

The Free Pitching Debate

The DBA perspective

Free / speculative / creative pitching - whatever you want to call it, it amounts to the same thing – doing free unpaid creative work in order to impress a client to win a job.

It has always happened, and it always will. There will always be an up and coming young designer / agency willing to do some work for free in the hope of winning a contract. There will always be clients who ask for creative work during the pitch process so “they have something to judge.” It is impossible to legislate against and impossible for a representational body (such as the DBA) to police.

But that does not mean that DBA members should partake, or that the DBA shouldn't campaign against it. The “free pitch” request is something that should be pushed back against. Not necessarily because it is bad for the agency (although it certainly is) but because it is not an effective way for clients to source the best agency for their needs.

Why we think free pitching is wrong

1. It does not produce the best solution for the client
2. It is an unsustainable business model for design agencies

Choosing an agency based on creative work presented in a pitch is not a good way to source the best agency for your requirements.

- It simply shows which agency has the most free studio time in the run up to the pitch in which to develop some ideas.
- Any creative work presented in a pitch cannot have been produced with the insight into the client business and objectives that would be required, and can only be achieved once the agency is working with the client.
- Creative work in a pitch gives the client something tangible they can show colleagues and “judge” – but it will have been based on a shallow understanding of the business and market.
- Just because work has been created for the pitch clients have no way of judging whether this was a result of luck or judgement. They have no guide as to how the agency might manage their creative process.

Taking part in pitches that require free creative work is not a sustainable business model

- Nobody is saying that agencies should not have to work to win the work. Writing a credentials pitch takes considerable time and effort, but if you give away your ideas upfront what have you got left to sell once you win the work?
- If there are five agencies all producing the equivalent of £10,000 worth of creative work just to win a £40,000 contract the loser is the design industry.
- If giving away so much studio time for free agencies will then have to charge higher rates to those clients they do get to cover the costs of their failed pitches.
- Loss of IP – once you have presented work to a potential client it is very difficult to stop the misuse of your intellectual property

How to choose a design agency?

The recommended method for choosing a design agency is a **credentials pitch** where experience and past work is interrogated. This approach gives practical evidence of relevant capabilities and expertise, plus gives a clear indication of whether they are able to repeat past successes.

Clients can use the DBA's free Client Guides on Commissioning Design at www.dba.org.uk, which include a comparison between a free pitch and a credentials pitch.