



WHAT CLIENTS THINK 2015

A report based on 420 client
interviews conducted on
behalf of design agencies.

IN ASSOCIATION WITH

dba

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on 420 interviews that Up to the Light conducted with clients during the course of 2014. We have built on last year's report and have been able to add some informative statistics, particularly around the subjects of pitching, agency communications, proactivity and costs.

All the interviews were commissioned by design agencies. Names of the individual agencies and clients involved are confidential. However, we are able to share some interesting figures when looking across all 420 interviews. As in the 2014 report, they reveal a fascinating snapshot of the client viewpoint and provide some important pointers for how agencies can strengthen their client relationships.

1.1 About the agencies

All the agencies commissioned Up to the Light to conduct a Client Survey with their key clients. The 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 the levels of client loyalty.

The disciplines of the different agencies included:

- Retail design
- Packaging design
- Digital design
- Corporate identity
- Corporate communications
- Corporate reporting
- Print design
- Integrated or multi-disciplinary design

The design agencies range in size from 5 employees to over 100.

1.2 About the clients

The 420 interviews are across a very broad range of clients – different industries, UK and international, business to business, business to consumer, not for profit.

Different areas represented include:

- Food and drink manufacturers
- Fashion retailers
- Other high street retailers
- Supermarkets
- Department stores
- Government
- Financial services
- Pharmaceuticals
- Health care
- Charities
- Automotive
- Education
- Professional services firms
- Hi tech/software
- Chemicals

Job titles of people interviewed range from Chief Executives and Board Directors of major organisations to Brand Managers. However, they all have responsibility for buying design and have a relationship with a design agency. Most interviewees are responsible for day to day dealings with the design agency, whilst some interviewees have a more senior overseeing role.

2. THE INTERVIEWS

All the interviewees were first asked by their design agency for permission to be interviewed by Up to the Light on their behalf. Many clients are now used to taking part in such an exercise and are impressed that their agency is taking the trouble to conduct an independent Client Survey. Consequently, they take time to give considered answers and most interviews last 30-45 minutes. Some are considerably longer.

All 420 interviews were conducted on the telephone. The statistics in this report are based on a core question set that was used across all 420 interviews, rather than bespoke questions that we use to probe issues specific to a particular client/agency relationship.

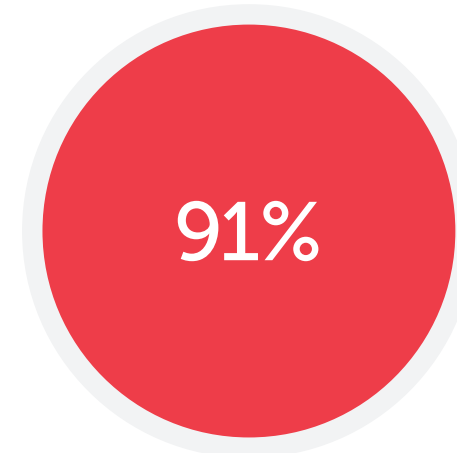
2.1 Attitudes to design and design agencies



OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT DESIGN AND CREATIVITY IS AN **'ENJOYABLE'** PART OF THEIR BUSINESS LIVES



Ongoing proof that the design agency's visual currency is naturally appealing for clients.

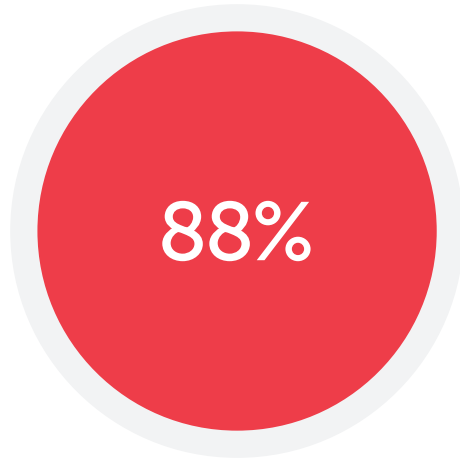


OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT GREAT DESIGN PROVIDES AN **EXCELLENT RETURN ON INVESTMENT**



There is a widespread belief that design at its optimum is a highly effective business tool.

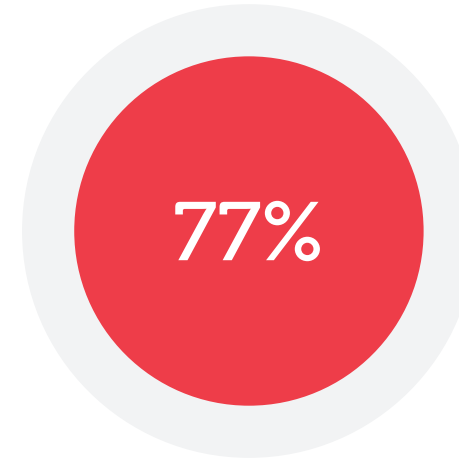
2.1 Attitudes to design and design agencies (continued)



OF CLIENTS BELIEVE IT IS **'DIFFICULT'** TO EVALUATE DESIGN CONCEPTS



While most clients enjoy the visual nature of design and the contrast that it brings to their daily work, many are acutely conscious of being on less firm ground. The more subjective area of design can be problematic for many clients.

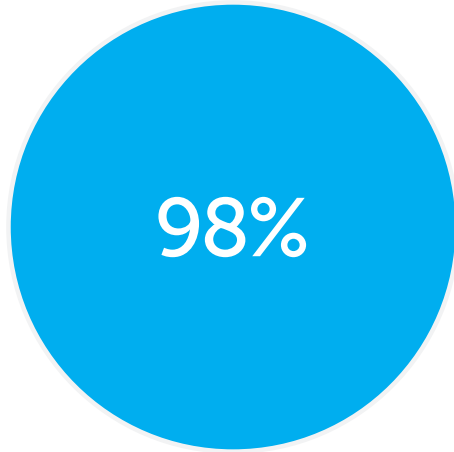


OF CLIENTS PREFER THEIR DESIGN AGENCY TO OFFER A **RANGE OF DISCIPLINES** RATHER THAN BEING A SPECIALIST IN ONE AREA



Due to the more complex and overlapping nature of modern marketing many clients see a clear benefit in their agency being able to offer a range of skills under one roof. For example, the conventional argument that a packaging design agency might espouse about the benefits of being a specialist are becoming less convincing.

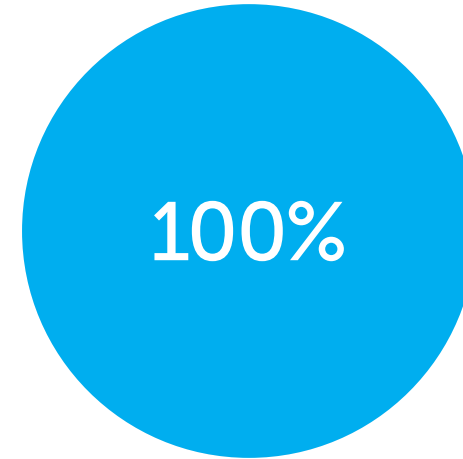
2.2 Attitudes to pitching



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



As in last year's report, the vast majority of clients considered a pitch to be 'best practice' and simply a matter of carrying out 'due diligence.' It would almost be a professional embarrassment not to. It is important to note that this statistic applies to 'high value' pitches. The definition of 'high value' differs depending on the market.

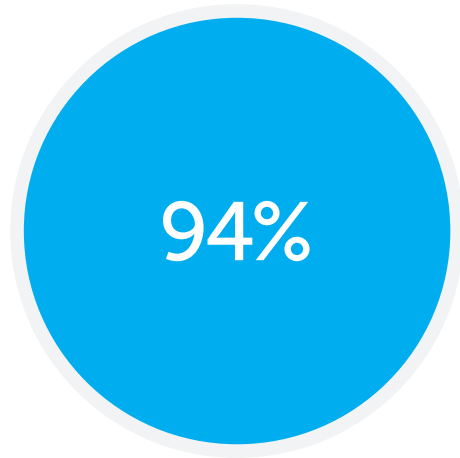


OF CLIENTS WOULD **NOT EXPECT TO PAY** FOR A CREDENTIALS PITCH



No surprises here. All the clients interviewed would expect agencies to give a presentation that shows relevant examples of work, and to treat this as their investment in winning a potential project.

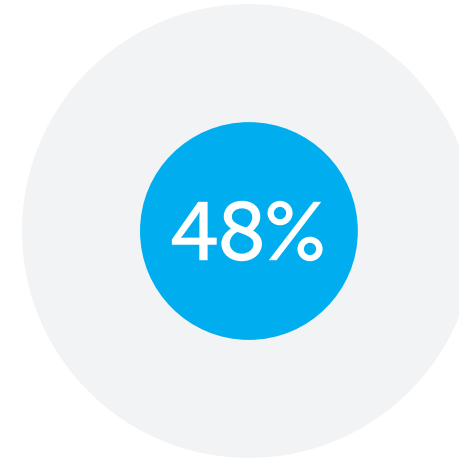
2.2 Attitudes to pitching (continued)



OF CLIENTS WOULD **NOT EXPECT TO PAY**
FOR A STRATEGIC PITCH PRESENTATION



A 'strategic' pitch is where the agency offers a view on the client's brand, market and audience. It includes thoughts on strategic direction but does not include creative work. Of course, this represents a grey area in the pitching debate. Clients accept that while strategic pitches do not include creative work they can still entail a significant agency investment. However, the vast majority of clients interviewed still expect agencies to treat a strategic pitch as their investment in winning a potential project..

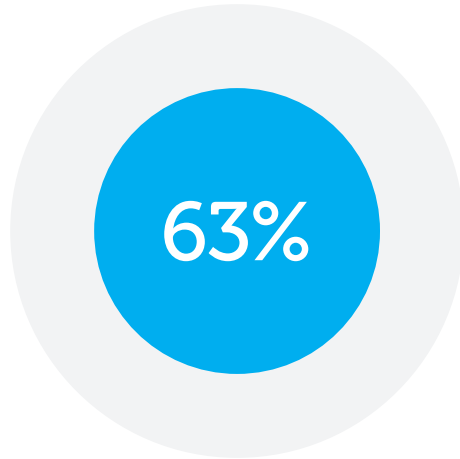


OF CLIENTS HAVE EXPERIENCED
'STRATEGIC' PITCHES WHERE AGENCIES
HAVE PRESENTED CREATIVE WORK
REGARDLESS



In an attempt to outflank competitors a significant number of agencies appear to be presenting creative work even when the client has stated that this is not what they are expecting. In effect, these agencies are turning strategic pitches into free creative pitches.

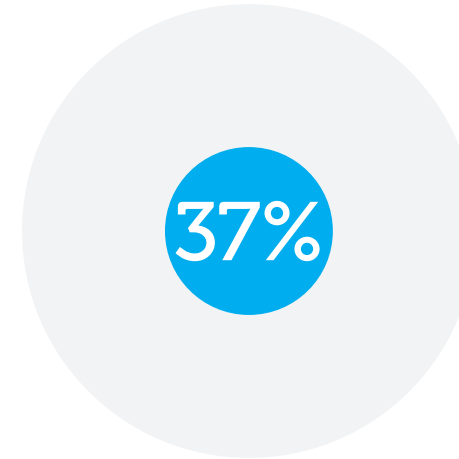
2.2 Attitudes to pitching (continued)



OF CLIENTS WOULD **NOT EXPECT TO PAY**
FOR A CREATIVE PITCH



The general view among these clients tends to be 'I don't need to pay because there are enough hungry agencies out there wanting our business.' The figure suggests that free pitching is still widespread.

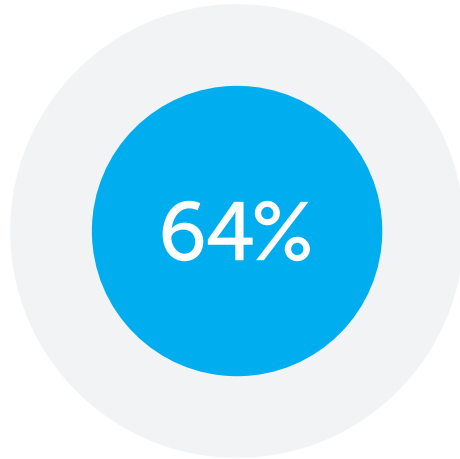


OF CLIENTS WOULD **EXPECT TO PAY FOR**
A CREATIVE PITCH



The 'no free pitching' message doesn't seem to be getting through to clients. However, it takes two to tango and there are still too many agencies willing to give away creative work.

2.2 Attitudes to pitching (continued)

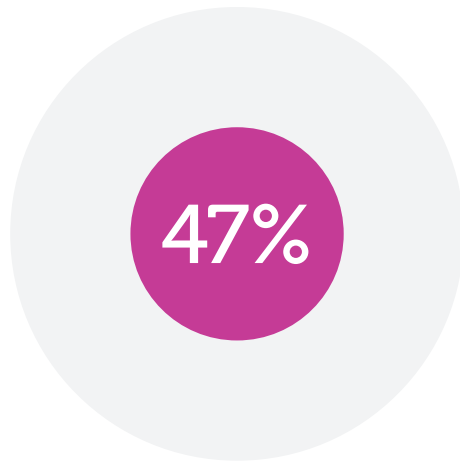


OF CLIENTS HAVE SELECTED AN AGENCY
THAT **WENT AGAINST A SPECIFIC PITCH**
REQUIREMENT



Breaking the rules can pay dividends. The client may have specified in the pitch brief that 'the logo is not to be changed' or 'do not move away from the existing core colours' but the winning agency has opened the client's eyes to new possibilities and the client has liked what they've seen. Despite writing a brief, clients don't always know what they want!

2.3 Agency communications



OF CLIENTS FELT THAT THEIR AGENCY **DID NOT COMMUNICATE** REGULARLY ENOUGH



This is agency to client communication, rather than on an individual basis. These clients felt that their agency was slightly shy and retiring when it came to communicating their successes and the work they do for other clients. Clients generally like to feel that their agency is busy, dynamic and successful and are quick to point out in interviews if things feel a little quiet or passive.

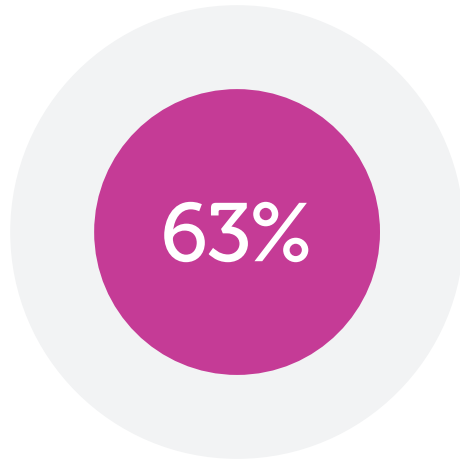


OF CLIENTS **RARELY OR NEVER READ** THE AGENCY NEWSLETTER OR CLAIM NOT TO RECEIVE IT



Clients are receiving a staggering number of e-mailed newsletters and are generally not giving them the attention that agencies hope for. Agencies should not over rely on their newsletter as a means of agency/client communication.

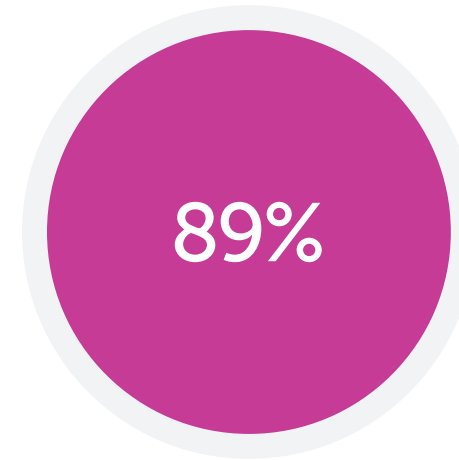
2.3 Agency communications (continued)



OF CLIENTS **PREFER A PRINTED UPDATE**
TO AN ONLINE NEWSLETTER



In a world of online 'noise' clients are tending to appreciate the printed format versus an increasingly crowded Inbox.

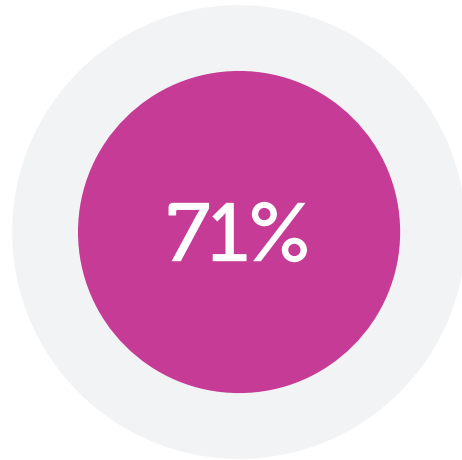


OF CLIENTS **COULD NOT REMEMBER**
VISITING THEIR AGENCY'S WEBSITE



Like last year, the agency website appears to be a missed communication channel for current clients. Clients are not being given reasons to visit their agency's website. For clients who are visiting their agency's website, the most popular reasons are to check contact details, show a colleague their agency or check out their own case study.

2.3 Agency communications (continued)

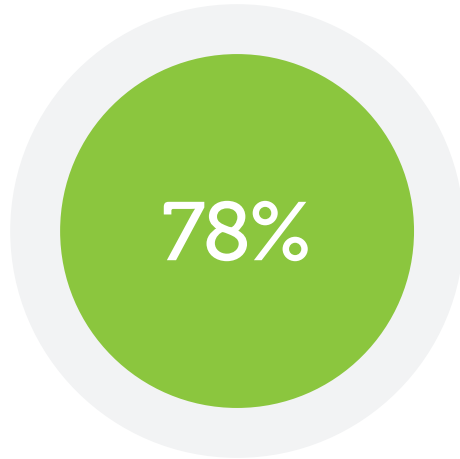


OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT AGENCY
NEWSLETTERS ARE **TOO CREDENTIALS
BASED**



Clients often rely on their agencies to 'show us what's new out there.'
They are generally more interested in pithy views, opinions, trends
and new developments than another agency case study.

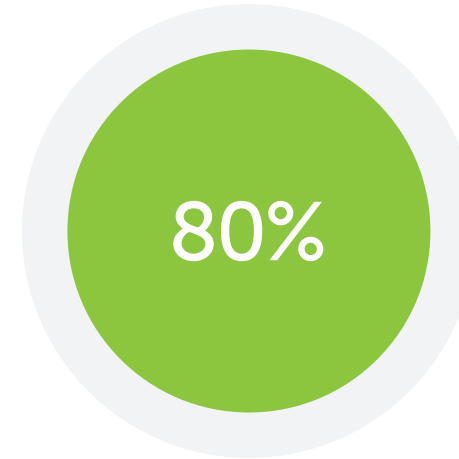
2.4 Client service



OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THE CLIENT/AGENCY
CHEMISTRY TO BE 'VERY GOOD'



By and large, design agency principals and staff are seen as friendly, approachable and personable.

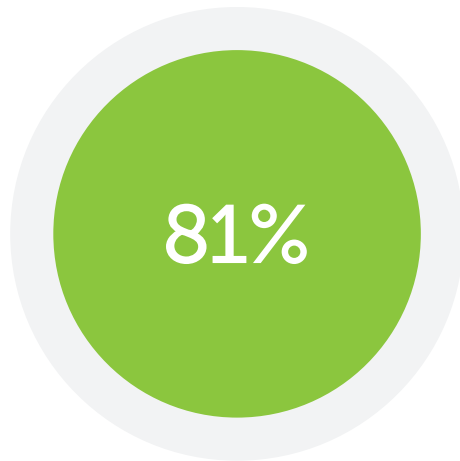


OF CLIENTS '**LOOK FORWARD TO MEETINGS**' WITH THEIR DESIGN AGENCY



A slightly higher percentage than last year. Proof that a design agency meeting can be a fun part of the client's day.

2.4 Client service (continued)



OF CLIENTS WHO HAD A WEAKER OR MORE **VULNERABLE RELATIONSHIP** WITH THEIR DESIGN AGENCY CITED CLIENT SERVICE ISSUES AS THE MAIN REASON



A similarly high percentage to last year's report. As ever it tends to be the nuts and bolts client service issues that are to blame, rather than quality of creativity or thinking.

Examples include:

- **Budget management** – failing to flag things up early.
- **Hiding problems** or being too slow to reveal them.
- **General sloppiness** – late for meetings, not prepared.
- **Haphazard** – no contact reports, client has to chase, 'last minute' feeling, poor communications.
- **Too passive** – not driving things, supplier not partner mentality.
- **Making it hard work** – choosing the wrong battles, overly defensive, stubborn.

These examples are often viewed as a deterioration from an earlier point in the relationship when agency keenness and commitment was deemed to be higher.

2.4 Client service (continued)



OF CLIENTS WHO WANT THEIR DESIGN AGENCY TO WORK COLLABORATIVELY WITH OTHER AGENCIES **EXPRESSED FRUSTRATION** THAT THIS WASN'T HAPPENING AS EFFECTIVELY AS IT SHOULD.

Effective collaboration with other agencies is becoming increasingly important. In fact, it is often mentioned by clients when asked to list top expectations of their design agency. When agencies are not working well together it can make the client's life very hard work.

Typical problems include:

- Personality clashes and clashes of ego between agencies.
- Overt competition for work where skills overlap.
- Inconsistent communication between agencies.
- Agencies looking to the client for leadership instead of sorting out some issues between themselves.
- Overt jockeying for position so that a perception develops of an agency that is working for its own glory rather than the good of the client

The effect on the client is that the work programme can be slowed down, misunderstandings can develop and time consuming client input is required to manage the process of agency integration.

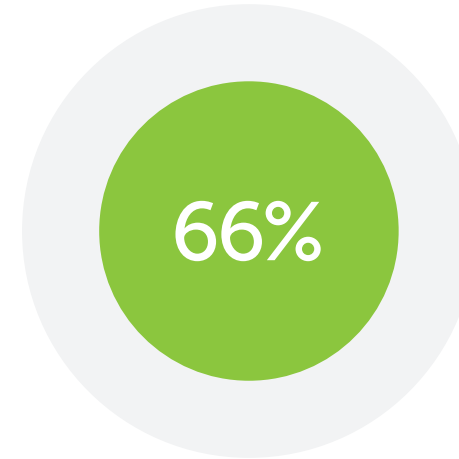
2.4 Client service (continued)



OF CLIENTS REFERRED TO AN AGENCY
'MISTAKE' THAT HAPPENED OVER
A YEAR AGO



A very similar figure to last year's report, proving that clients have long memories for the bad stuff.

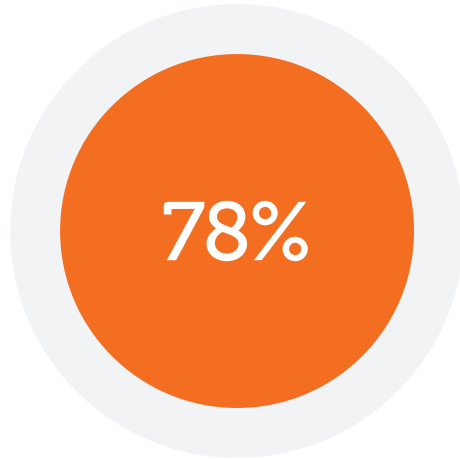


OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR
AGENCY TO HAVE **MORE COMMERCIAL**
UNDERSTANDING



Understanding the brand, market and audience are vital areas for the agency to understand but, as far as the client is concerned, more of a given. The missing component seems to be 'commercial understanding' which usually involves a greater knowledge of the client's financial pressures and challenges. This is a more immersive view of the client's world that allows the agency to build a better commercial case for their design solution.

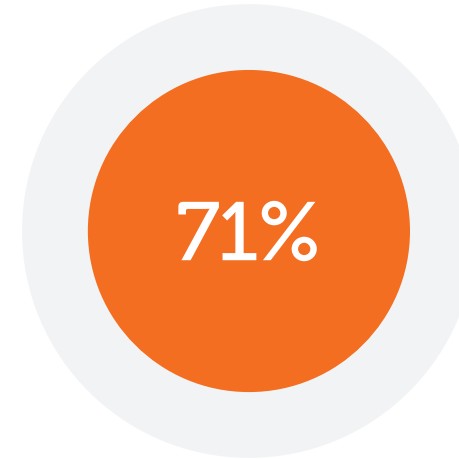
2.5 Agency costs



OF CLIENTS STATED THAT THEY ARE
LOOKING TO **REDUCE AGENCY COSTS**



A slightly lower figure than last year but still high. Many clients are under some pressure to contain and reduce costs.

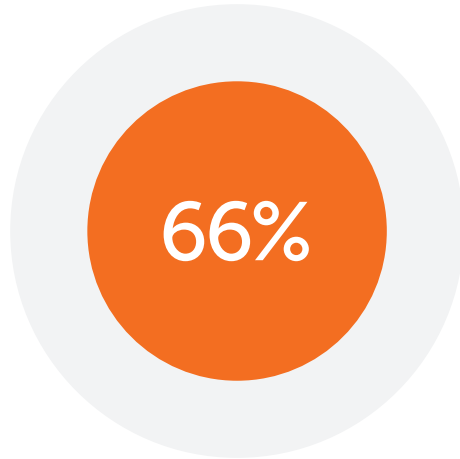


OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THEIR AGENCY
TO BE **'A LITTLE EXPENSIVE'** VERSUS
OTHER AGENCIES



Clients tend to believe that their agency is 'a little expensive' versus other agencies regardless of whether they have done any recent cost comparisons. As in last year's report, perhaps this reflects an underlying nervousness about buying creative services, a less tangible area than other purchases.

2.5 Agency costs (continued)



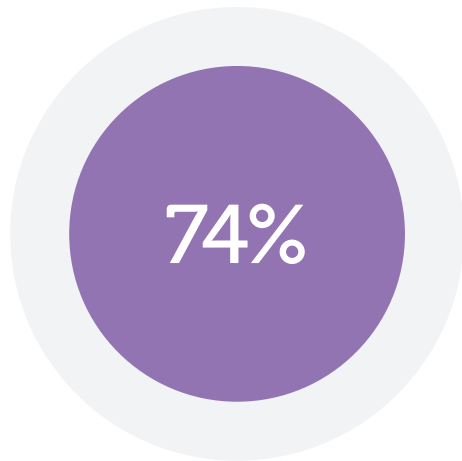
OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR AGENCY
TO BE MORE PROACTIVE ABOUT
DEVELOPING **MORE COST EFFECTIVE**
WAYS OF WORKING



How to work with agencies in 'smarter' and 'more cost effective' ways is much talked about by clients. Increasingly, clients are looking to agencies to make proactive proposals about how this can be achieved.

These clients can often view design agencies as being inflexible in their approach to costs and adopting a 'one size fits all' approach. For instance, they often accept that front end conceptual thinking is charged at a premium but question why more run of the mill implementation work sometimes seems to be charged at similar levels.

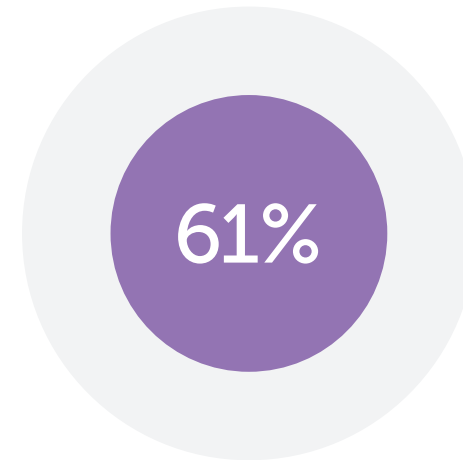
2.6 Added value



OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT THEIR DESIGN AGENCY COULD BE **MORE GENERALLY PROACTIVE** IN THEIR APPROACH



Proactivity is so often the difference between good and excellent client relationships. Proactivity usually falls into two different areas. Firstly, proactivity within the project in hand – suggesting a better option, challenging the client, spotting potential problems. Secondly, broader proactivity about the client’s business – trends and competitor analysis, original research, business improving ideas.

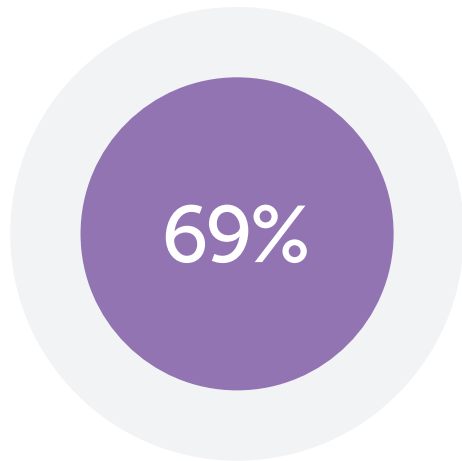


OF CLIENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR AGENCY TO BE **MORE SELF-CRITICAL**



Most agencies seek praise not criticism, so being self-critical in front of the client is not something that comes naturally to most agencies. However, it is something that clients would like to see more of, particularly in long standing client/agency relationships built on trust. It’s about saying, ‘The project went well but how can we make it even better next time?’

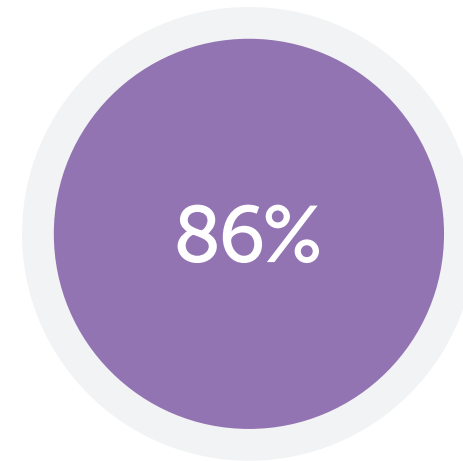
2.6 Added value (continued)



OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT THEIR DESIGN AGENCY COULD BE **MORE PROACTIVE** IN ADDING VALUE AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE



A very similar percentage to last year's report. Clients are usually referring to agency contributions outside the project in hand. Key to this is how agencies use their case studies more imaginatively to find direct relevance and learning, rather than telling the generic story of a project. Other examples are competitive reviews, analogies with other brands/markets and sharing anything new and interesting.

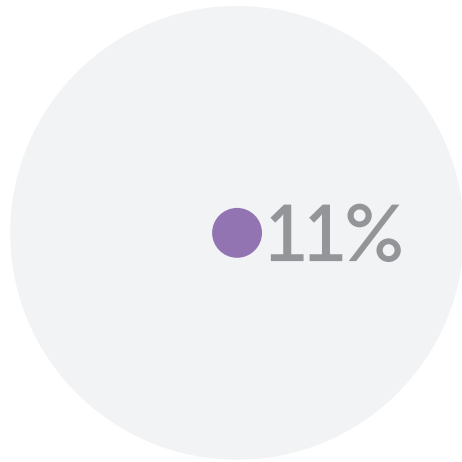


OF CLIENTS ARE **EXPECTING MORE** FROM THEIR AGENCY NEXT YEAR



The message here is not to rest on your laurels. No matter how successful the relationship, most clients expect a progression. They might be expecting more brand understanding, more nurturing of high level relationships, more added value ideas or more people on the team. Client expectations evolve.

2.6 Added value (continued)

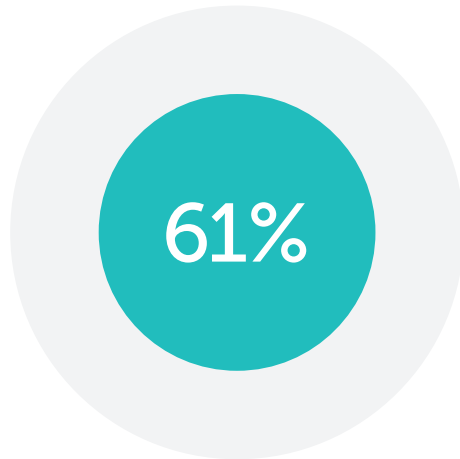


OF CLIENTS BELIEVE THAT THEIR DESIGN
AGENCY '**REGULARLY EXCEEDS**' THEIR
EXPECTATIONS



Clients were asked to list their top 3-4 expectations of the agency and then to what extent these expectations are met. Whilst 'regularly exceeds' is a low percentage it is important to note that their expectations can be quite broad ranging and encompass different aspects of the relationship. If their expectations only referred to quality of creative work, then this figure would be much higher. Proof again that client/agency relationships are about much more than simply answering the brief.

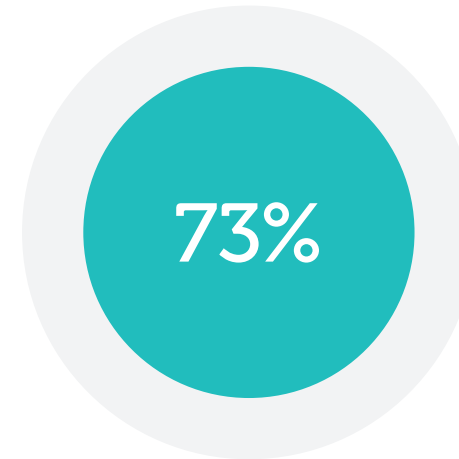
2.6 Client development



OF CLIENTS ARE NOT AWARE OF THEIR AGENCY'S **FULL SKILL SET**



We know that clients like to put agencies in particular boxes – ‘Not very strategic’ or ‘weaker at digital’ or ‘limited resources’. Some of these boxes may be fair while others wildly inaccurate. Independent client interviews continually reveal how relatively unaware agencies are of these perceptions because they are rarely voiced directly to the agency.

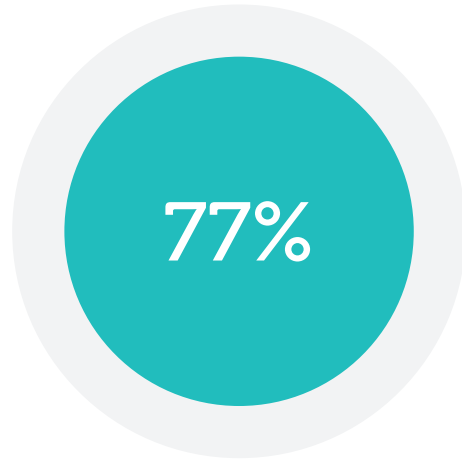


OF CLIENTS **WOULD RECOMMEND THEIR AGENCY TO A COLLEAGUE/FRIEND NOT ‘UNRESERVEDLY’ BUT ‘WITH CAVEATS’**



In other words, they are saying, ‘Yes, they are good but watch out for...’ Gaining real client commitment, over and above mere client satisfaction, is hard won. Never take client loyalty and commitment for granted.

2.6 Client development (continued)



**OF CLIENTS WERE UNABLE TO NAME
5 COMPETITORS OF THEIR INCUMBENT
DESIGN AGENCY**



Client recall of design agencies tends to be poor. Generally speaking, most clients do not read the design trade press, take note of agency league tables, who's winning awards or have much sense of who the big players are versus small and medium sized agencies. This means that design agencies have great scope to create and manage client perceptions. For most clients the design industry is viewed through a very small window of just a few agencies.

2.8 And finally, beware of conforming to one of these stereotypes

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Clients often have some rather stereotypical views about the types of agencies that should be avoided at all costs. Clients are quick to notice if their agency begins to show any of these traits so beware. Here are some of the stereotypes:

LONDON IVORY TOWER

The agency that never leaves the M25 bubble and is totally out of touch with reality. Trendy designers who inhabit the rarefied world of agency land and don't understand 'real' consumers.

PRIMA DONNAS

The agency that is only interested in their own portfolio. 'Precious' designers who don't understand commercial realities.

NO FOLLOW THROUGH

The concepts may be great but they let themselves down on making it all happen. They cause the client extra work and aggravation.

STRATEGY OVERKILL

The agency that bombards the client with strategy, whether it is necessary or not. However, the creative execution of the strategy disappoints.

.....

These are just a few examples but what is striking is how easily clients can begin to place their agency into a stereotype. Once there, negative perceptions can be difficult to shift.

Up to the Light is a specialist consultancy offering 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.

Services include:

Client Surveys

Business development strategy

Pitching advice

Business differentiation

Training & workshops

Brand strategy for clients in partnership with creative agencies



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