective. Instead of seeking clients we will selectively and respectfully pursue 'perfect fits' – those targeted organizations that we can best help. We will say 'no' early and often, weeding out those that would be better served by others and those that cannot afford us. By using 'no' we will give power and credibility to our 'yes'.

8. We will not solve problems without being financially engaged. Under no circumstances will we part with our thinking without appropriate compensation, for our thinking is our highest value product and if we demonstrate that we do not value it, our clients will not. When we are asked to begin solving problems in the buying cycle we will politely but firmly point out that we save our best thinking for our paying clients and should the client-to-be choose to engage us they can rest assured that our best minds will be working on their business rather than on winning business that we do not currently have.

9. We will address issues of money early. We will never again put ourselves in a position where we have over-invested in a relationship only to find that the client-to-be cannot afford to pay us what we are worth. We will set a minimum level of engagement and declare it early in conversations with our clients-to-be so that in the event they cannot afford us both parties will be able to walk away early without wasting valuable resources. We will keep in mind the Win Without Pitching Rule of Money: *Those who cannot talk money, do not make money.*

10. We will refuse to accept work at a loss. We will build this firm one profitable assignment at a time. Excepting our carefully selected pro bono engagements and the occasional favor to our very best and longest standing clients, every project will generate a profit that recognizes our expertise and the value we bring to our clients' businesses. There will be no loss leaders. We will pursue margin objectives first and then work to add volume at our newer, higher margin.

11. We will charge more. As our expertise deepens and our impact on our clients' businesses grows we will evolve our pricing to reflect that impact. We will recognize that to our clients the smallest invoices are the most annoying. Through charging more we will create more time to think on behalf of our clients and we will eliminate the need to invoice for changes and other surprises.

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12. We will hold our heads high. We will see ourselves as professional practitioners who are hired to bring real solutions to our clients' business problems. We will not grovel. We will not be coerced. We will understand that in accordance with all of the above anyone who insists that we devalue our product or compromise our values is not someone we would have as a client. We will seek respect above money, for only when we are respected as experts will we be paid the money we seek. This money will allow us to reinvest in ourselves, become even better at what we do and deliver to ourselves and our families the abundance we deserve.

Re-evaluate Your Assumptions

I recently found myself at dinner seated next to the head of a national design association for a large European country. She asked what I did for a living and I told her that I taught marketing communication agencies how to win without pitching. She contemplated this for a second before resolutely responding in one word: 'Impossible.'

We all understand the business advantages of not pitching. They include a lower cost of sale, higher utilization rates and fewer late nights, to name a few. These advantages should be enough motivation to want to learn ways to win without pitching. But many agency principals assume that the business advantages must be offset by business development disadvantages, i.e.: 'If we are not pitching then surely we are not winning as much, and probably we are disqualifying ourselves from numerous opportunities.' It is this assumption of such a lopsided trade-off that makes winning without pitching seem impossible or impossibly sustainable.

But what if this assumption is wrong? What if rethinking your methods of getting new business could actually help you to win more business, better business? I won't try to convince you, I'll merely ask you to consider the question: do you think it might be possible to quit pitching and actually win more business, even while your competitors continue to free pitch? How would things change for you if this was possible?

The Thirteenth Proclamation

To some the idea of overthrowing the governing conventions of this industry will always seem impossible. Not everyone has the heart or stomach for revolution. The rest of us – the fed up, those craving more respect and willing to fight for it, and those who believe that there just has to be a better way to build and run a business – we will change the way creative services are bought and sold the world over, one firm at a time.

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