

The Facts are Friendly



How important is it to know what your clients truly think about your company?

Some people don't want to deal with the cold facts, preferring to believe a deteriorating relationship will somehow fix itself. Reminds us of the famous Jack Nicholson line in *A Few Good Men*: "You can't handle the truth."

Yet knowing what clients think about you can save accounts and even your business. Here's a true story to prove the point that the facts are always friendly.

Some years ago we did a relationship survey for a West Coast agency which revealed its clients missed seeing the principal and getting his senior strategic guidance, a fairly common complaint. This guy knew a lot about marketing and more importantly, knew tons about the retail niche the agency focused on. But he was busy with inside issues and suffered from a severe case of micromanagement. He allowed himself to be seduced by the details – correcting copy, fiddling with layouts, and so on. He thus conveniently avoided dealing with client personalities because he was so "busy."

Big mistake. The survey interviews revealed his larger clients in particular missed his counsel and weren't especially happy with the younger agency staff they kept getting. Worse, they disclosed to us they felt somewhat insulted by his waning attention but were uncomfortable saying so to him directly.

When we presented the interview findings it was a splash of cold water. To his credit this guy bought a handful of plane tickets (remember that great United spot years ago with the same theme?), reconnected with the people whose accounts he'd won years earlier, and – get this – since then has seen incremental business grow more than 25%.

But here's the best part. In the interviews one of the accounts, delivering 30% of the agency's income, told us they were going to put their business up for review because they weren't getting the attention they used to. Recently we circled back after the benchmark survey to take their temperature again and the VP of marketing said she'd decided to cancel the search for a new agency. Here's a quote: "We don't need to change. We've got our agency back and it's better than ever!"

The lesson is clear. Business can slip away if you don't have a way to really "handle the truth." Don't depend on your account people to tell you how it's going; they can't help but subconsciously shade the report in their favor. That's just

human nature. And if you go to bed at night convinced you have watertight relationships, you could be fooling yourself. Maybe Ronald Reagan was right when he said trust (what you think about your account relationships) but verify.

Look, it usually costs less to have us do an objective across-the-board client diagnosis than you'd spend on T&E or write-offs. You'll get an accurate look at how things are going and because it comes from the outside it's often a good way to leverage change. It signals to clients that you're committed to ongoing improvement. As you prep next year's budget you should consider funding an objective and professional client relationship analysis.

It might be a lot cheaper than scrambling to replace the income from one of your bigger accounts that you're so sure is rock solid.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe Grant". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a prominent loop at the end of the last name.