UP
to the
light

What
Clients
Think
2023

A report based on
650 client interviews
conducted on behalf
of creative agencies.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our 9th annual 'What Clients Think' report. This year's report is based on 650 client interviews conducted on behalf of creative agencies, our highest ever number of interviews. Each year the report has steadily increased in size and influence. I'm delighted that it has become the definitive annual snapshot of the client/design agency relationship, eagerly anticipated by agencies not just in the UK but around the world.

Client/agency relationships never stand still, particularly given the pressures of the last few years. The overall feel, however, is that clients are having to achieve more with less. Tighter budgets and smaller client teams are the order of the day. The need for agencies to be proactive partners has never been greater.

The report revisits some key issues, as well as exploring new areas not covered in previous reports. As in previous years, the report is divided into 3 sections. Firstly, 'Client World' looks at wider client pressures and concerns, over and above their immediate client/agency relationship. Secondly, 'Winning Clients' looks at agency new business activity, marketing content and pitching. Thirdly, 'Retaining & Growing Clients' covers client service and client development issues.

It's important to mention that every interview was paid for by individual design agencies commissioning Up to the Light to provide an independent Client Survey for their agency. The interviews are with interested clients who are talking at length about their views on agencies and the relationship with their incumbent agency. They are giving comments in a spirit of constructive criticism.

Names of the individual agencies and clients involved are confidential. However, we can share some very revealing statistics when looking across all 650 interviews. As in previous years, it provides important pointers for how agencies can strengthen their client relationships and sharpen their approach.

Jonathan Kirk
Founder of
Up to the Light

About the agencies

About the clients

All the agencies commissioned Up to the Light to conduct a Client Survey with their key clients. The design agencies cover every discipline and range in size from 5 employees to over 100. The principal purpose was to monitor the health of their most important client/agency relationships.

Specifically:

- Understand current perceptions of the agency's strengths and weaknesses.

- Understand which boxes clients are putting them in, whether fairly or unfairly.

- Provide a better understanding of client needs and concerns.

- Identify client development opportunities.

- Highlight client service measures that can improve the relationship.

- Spot any problems early so that they can be dealt with proactively.

- Understand how they are compared to competitor agencies.

- Provide an assessment of client perceptions across areas such as creativity, value for money, ability to add value, proactivity, effective listening and commercial awareness.

- Understand how clients see the market more generally – trends and concerns.

- Assess levels of client loyalty.

- Understand client challenges and how these are likely to affect the client/agency relationship in the future.

The clients range from Brand Manager level to Chief Executives and Board Directors of major organisations. All 650 clients have responsibility for buying design and have relationships with design agencies, whether day to day or in an overseeing capacity. A very broad range of clients are represented – different industries, UK and international, business to business, business to consumer, not for profit.

Different areas represented include:

- Food and drink manufacturers

- Financial services

- Pharmaceuticals

- Hi tech/software

- Mobile telecoms

- Government

- Higher education

- Utilities

- Healthcare

- Charities

- Automotive

- High street retail

- Supermarkets

- Professional services

- Sports organisations

- Venture capital

A unique spotlight on the client viewpoint. 650 interviews that reveal what clients are really thinking.

1 Client World

1.1. Role of creativity

94%

OF CLIENTS AGREED THAT **GREAT CREATIVITY** HAS THE POWER TO MOVE A BRAND FORWARD

There is widespread agreement that great creativity is transformative. When you get it right, it represents great value for money.

75%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT **DESIGN EFFECTIVENESS** IS DIFFICULT TO QUANTIFY

Clients often strongly believe that design has played an important role and has been effective, but admit to difficulties in actually proving it with hard evidence. Isolating the design component is problematic.

82%

OF CLIENTS CONSIDER THEMSELVES TO BE **RISK AVERSE**

These are the same clients that talk about the need for brand differentiation and innovation, but they want it to be accompanied by a strong rationale and convincing business case. Agencies that talk in general terms about 'being brave' and taking risks' are in danger of appearing superficial. Clients are in the risk aversion business when it comes to 'being brave' for the sake of it.

1.2. Top challenges

Clients were asked a range of questions about their wider concerns and pressures, beyond the immediate client/agency relationship.

36%

98%

66%

OF CLIENTS AGREED THAT A FOCUS ON 'THE GREAT CREATIVE IDEA' HAS BECOME MORE DIFFICULT IN TODAY'S MARKETING ENVIRONMENT

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT MARKETING IS MORE COMPLEX & CHALLENGING THAN JUST 5 YEARS AGO

OF MARKETING DIRECTORS WOULD LIKE TO RECRUIT MORE MARKETING OPERATIONS EXPERTS TO THEIR TEAM

More and more marketing time is spent on the 'how' as opposed to the 'what'. How do you connect brand messages across multiple channels, how do you improve customer targeting, how do you extract useful data and how do we utilise data? This inevitably detracts from a focus on the 'what' – what's the creative idea that underpins all this activity?

Marketing has become more technical and data driven. The purchase path is non-linear with a proliferation of channels. Driving sales, building loyalty, retaining customers and maintaining a consistent experience has become hugely challenging.

We asked Marketing Directors who they'd ideally like to recruit to their marketing teams. Most opted for 'marketing operations' people – technology, data management, data analytics, social media, campaign implementation... It's a clear indication of a key area where clients need help from agencies.

1.2. Top challenges

43%

OF MARKETING DIRECTORS BELIEVE THAT **DATA & ANALYTICS** IS AN AREA THAT NEEDS TO BE IMPROVED UPON

Data and analytics are issues that are keeping clients awake at night. The sheer volume of data is a problem in itself, as well as identifying what you want to measure. There is an uneasy feeling among 43% of Marketing Directors that their approach to these areas is not quite what it should be.

78%

OF CLIENTS COMPLAIN OF BEING EXTREMELY **TIME PRESSURED & UNDER RESOURCED**

A slight increase on last year. Whether it's sharing trends, monitoring competitors, driving projects not just managing them or working with tight deadlines, clients are relying on agencies to save them time.

76%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEY ARE UNABLE TO GIVE AS MUCH CONSIDERATION TO LONG TERM **BRAND BUILDING** AS THEY WOULD LIKE TO

Another slight increase on last year. Many clients are frustrated at being more reactive than they would like to be in the face of seemingly constant change. It's easy for agencies to get sucked into this climate and neglect the longer term view.

1.2. Top challenges

54%
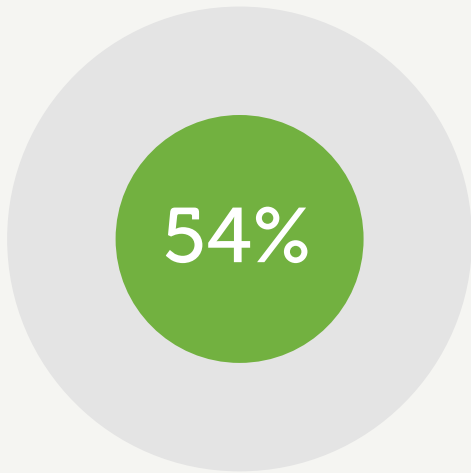
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT THEIR **COMPANY'S VALUES** ARE NOT FULLY REFLECTED IN THE REALITY OF THE ORGANISATION

Where and how are corporate values evidenced? Over half the clients interviewed have their doubts. A clear role for agencies in helping to define more meaningful values and translate them into reality.

12%
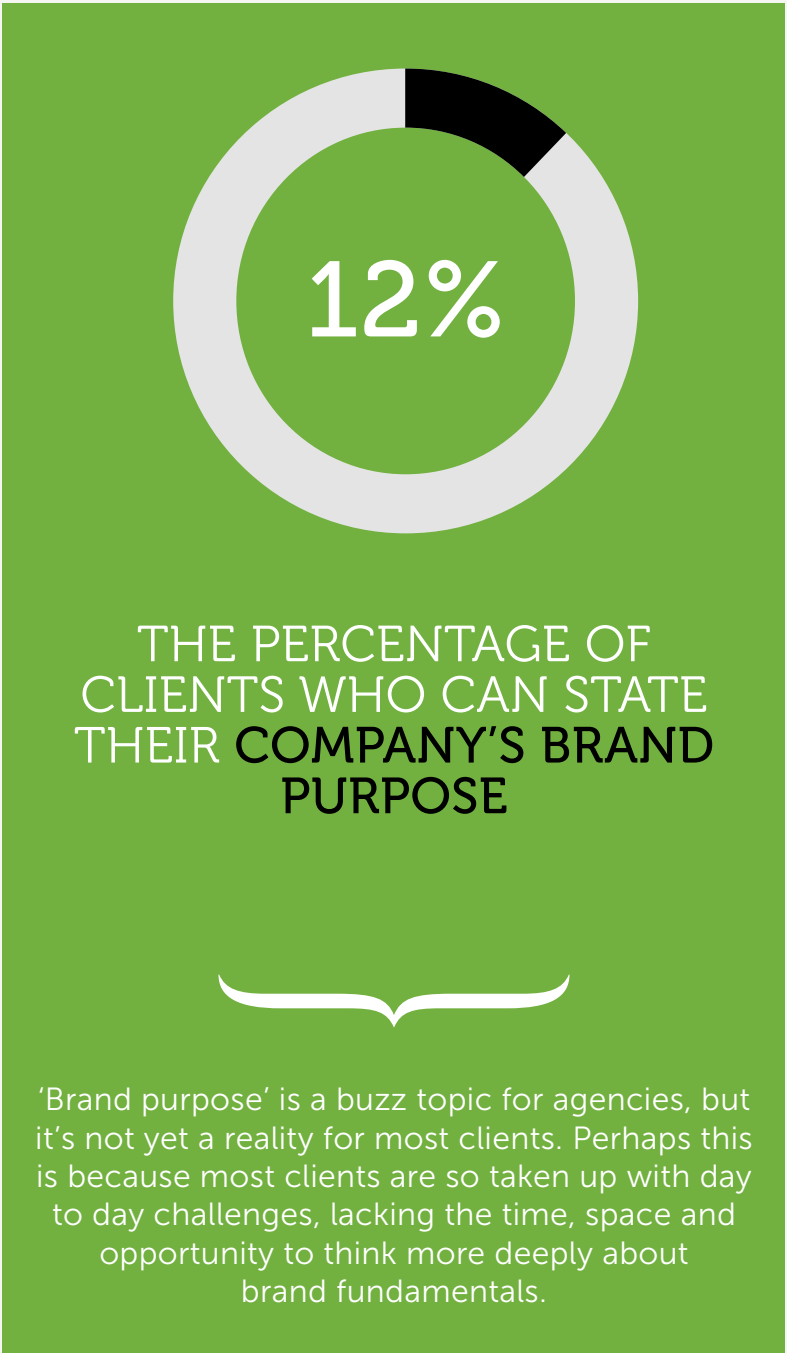
THE PERCENTAGE OF CLIENTS WHO CAN STATE THEIR **COMPANY'S BRAND PURPOSE**

'Brand purpose' is a buzz topic for agencies, but it's not yet a reality for most clients. Perhaps this is because most clients are so taken up with day to day challenges, lacking the time, space and opportunity to think more deeply about brand fundamentals.

62%
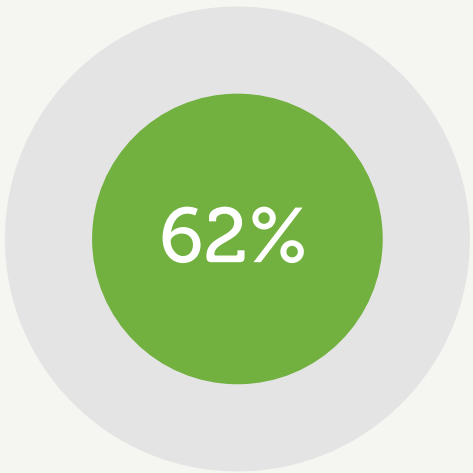
OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEIR **MARKETING BUDGETS** ARE BELOW PRE PANDEMIC LEVELS (AS A PERCENTAGE OF COMPANY REVENUE)

Marketing budgets may appear to be climbing but the true test is as a percentage of company revenue. Depending on the sector, marketing budgets are slightly tighter than before the pandemic and always seem to be an easy target in tough times.

1.3. Agencies

59%

OF CLIENTS STRESSED AN INCREASED NEED FOR CREATIVE WORK TO DEMONSTRATE A **RETURN ON INVESTMENT**

The need to extract every last drop from the marketing budget is the mood of the times. Clients increasingly need agency help to put the case internally, bring stakeholders with them and convince senior colleagues of the business rationale and ROI. For clients, this has become part of the definition of a true agency 'partner'.

74%
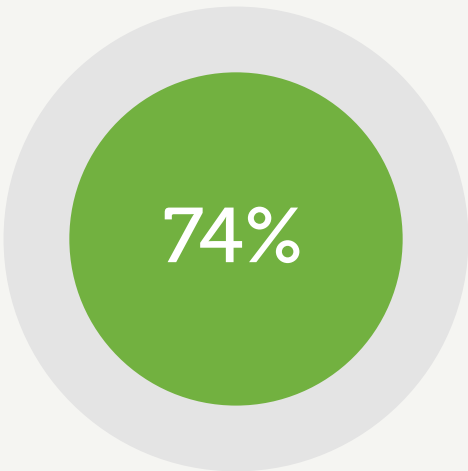
OF CLIENTS STATED THAT **'DIVERSITY'** IS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE WHEN SELECTING AND WORKING WITH AGENCIES

An increase on last year and a dramatic increase over the last four years. 'Diversity' also extends to having designers of appropriate nationalities. For example, if you are a London based agency, many clients question whether you can design for the Indian or Singapore markets if people from those countries are not represented on your team? London agencies have traditionally thought of themselves as international just by virtue of being based in London, but this is now a somewhat lazy assumption.

55%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEY ARE LOOKING FOR A **DIFFERENT TYPE OF SUPPORT** FROM THEIR AGENCY IN THE NEXT 1-2 YEARS

All client/agency relationships evolve and over half the clients interviewed are looking for something different from their agencies in the next 1-2 years.

1.3. Agencies

If 55% of clients are looking for 'a different type of support' from their agency over the next 1-2 years, how are clients defining that? It falls into 3 broad areas.

FUTURE – LOOKING FOR 'SOMETHING DIFFERENT'

2

More
Knowledge & Productivity

- Added value ideas based on increased knowledge
- More innovative or disruptive thinking
- More reviews, step back from the day to day
- More understanding of the client organisation – politics, stakeholders, developing number & seniority of contacts

1

Different or new
Services & skill sets

- Different skills that will be needed – does the agency have them?
- e.g. Sustainability, brand activation, higher level strategic work, future visioning & planning

3

More
Focus on value for money

- Not always reduced budgets, but working harder to demonstrate return on investment

97%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT LONG TERM CLIENT/AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS YIELDED BETTER RESULTS

The vast majority of clients have good intentions when it comes to nurturing longer term relationships with their agencies. It can be more difficult in practice but, at least in intent, clients and agencies seem to be in alignment.

1.3. Agencies

How many agencies would you like to be working with?

AS IS

48%

48% of clients are comfortable that they have the right number and mix of external agencies.

FEWER

46%

6% would ideally like to be working with more agencies and this is usually about adding specialist agencies to cover particular skill gaps.

MORE

6%

A significant 46%, however, would ideally like to be working with fewer agencies.
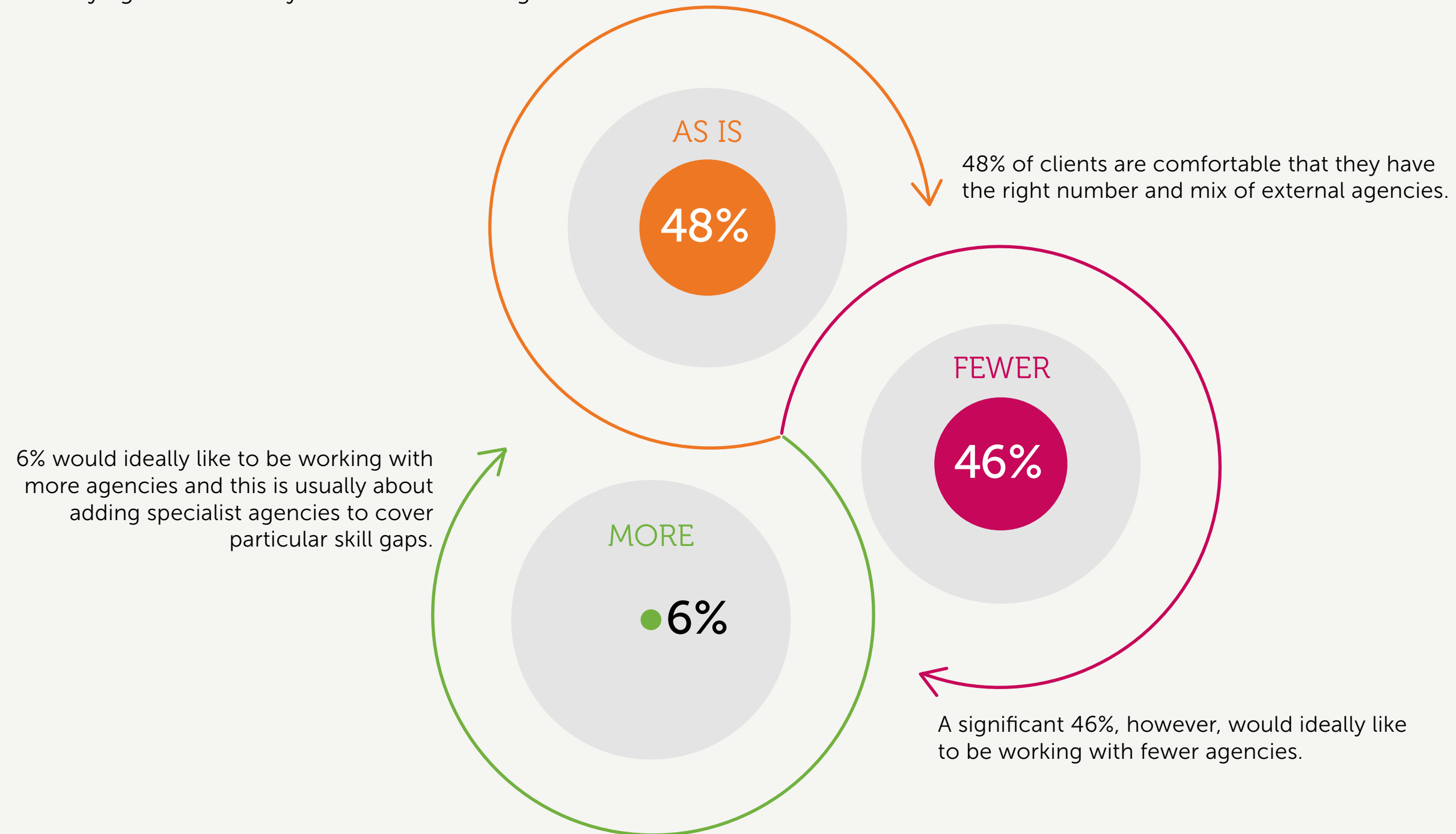
1.3. Agencies

TOP 3 REASONS FOR WANTING TO WORK WITH FEWER AGENCIES:

1

Reduces client time instead of managing multiple agency relationships.

2

Fewer agencies can mean a more connected, holistic view, as opposed to different agencies engaged in siloed tasks.

3

Potential cost reductions.

On average, Marketing Directors spend 15-20% of their time dealing directly with external agencies.

2.1. Opening the door

IF A NEW AGENCY HAD 30 SECONDS TO SAY SOMETHING TO YOU, WHAT WOULD BE MOST LIKELY TO GET YOUR ATTENTION?

Commercial effectiveness of their work

Show me that we could be doing something better

A view of the future

If you've got commercial results and tangible evidence of your work's effectiveness, then shout it from the rooftops. Clients are more persuaded by commercial success than anything else.

Show a client where they could be doing something better – 'We've noticed this...' Critiques, pointing out where a client might be missing a trick or suggesting a different, interesting way of

looking at a particular challenge are all effective. Why? Because it's all about the client and their issues, not the agency.

In new business the past is dull, the present is alright, but the future is fascinating. Future leaning points of view can be intriguing door openers.

2.1. Opening the door

SKILLS COMBINATIONS THAT CLIENTS BELIEVE ARE MOST DIFFICULT TO FIND

Can the lead agency handle some of the more technical aspects, or will the client need to consult specialist agencies? For example, can they take on web development, digital marketing, lead generation, e-commerce or CRM issues? For design-led agencies, these types of 'brand activation' services can be slightly hazy with clients questioning how far a design agency's technical expertise really goes.

Creativity & commercial awareness

Strategic thinking & creativity

Front end conceptual & delivery

Creativity & technical

2.1. Opening the door

SKILLS COMBINATIONS THAT CLIENTS BELIEVE ARE MOST DIFFICULT TO FIND

Can the agency really deliver what they're proposing? Whether it's a product design that's not manufacturable or retail store concepts that become diluted, many clients have stories to tell about great looking concepts that, for one reason or another, were never capable of being realised.

Creativity & commercial awareness

Strategic thinking & creativity

Front end conceptual & delivery

Creativity & technical

2.1. Opening the door

SKILLS COMBINATIONS THAT CLIENTS BELIEVE ARE MOST DIFFICULT TO FIND

Most agencies pride themselves on being able to deliver both these elements. Indeed, they should be inextricably linked. Clients, however, still rejoice when they find the two ingredients in equal measure and frequently state that it's a 'rare combination'.

Creativity & technical

Front end conceptual & delivery

Strategic thinking & creativity

Creativity & commercial awareness

2.1. Opening the door

SKILLS COMBINATIONS THAT CLIENTS BELIEVE ARE MOST DIFFICULT TO FIND

For clients, this is the most sought after and rarest agency combination. Genuine commercial awareness is likely to make creative concepts more relevant and easier for clients to make a case internally.

Creativity & technical

Front end conceptual & delivery

Strategic thinking & creativity

Creativity & commercial awareness

2.1. Opening the door

68%

OF CLIENTS VIEW AGENCIES WITH **B CORP CERTIFICATION** MORE FAVOURABLY IN INITIAL NEW BUSINESS SITUATIONS

B Corp certification is obviously not just about winning new business, but it's good to know that it makes a difference in those initial new business situations. Our interviews show that it's quite powerful at shunting an agency higher up the selection agenda, particularly with clients that share a B Corp philosophy.

89%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT **B CORP CERTIFICATION** WOULD NOT INFLUENCE THEIR FINAL CHOICE OF AGENCY

It's a different story when it comes to final selection, though. B Corp certification helps in the initial new business stages in terms of getting considered, but most clients state that they're not going to be swayed by this when it comes to the ultimate decision.

93%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT AN AGENCY'S ETHICAL CLAIMS **MUST** BE FULLY REFLECTED IN THEIR WORK

Clients can be a cynical bunch and generalised agency claims about 'design for good' and 'positive change' only cut it when the work fully backs it up. Making claims like these and then showing a portfolio that includes work for snacks, fast food or booze is counter productive.

2.1. Opening the door

91%
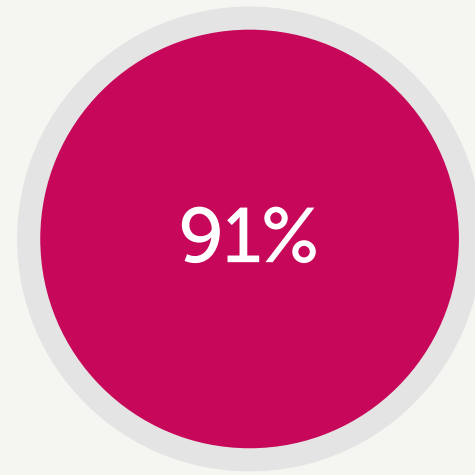
OF CLIENTS LIKE TO 'DISCOVER' A NEW AGENCY RATHER THAN FEEL 'SOLD TO'

A slight increase on last year. Previous reports have revealed that clients prefer agency content, new business approaches and meetings to feel more like an informed conversation, as opposed to a 'sell'.

15%
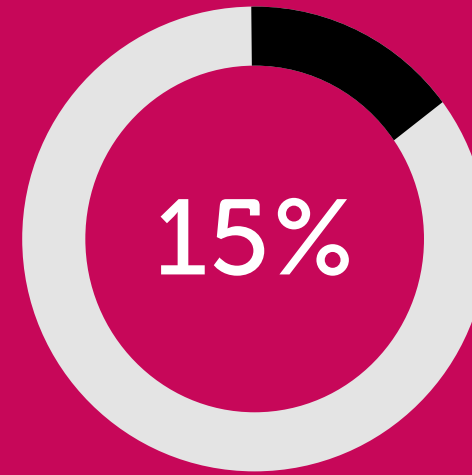
THE PERCENTAGE OF CLIENTS WHO CAN NAME MORE THAN 5 DESIGN AGENCIES

Clients' knowledge of the design agency landscape is generally poor. There is widespread acknowledgement that it is a crowded and competitive market, with clients often struggling to name agencies beyond their incumbent(s) and 1 or 2 other agencies that may have pitched in the past.

87%
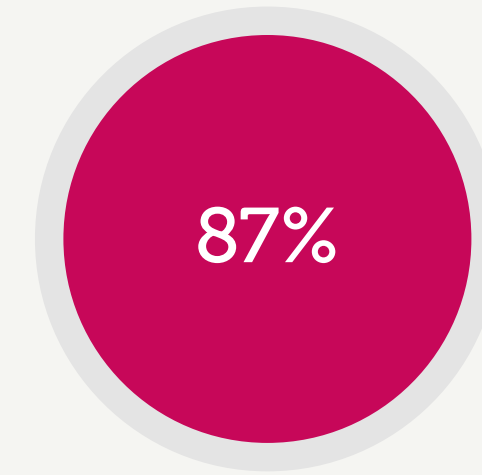
VIEW 'DIGITAL' AS INTEGRAL TO COMMUNICATIONS, RATHER THAN BEING A SEPARATE OR DEFINED AREA

For most clients now, it doesn't make sense for agencies to present 'digital' as a separate or defined service. Apart from a number of distinct specialisms (e.g. SEO), digital is expected to be part and parcel of an agency's approach. It permeates everything.

2.2. Websites

91%
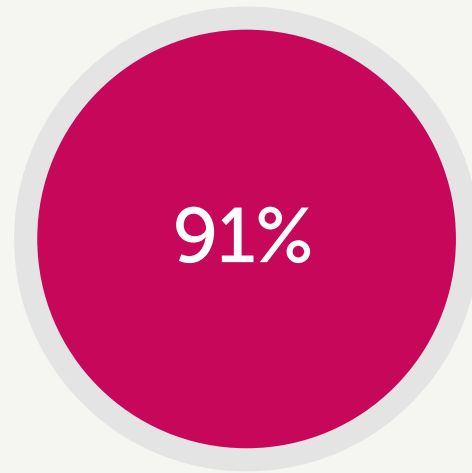
OF CLIENTS PREFER AGENCY WEBSITES WITH **LESS COPY**

For the initial look at the agency's shop window, the old adage that 'less is more' rings true. Our interviews show that most clients like to quickly find out what an agency is best at and then scan their best and most relevant work. Too much copy impedes that journey. It's more about sharp, pithy statements.

22%
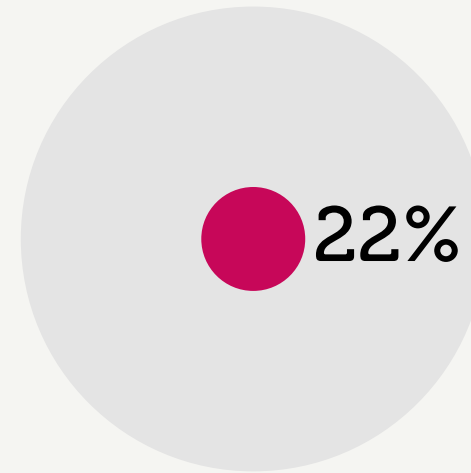
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT SOME AGENCY WEBSITES DEFY **CREDIBILITY**

'Surely they can't really offer all those services?' Clients are good at seeing through over claim. Small and medium sized agencies need to be careful about making claims that are out of kilter with their real size and capability.

65%
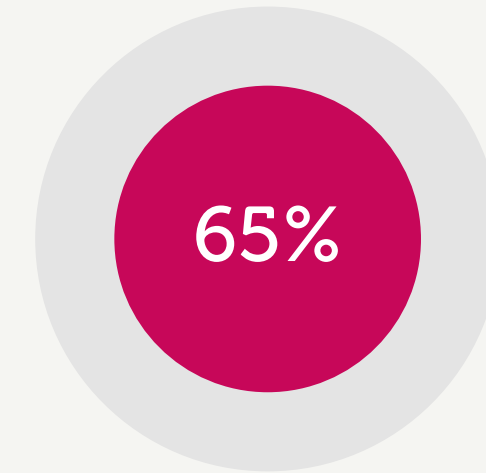
OF CLIENTS STATED THAT AWARDS ON WEBSITES ARE **IMPORTANT PROOF** OF AN AGENCY'S SUCCESS

Some clients dismiss awards out of hand, but over half the clients interviewed value them as useful evidence of agency accomplishment. Our post-pitch interviews also reveal that clients are regularly googling 'awards' when selecting agencies for pitch lists.

2.2. Websites

45%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT AGENCY WEBSITES TEND TO BE MORE ABOUT WHAT THE AGENCY HAS DONE, RATHER THAN **WHAT THEY THINK**

There is so much good work out there and endless glossy images. The agency's view on the world and its stance on different topics can be an important point of differentiation. Is your agency website just a glorified portfolio with additional news, or are you sharing an authentic viewpoint?

86%

OF CLIENTS LAST VISITED THEIR **INCUMBENT** AGENCY'S WEBSITE MORE THAN 6 MONTHS AGO

Many agencies are not giving clients reasons to visit their website. It's a missed communication channel for existing clients.

63%

OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE AGENCIES TO SHOW MORE **BEFORE AND AFTER EXAMPLES** OF WORK ON WEBSITES

There is that slight frustration for these clients – 'Yes, but what did it look like before? How and what was changed? Let me see it.' There is a lot of focus on the shiny new design, but it would be good to have a reference point image that shows what went before.

2.2. Websites

WE ASKED CLIENTS HOW THEY VIEW AGENCY WEBSITES AND THE KEY
THINGS THEY LOOK FOR. HERE'S THE TOP 10 LIST IN ORDER OF PRIORITY:

1 What are they best at – where do they excel, what's their sweet spot?

2 What's the scope of their offer – are they specialists or generalists?

3 Do they have a point of difference – anything that differentiates them from other agencies?

4 Any examples of work in my sector or close to my brand?

5 Any examples of work that addressed a similar strategic challenge to the one I'm facing?

6 Is the work clear and well presented – does it give the business context?

7 Are they an agency that I'd brief, or would I go to them with a problem – how strategic are they?

8 Who are the people behind the agency – if it's a small/medium sized agency, tell me about the founders?

9 What's the agency culture – what makes them tick?

10 Do they have views and opinions – are they sharing knowledge?

2.3. Marketing content

LinkedIn - what are clients looking for?

40%

OF CLIENTS ARE **NOT ENGAGING** ON LINKEDIN OR SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEED TO BE REACHED BY OTHER METHODS
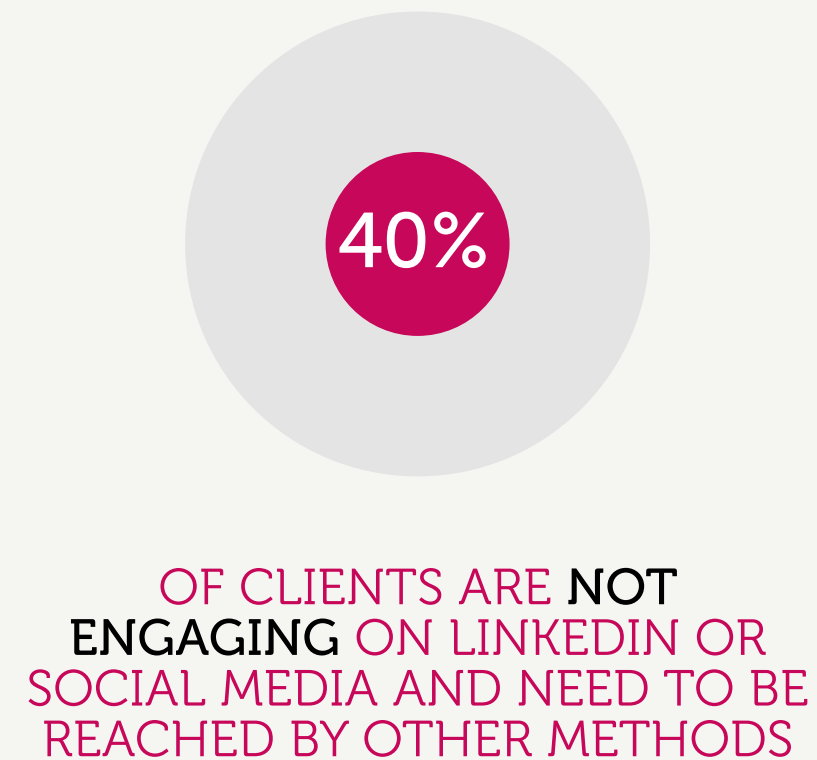
We've seen social media (including LinkedIn) engagement steadily increase since the first 'What Clients Think' report 9 years ago. However, there is still a stubborn and significant percentage of clients who are not engaging. The typical reasons include 'I haven't got time' or 'I'm not a social media person'. So, no matter how good your LinkedIn activity might be, 40% of clients need to be reached by more direct routes.

LINKEDIN

2

What leaves clients
Indifferent or 'so what'

Too much:

- Self promotion
- Recruitment
- Trivia

1

What clients
Like & appreciate

- Quick nuggets
- Learn something useful
- Relevance
- Strongly held views – authenticity
- Video & highly visual
- A distinctive, consistent theme

3

What clients find
Irritating & 'not for me'

- Obvious virtue signaling
- Lots of personal stories
- Too much to read

2.3. Marketing Content

Of the 60% who claim to follow their agency on social media, across one or more formats, this is how it breaks down.

LINKEDIN

98%

INSTAGRAM

35%

TWITTER

20%
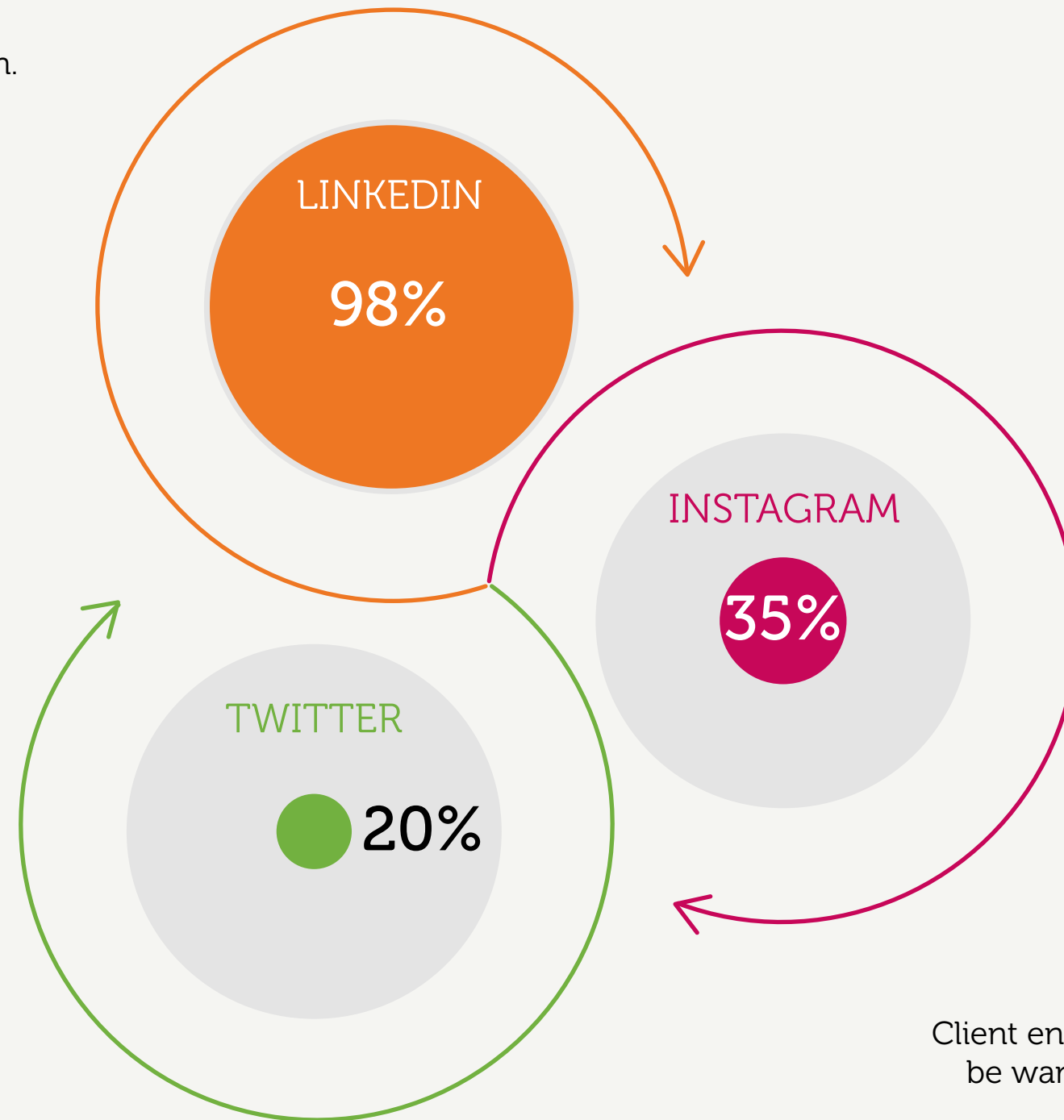
Client engagement with Twitter appears to be waning, while their engagement with Instagram is growing.

2.3. Marketing Content

35%

OF CLIENTS WHO CLAIM TO 'FOLLOW MY AGENCY ON SOCIAL MEDIA' (INCLUDING LINKEDIN) ACTUALLY HAVE A VERY LOW LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

These clients can go 1-2 months without looking at LinkedIn. They typically say, 'I might be following them' or 'I think I do'. So, don't over estimate clients' level of engagement on any platform. Employ a healthy mix of routes to clients, rather than putting all your eggs in one basket.

66%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THEIR INCUMBENT AGENCY SHOULD BE DOING MORE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

No matter how hard you try, most clients only seem to pick up on a fraction of their agency's marketing content.

40%

OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR AGENCY TO ACT AS A BETTER CONDUIT FOR MEETING OTHER CLIENTS

Most clients enjoy meeting their peers and comparing notes. Agency events that act as a conduit in this way are always popular, almost regardless of the actual topic being covered.

2.4. Presentations & pitches

98%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT A PITCH IS **GOOD BUSINESS PRACTICE** FOR HIGH VALUE PROJECTS

Note the words 'high value'. These are the big budget, brand directional projects. For these types of projects that are integral to a brand's future, a pitch is seen by clients as due diligence and good business practice.

63%

OF CLIENTS PREFER AGENCIES TO PRESENT **ONE CREATIVE CONCEPT** IN PITCHES

These clients feel that it's often clear which concept the agency prefers and the agency's time would be better served by developing their preferred concept further and bringing it to life. Showing real conviction for their preferred route, rather than presenting three less detailed options and asking the client to choose the one they prefer. It should be noted that the remaining 37% of clients are strongly in favour of agencies presenting more than one concept, so there is a marked divide on the issue.

70%

OF CLIENTS ADMITTED THAT THEIR PITCH BRIEF WAS NOT AS **PRESCRIPTIVE** AS IT MAY HAVE SEEMED

Clients often don't know what they like until they see it, and this is particularly true in pitches. The client brief that seems so well thought through and watertight is often more open to interpretation than agencies think. Clients often talk about the 'wow factor' in pitches. The reality is that this is often achieved by stepping outside the rigid confines of the brief.

2.4. Presentations & pitches

88%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THE WINNING AGENCY DEMONSTRATED GREATER **UNDERSTANDING**

Agencies that win pitches are showing greater understanding of the client's brand, market and audiences. But it's more than that. Clients often talk about the agency 'understanding our anxieties'. It's about empathising with the client, reading between the lines and identifying their true challenges.

63%

OF CLIENTS WOULD HAVE LIKED MORE **FOCUS** ON CLIENT SERVICE AND **PROCESS** IN THE PITCH PRESENTATION

A very similar figure to last year's report. Problems with client service and delivery issues have the biggest potential to leave clients with egg on their faces. It's a really important part of the presentation and always a mistake for this part of the pitch to become squeezed.

90%

OF CLIENTS AGREE THAT AGENCIES CONSISTENTLY WINNING PITCHES TEND TO HAVE **BETTER PRESENTATION SKILLS**

In post-pitch interviews, clients often talk about the winning agency's presentation being more 'polished', 'better communicated' or having a 'more engaging style'. Proper preparation and good presentation skills are an important ingredient of an agency's approach to pitching.

2.4. Presentations & pitches

In pitch presentations, clients frequently evaluate agencies against agreed criteria. Scoring systems vary but our research has shown the following categories to be most important. We have included the average weighting (AW) that clients are giving to each category:

Creative concepts/creativity	25-35% AW	Relevance to brief	10-15% AW
Strategic thinking	25-35% AW	Challenging us	10-15% AW
Understanding (brand/our issues/technical)	15-25% AW	Fit with our culture/values	10-15% AW
Project management	15-25% AW	Costs/value for money	10-15% AW
Quality of people/teamwork	15-20% AW	Quality of credentials	5-10% AW

But let's not get too carried away with scoring systems. There are lots of anecdotes in our interviews where clients talk about abandoning the evaluation process because they just instinctively knew whether an agency pitch presentation hit the spot.

2.4. Presentations & pitches

53%

OF CLIENTS ADMIT TO HAVING LARGELY **MADE UP THEIR MINDS** ABOUT A PITCH PRESENTATION WITHIN THE FIRST 15 MINUTES

Winning pitch presentations grab the audience's attention early. If an agency hasn't shared what they really *think* and set out a compelling argument within the first 15 minutes, then it's probably game over.

44%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT AGENCIES CAN SELL THEIR **CASE STUDIES** MORE EFFECTIVELY

Typical client comments include, 'I didn't get the relevance' or 'They didn't relate it to us and our problem'. Agencies are also tending to present too many case studies, as opposed to focusing on just a few totally relevant examples.

77%

OF CLIENTS DO '**NOT HAVE TIME**' TO SEE SPECULATIVE AGENCY CREDENTIALS PRESENTATIONS

For time pressured clients, seeing agency presentations can be a hassle. There usually has to be a specific project/pitch on the horizon or the client believes they will learn something useful. A conventional 'credentials presentation' doesn't cut the mustard.

2.4. Presentations & pitches

TO 5 SUCCESS FACTORS FOR AGENCY CASE STUDIES:

1

'It was absolutely relevant to our situation'

The case study was truly relevant to the strategic issue the client is facing.

2

'They gave really good business context'

A clear explanation of the problem, objective and business outcome.

3

'They managed to explain how they made a difference'

Not just the story of a project that any other agency could tell, but articulating where and how they made a real difference.

4

'It felt like a well-rounded story'

A journey with a beginning, middle and end.

5

'There was some useful learning'

Not just telling but sharing learning and insight.

77% of clients believe that video is a better method of conveying a client story than a conventional case study.

3 Retaining & Growing Clients

3.1. Client service

WHAT DO CLIENTS THINK ARE THE QUALITIES OF A GREAT ACCOUNT DIRECTOR OR CLIENT SERVICE PERSON?

1 **Organised** – Utterly dependable, regularly updating, instilling confidence.

2 **Driving** – Not just managing but taking the pressure off the client by really owning the project.

3 **Forceful** – When necessary they should be able to push back, challenge, get everyone sticking to deadlines.

4 **Honest** – Flagging issues up not hiding things, admitting mistakes.

5 **Upbeat** – Enthusiastic, interested, willing.

38%

OF CLIENTS RECALLED AN AGENCY 'MISTAKE' OR 'BAD EXPERIENCE' THAT HAPPENED OVER A YEAR AGO

Clients have long memories for agency 'mistakes' and 'bad experiences'.

3.1. Client service

'BAD EXPERIENCES' WITH AGENCIES

Perhaps an agency presentation to senior colleagues that fell flat or the recommendation to colleagues that didn't work out.

Not on time
Not on budget

Concepts not
fully realised

Haphazard
account
management

Let down in front
of colleagues

3.1. Client service

'BAD EXPERIENCES' WITH AGENCIES

The process was more painful than it should have been. The agency failed to drive the project.

Not on time
Not on budget

Concepts not fully realised

Haphazard account management

Let down in front of colleagues

3.1. Client service

'BAD EXPERIENCES' WITH AGENCIES

For whatever reason, the promise of the original concept was never truly borne out in the final design.

Not on time
Not on budget

Concepts not fully realised

Haphazard account management

Let down in front of colleagues

3.1. Client service

'BAD EXPERIENCES' WITH AGENCIES

The one that causes clients most aggravation and internal embarrassment.

Not on time
Not on budget

Concepts not
fully realised

Strategic
thinking &
creativity

Let down in front
of colleagues

3.1. Client service

49%
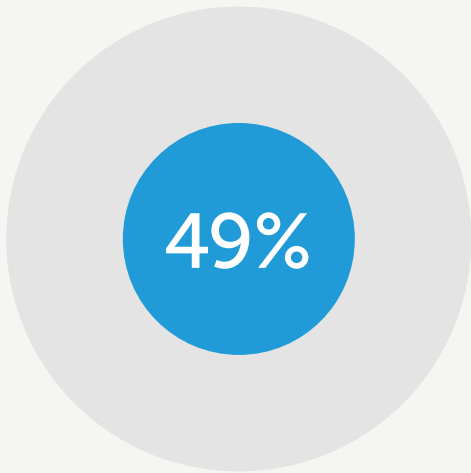
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT DESIGN AGENCIES SUFFER FROM A HIGH TURNOVER OF PERSONNEL

A frustration for clients. Bringing new team members up to speed takes time. There can be a knowledge gap and a break in momentum.

26%
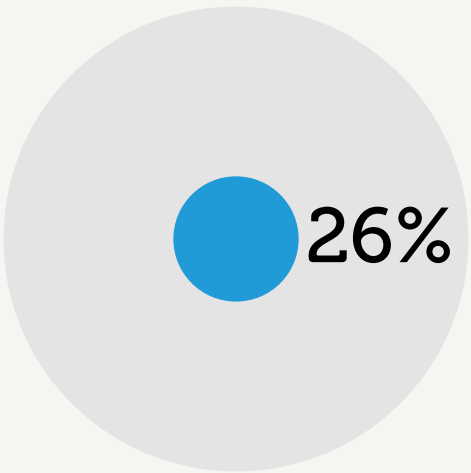
OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT AGENCY CHANGES IN PERSONNEL COULD BE BETTER COMMUNICATED

Most clients are fair and reasonable about changes in personnel. They know that people will come and go, but they do expect these changes to be well communicated – plenty of warning, good overlap and proper introductions.

38%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT HANDOVERS COULD BE IMPROVED WHEN NEW PEOPLE JOIN THE AGENCY

This is a process that is not generally seen by the client. They have to trust the agency that behind the scenes there is a good transference of knowledge from the departing person to the new person.

3.1. Client service

30%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT AGENCIES COULD PROVIDE BETTER ONGOING SUPPORT & MONITORING
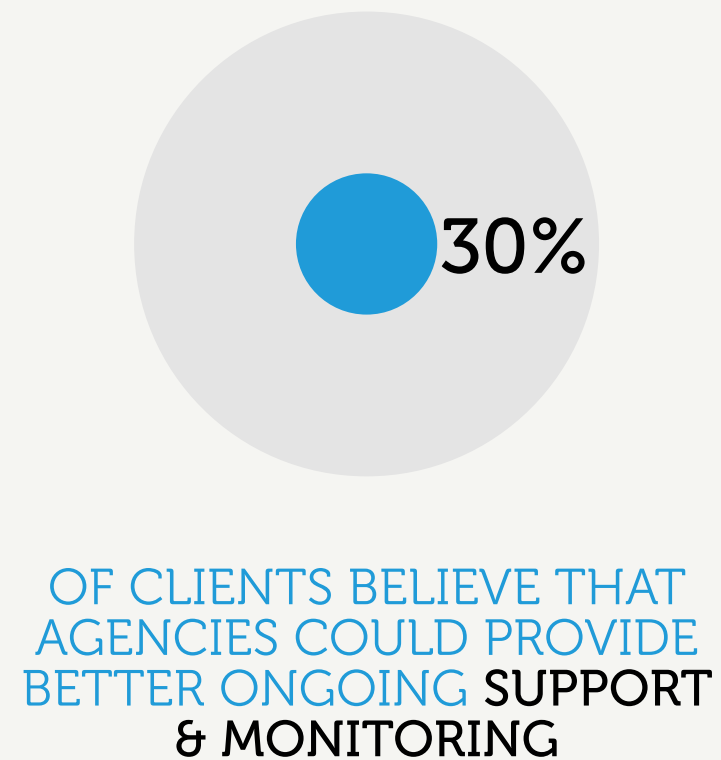
A slight feeling here that some agencies tend to draw a line under a project and want to immediately move on. The client, though, can be left wondering how they implement the rebrand, how they continue to improve the new website or how they monitor the success of a campaign. Clients want that strategic advice and guidance to continue in terms of support and monitoring. Agencies are sometimes missing opportunities to increase revenue and extend the relationship.

SUPPORT & MONITORING

2
Better Support & hand holding

- Post branding implementation – advice & guidance?

1
Better Relationship management

- Ways to extend the relationship
- Client development opportunities
- Maintaining strategic input & oversight
- Plugging the gaps between projects

3
Better Ongoing monitoring

- New website – how it's performing, ways to improve?
- Campaigns – reviews, ways to improve effectiveness?

3.1. Client service

TOP CLIENT CRITICISMS FOR AGENCY MEETINGS. THE THINGS TO AVOID:

1 **Why are we having the meeting?** – The purpose or objective is not clear.

2 **Wrong casting** – Too many people from the agency attending, the right person(s) not there, unsure about their roles.

3 **Repetition** – Didn't we cover this at our last meeting or in our last call?

4 **Command & control** – The agency is too passive and is just taking client direction. Lack of views and advice.

5 **Next steps not clear** – No follow up in terms of minutes and next actions.

77%

OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEIR AGENCY RELATIONSHIP IS A **GOOD BALANCE** OF ONLINE & FACE TO FACE

Agencies have coped well through the pandemic in terms of maintaining good communications with clients. Our research shows that most clients are happy with the current balance of online and face contact.

3.1. Client service

WHAT DO CLIENTS MEAN BY 'FLEXIBILITY'?

When it comes to client/agency relationships, there are some familiar words that trip easily off the tongue. But what do these words really mean to clients? Let's look at five key words – flexibility, collaborative, proactive, consultative, understanding.

18% OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR AGENCY TO BE **MORE FLEXIBLE**

Deadlines
Accomodating on tight & changing deadlines

Feedback
Listening & responding to client feedback in a non-defensive way

Processes
Not being rigid when something just needs to 'get done'

Budgets
Understanding, willing to find a way

3.1. Client service

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WHAT DO CLIENTS MEAN BY 'COLLABORATIVE'?

23% OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR AGENCY TO BE **MORE COLLABORATIVE**

Free flow
Of opinions & ideas from both sides
Enjoyable, honest exchanges

Interim meetings
Continuous dialogue, allowing client to input

Proactivity
Thoughts & ideas about the client's wider business

Agency team
Connected, working well together

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WHAT DO CLIENTS MEAN BY 'PROACTIVE'?

58% OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR AGENCY TO BE **MORE PROACTIVE**

Big picture
Understanding wider objectives & strategy
Taking a step back from their day to day – quarterly strategy meetings

Day to day
Asking questions, sharing opinions – not just 'Yes' people
Easy to slip into brief taking mode

Adding value
Client development activity that adds value for both client & agency

Sharing
Experience with other clients

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WHAT DO CLIENTS MEAN BY 'CONSULTATIVE'?

33% OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR AGENCY TO BE **MORE CONSULTATIVE**

Challenging
Suggesting alternative options

Proactive
Added value thoughts & ideas

Genuinely insightful
More than replaying or telling the client what they already know

Beyond first phases
Not just consultative in strategic phases – continuing to be consultative through the entire project or relationship

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3.1. Client service

COULD BETTER UNDERSTAND THE CLIENT'S BUSINESS

61% OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THEIR AGENCY COULD **UNDERSTAND MORE** ABOUT THE CLIENT'S BUSINESS

Internal stakeholders
Dynamics of the business
Who to convince and bring with you

Strategy & objectives
Wider strategy & how the agency's work and ideas relate

Commercial understanding
Economic realities
Increasing relevance of agency's solutions

Brand, market and audience(s)
Vital but a given

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Who to convince and bring with you

3.2. Barometer questions

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF CRUNCH 'BAROMETER' QUESTIONS THAT WE ASK IN EVERY CLIENT INTERVIEW. THESE ARE BASIC MEASURES OF THE STRENGTH OF CLIENT/AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS.
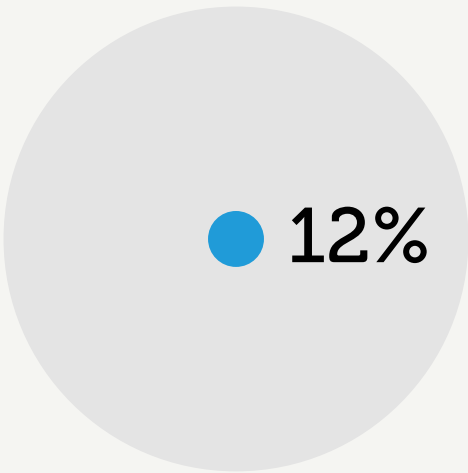
3.2. Barometer questions

79%
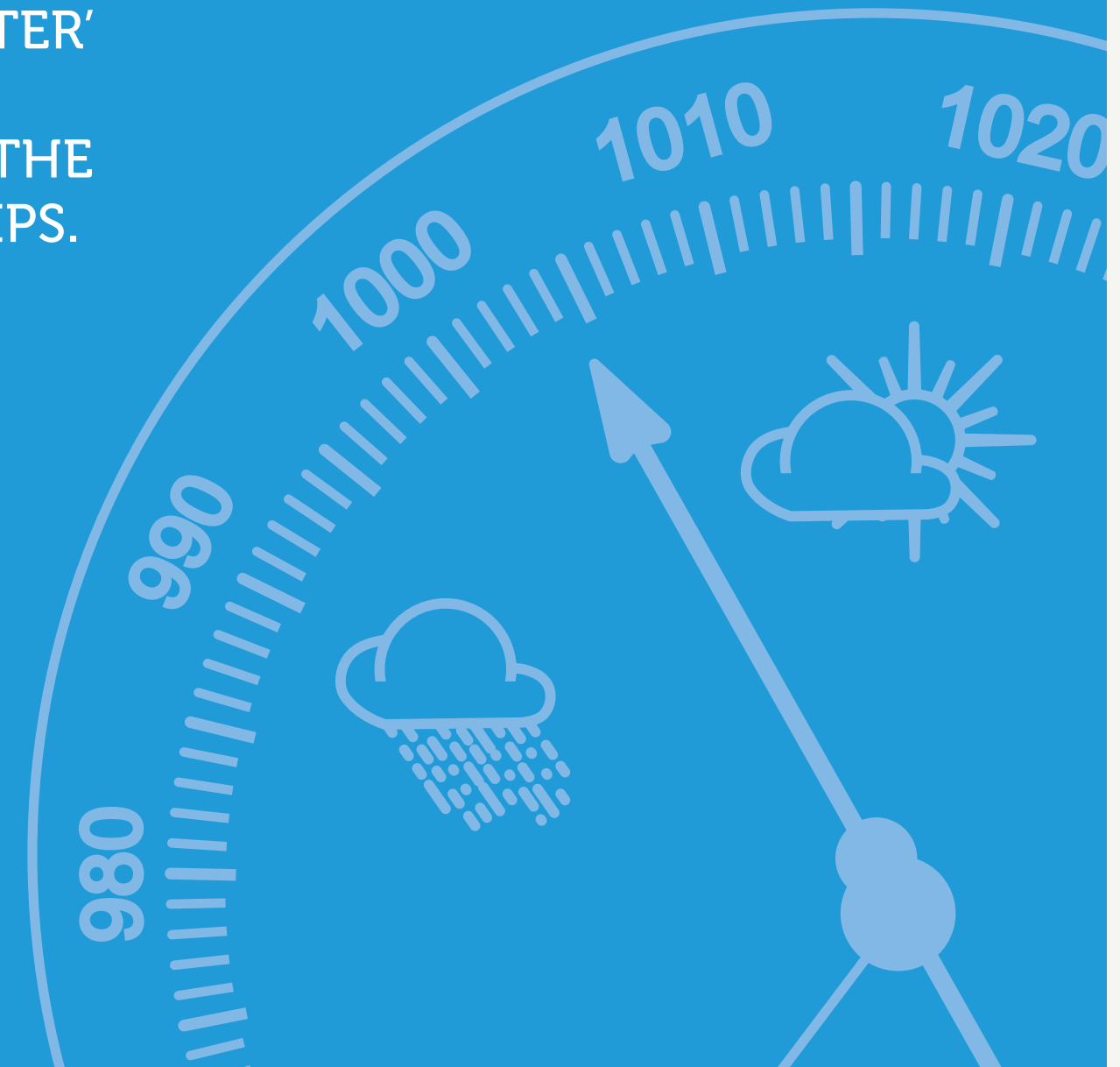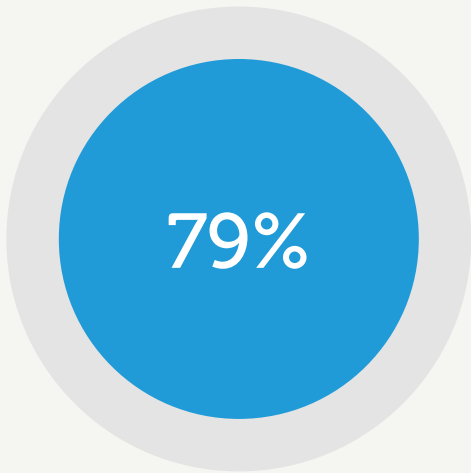
OF CLIENTS DESCRIBED THEIR FEELINGS TOWARDS THEIR INCUMBENT AGENCY AS 'POSITIVE'

These clients will still voice constructive criticism but it's within a positive context.

12%

OF CLIENTS DESCRIBED THEIR DESIGN AGENCY AS 'THE BEST' PARTNER/SUPPLIER THAT THEY WORK WITH, REGARDLESS OF DISCIPLINE

It's difficult to be viewed as 'the best', especially by large scale clients that are dealing with multiple agencies across different disciplines. 'The best' description is usually reserved for long standing, senior level relationships where there is a track record of important, highly regarded work.

47%
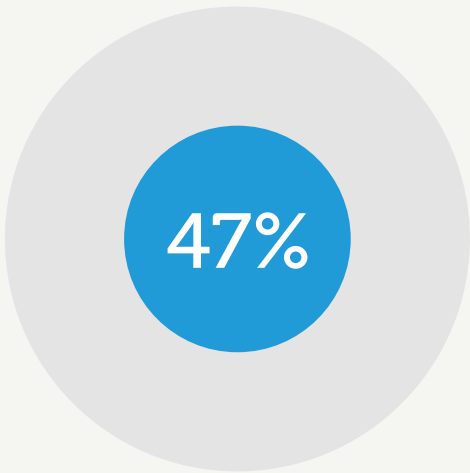
OF CLIENTS WOULD RECOMMEND THEIR DESIGN AGENCY 'UNRESERVEDLY' AS OPPOSED TO 'WITH CAVEATS'

Our independent, bespoke client surveys get to the heart of what your clients would really say about your agency to a colleague or friend – 'They're good but...' It's that honest conversation – the things they wouldn't necessarily say directly to the agency.
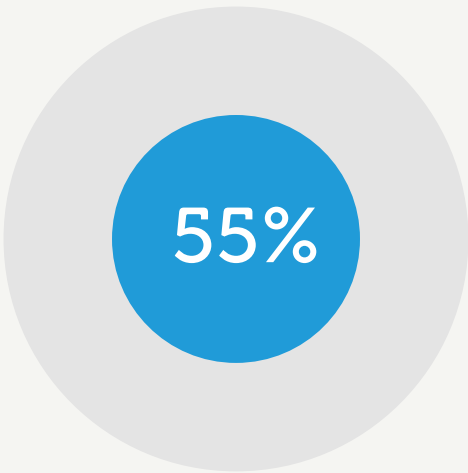
3.2. Barometer questions

14%

55%

65%
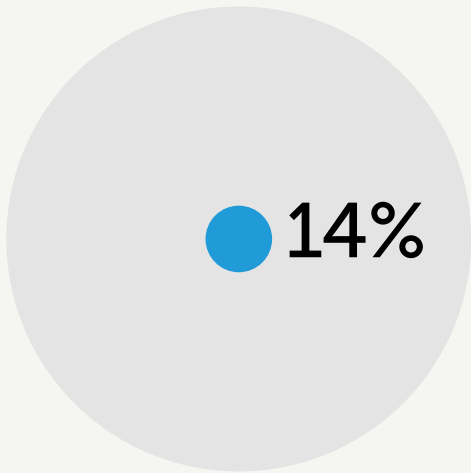
OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEIR AGENCY 'REGULARLY EXCEEDS' THEIR EXPECTATIONS

OF CLIENTS CONSIDER THEIR DESIGN AGENCY TO BE GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY

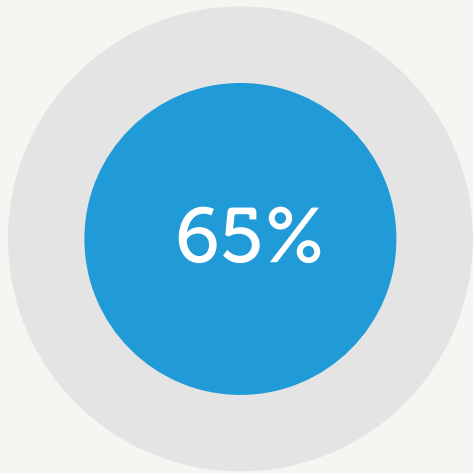OF CLIENTS VIEW THEIR AGENCY AS A PARTNER

'Regularly exceeds' is praise indeed. The icing on the cake. The statistic may well be higher if clients were judging purely on creative output. However, they are considering a whole range of factors from client service to levels of proactivity, value for money to meeting timelines and budgets.

Many clients complimented agencies for being flexible and accommodating on fees.

Being described as a 'Partner' is a more difficult level to achieve than many agencies think. Some clients believe that until agencies share the risk in some way, they will always be part supplier. Other clients believe that when relationships with design agencies are largely project based rather than retainer based, true partnerships are unattainable. The agency's level of proactivity is another key factor in a true partnership.

3.2. Barometer questions

TOP 3 REASONS FOR AGENCIES FALLING
SHORT ON VALUE FOR MONEY:

1

Disproportionately expensive for certain types of work

e.g. implementation work carrying the same premium
price level as front end conceptual work.

2

Applying rigid or overblown processes to more straightforward 'just get it done' jobs

3

Account management wasn't tight enough and resulted in the client having to give more input than they would wish
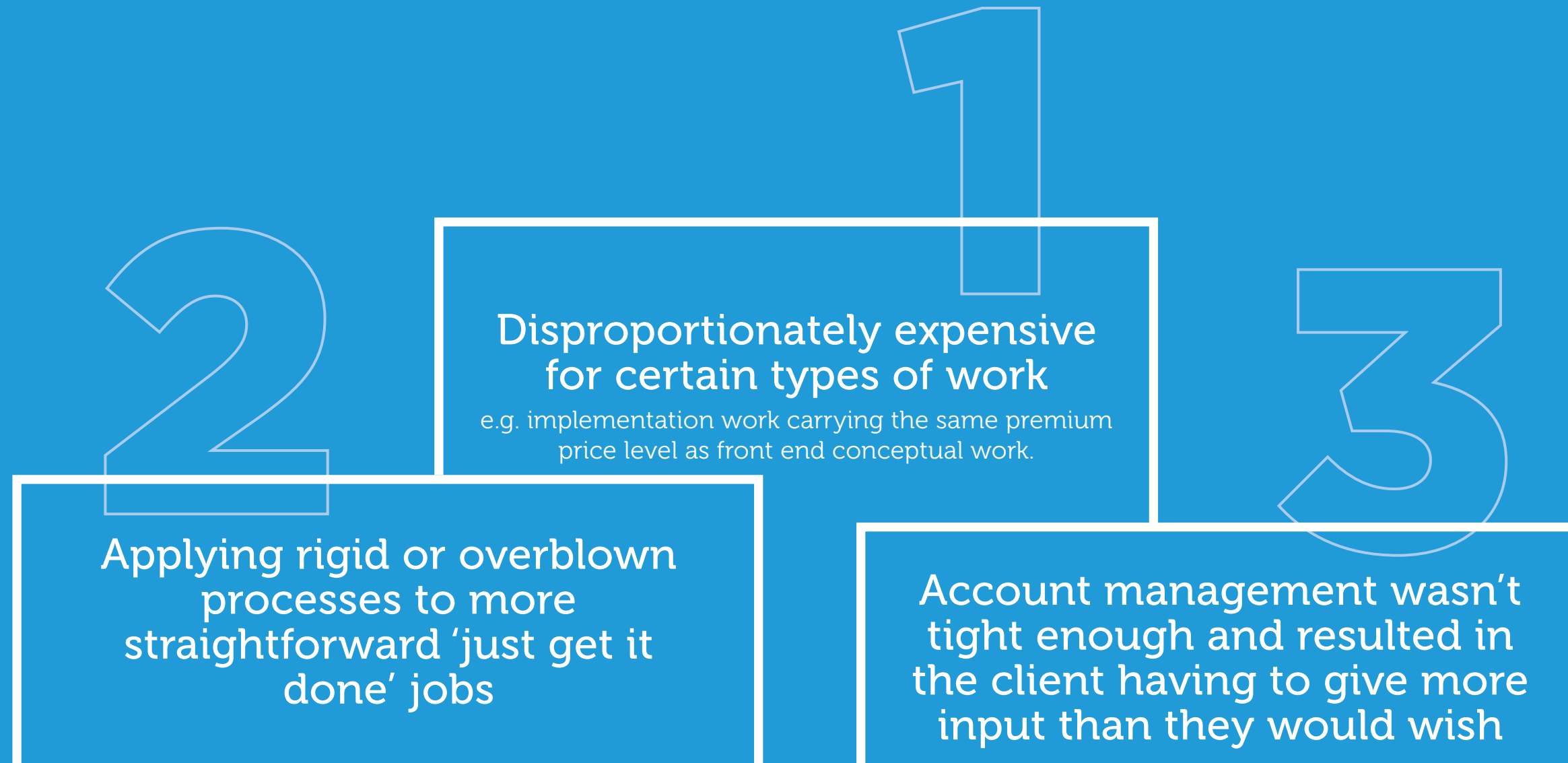
3.3. Client development

40%

OF CLIENTS ARE NOT AWARE OR HAZY ABOUT THE **FULL SKILL SET** OF THEIR INCUMBENT AGENCY

Perceived gaps and question marks about an agency's skill set are opportunities for agencies to reassure and convince. Many agencies, however, are not asking the question, 'Are there any types of project or challenge that you wouldn't consider us for, any areas that you're less sure about or simply don't know if we have a particular skill?'

97%

OF CLIENTS **ADMIRE AND RESPECT** AN AGENCY THAT ADMITS WHEN A PARTICULAR CHALLENGE OR TASK IS NOT FOR THEM

Agency honesty in these situations can go a long way – 'No, that's not really our area but we can recommend another company that can help.' Clients respect this answer and it tends to build trust.
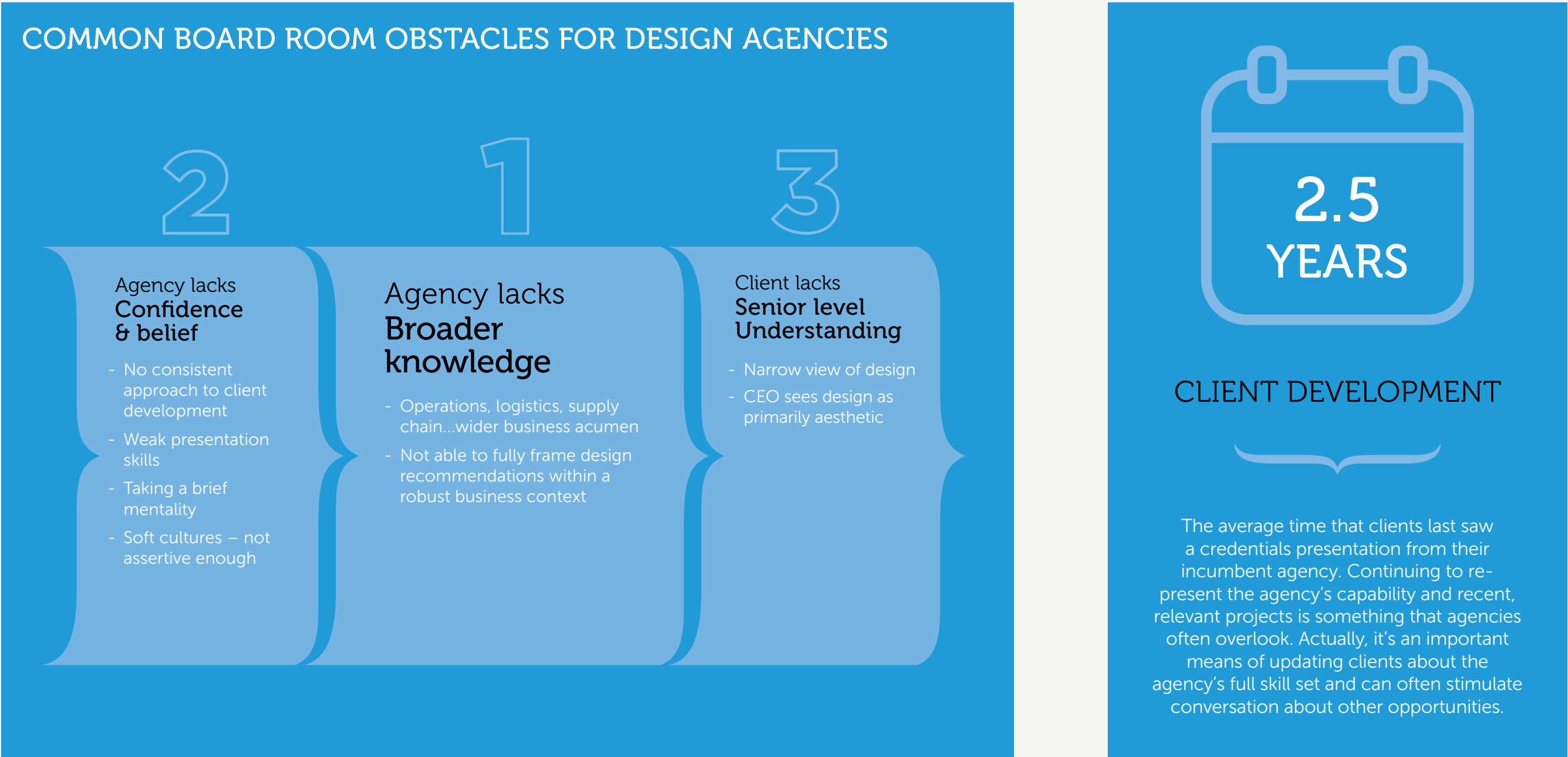
8%

OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THEIR DESIGN AGENCY IS 'IN THE BOARDROOM'

'In the boardroom' means that the agency enjoys a range of the most senior level relationships, not just one. The agency commands attention and respect at Board level. It has the ear of the Board and its opinion counts.

3.3. Client development

COMMON BOARD ROOM OBSTACLES FOR DESIGN AGENCIES

2

Agency lacks
Confidence
& belief

- No consistent approach to client development
- Weak presentation skills
- Taking a brief mentality
- Soft cultures – not assertive enough

1

Agency lacks
Broader knowledge

- Operations, logistics, supply chain...wider business acumen
- Not able to fully frame design recommendations within a robust business context

3

Client lacks
Senior level
Understanding

- Narrow view of design
- CEO sees design as primarily aesthetic

2.5 YEARS

CLIENT DEVELOPMENT

The average time that clients last saw a credentials presentation from their incumbent agency. Continuing to re-present the agency's capability and recent, relevant projects is something that agencies often overlook. Actually, it's an important means of updating clients about the agency's full skill set and can often stimulate conversation about other opportunities.

70% of clients describe at least 2 people at their incumbent agency as 'outstanding'.

About Up to the Light

Up to the Light is the leading provider of client surveys to the UK design industry. The consultancy offers expert, objective and experienced advice for marketing services agencies and professional services firms. The consultancy's approach is to challenge ingrained assumptions and offer more effective, insight-led thinking.

This report is dependent on agencies commissioning Up to the Light to interview their clients. If you've found this report useful, then just imagine how insightful and valuable a bespoke survey with your clients will be. Do get in touch if you'd like to discuss a client survey for your agency.

Services include:

- Client surveys

- Business development strategy

- Pitching advice

- Business differentiation

- Training & workshops

- Brand positioning & brand strategy for clients

IN ASSOCIATION WITH

dba

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