

Advice for agency MDs in tough times

By [Gillian Rightford](#)

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The usually tough job of being an agency MD is probably at its peak of toughness right now. While clients might not have cut budgets yet, you can be sure they're thinking of it. And the agency MD has to be thinking about that possibility.



We all know that one of the first industries to feel the pinch is advertising. Easy money for a company to say, "Hey, let's put that on hold for now, and see how it pans out." Well, great, but not so great for the agency at the receiving end of the "let's wait and see" attitude.

I know agencies at both ends of the spectrum. I know of agencies that are so busy they can't breathe. And I know agencies where the tumbleweed blowing down the passage is most active inhabitant of the building.

What I also know is that the usually tough job of being an agency MD is probably at its peak of toughness right now.

Thinking about that possibility

While clients might not have cut budgets yet, you can be sure they're thinking of it. And the agency MD has to be thinking about that possibility. And if clients have cut budgets, s/he has to be wondering how to sustain the overheads, always pretty hefty, with less dosh. And whether that means losing people, losing premises, and horror of all horrors, cutting back on Loeries entries and attendance.

I heard a wonderful story the other day which displayed to me just how tricky this balancing act is. To the outside world, and to the more accountant-minded among us, this behaviour would be rightly considered demented.

Someone was telling me that he had appeared in a TV ad and was a bit worried about where it would be shown (clearly it

was a bit off-centre), and was told, “Never mind, it's just for awards”. Apparently the problem was that the clients were cutting back on budgets so all the agency's great creative ideas were on hold, so they were now forced to spend their own money to make ads for awards...

Hmmm. Thankfully the agency was nameless in the story.

Client selection criteria

But here's the thing. Clients have cut back, so money must be tight. Maybe retrenchments are being considered. Yet the agency is spending money on production for what sounds quite obviously like a scam ad. Daft, I hear you mutter. Yet, if the agency wants to win new business, it needs to be up on the creative rankings, as it's pretty high on the selection criteria of clients. But how do you get creative points if clients won't spend on great ideas?

I love Sir Frank Lowe's quote: “It's because things are difficult that people won't take risks; and it's because people won't take risks that things are difficult.”

We're in this mess because some people took gigantic risks with other people's money, so it's not all about “yippee, let's go and jump off that cliff” risk-taking.

I am a firm believer that a great creative idea can be brought to life without a huge budget. That should be the challenge to the un-named agency creatives. Find less expensive ways of bringing this work to life. If the idea is great, it should be sustainable.

But the point of all my babbling is this. Times are tough. It's tough at the top. And what better time to start getting ready for the turnaround?

Take advantage of extra time

My message to the over-worked, over-stressed agency MD is this. Take advantage of the extra time on your hands to do some planning and strategising and route mapping. Look at ways to build your business. Write a business-building strategy - organic growth and new business generation. Up-skill yourself and your key players. Training is expensive, so it also falls by the wayside in tough times, but at least you have the time, which is usually also expensive.

Look at reputation management - where does your agency sit on the industry positioning grid? Who should you be targeting with your skills set? What are you doing about either getting your agency on the map, or securing your position on the map?

Recessions don't last forever. Marketers will need to advertise. In fact, they need your services now more than ever. So, get ready and get set.

Keep personal stress levels in check

Also, try and keep your own personal stress level in check. As hard as all of this is, and retrenching people is pure torture, the business, and your people, need you to be in prime fighting condition. You can't be if you are being weighed down by the pressure of it all. Find a mentor, go to gym, do yoga, whatever - but take time to rest, be positive, and remember to breathe every now and then.

The positive energy generated by looking forward is so much more uplifting and good for the spirit than peering at hopeless numbers every day. Just the very effort of focusing in a positive direction will give you and your team a whole new purpose and reason to get out of bed in the morning. Try it!

ABOUT GILLIAN RIGHTFORD

Gillian Rightford's CV is a mix of marketing, advertising, and management. A former group MD of Lowe Bull, she started Adtherapy (www.adtherapy.co.za), a company that aims to improve the quality of advertising out there through better skills and better client/agency relationships. Contact Gillian on tel +27 (0)21 761 2812 or email gillian@adtherapy.co.za, read her blog at <http://adtherapy.blogspot.com> and follow her on Twitter at [@grightford](https://twitter.com/grightford).

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