



## **Avoiding the Long Cold Winter**

By Mark Sneider, Managing Director, RSW US

It's that time of year again when the grass starts to appear greener in the eyes of a client, who may start to look toward some fresh perspective or firepower from a new agency. Affectionately known to agency and client executives as "Silly Season," there's really nothing "silly" about it. Remember, according to recent RSW research, clients don't mind changing firms one bit, so what are you doing to maintain and grow that client base?

Depending on your agency, Silly Season is either a bad thing or a very positive time of year that you've been planning for and working toward since January. Without question, now is the best time to do the work that will position your agency for a successful fourth quarter. Sales and marketing of an agency is work that should go on year around, from the entire integrated arsenal agencies preach but sadly, often don't practice. But, now more than ever, how an agency positions itself during this time is literally the difference between a very Happy New Year and a long cold winter.

Right now, we're hearing gloom and doom from all sides. Spending is down in this sector and that sector, inflation and unemployment are both increasing, and business in general is looking to tighten its proverbial belt rather than take steps to drive top line revenue. Oh glorious day for the agency executive on the right side of Silly Season! It is this very news that enables the proactive agency to be on the lookout for better alternatives for its clients and stretch those marketing dollars without sacrificing quality and service. But ideas and good intentions are no replacement to doing work to reach out on a continuous basis, and if you've not been doing any kind of proactive outreach program all year, you should be terrified.

Because your competition hired us months ago.

Fortunately, fear can be a great motivator to action, and certainly it's best to begin a proactive sales and marketing process while cash flow remains solid, rather than waiting until it becomes a trickle and market spend is weighed

against payroll as a choice. As you would tell your clients, marketing is not an event, rather it is a long term process with a pipeline of good, prospective clientele as well as interaction and leveraging of current clientele and influencers. Developing a pipeline can take months, if not years, requiring constant cultivation and ongoing reach outs designed to hit the right person at the right time with the right message and get them to take some desired action – meeting with your firm.

Provided you've not really done anything up to this point to market your organization, admittedly you have put yourself in a vulnerable situation. Many agency executives have an aggressive and proactive public relations and publicity program, a robust and optimized website that generate leads and provides information, sponsors or hosts events, and perhaps there are even some advertising agencies out there that advertise. Regardless, they are doing many of the necessary things to grow and gain market share. But, the missing component that I see in the most well intentioned firms is dedicated sales and new business outreach.

Assuming that you've done some basic work to reach out to and attract new business, doing some, all, or part of the following will help in making Silly Season something you look forward to each year.

### **1. Dedicate Someone to the Business Development Function**

While again, the track record of internal hiring for new business is not good, and while I don't want to shamelessly plug the lead generation and business development services of RSW, hire someone or some entity to proactively handle it. Will it cost you? Yes, it's an investment in the future of the firm and done properly, should begin to pay off within a few months. It takes time to make still rock roll, but having someone dedicated to the task of business development can ensure that prospects are being reached out to consistently and on a proactive basis.

### **2. Update Your Portfolio**

If your website and your presentation kit portfolio is still touting harvest yellow appliances and the cobranding promotion you did with the Bee Gees, now might just be the time to freshen that up. The mistake most firms make is showing everything they've ever done, as opposed to sharing some of their most recent pieces from current clientele, with a simple case study on the effectiveness of the piece. Clients want results, not pretty pictures. Share how your pretty pictures can actually make a difference to your client's bottom line.

### 3. Clean Up Your List

Do you even have a prospect list? If not, well, I'm worried about you. But how long has it been since you've cleaned it up or sent something to the list. Even if it's an inexpensive mailer, although dimensional mailers always work best for business to business, send something out to clean up that list. And, make sure you're proactively seeking ways to add to the list, such as a downloadable white paper, accessed survey, or even something more advanced like a downloadable video or podcast. Remember, websites are supposed to sell and generate leads, not be a static piece of online brochureware.

### 4. Proactively Increase Your Visibility

All those great tools you tell your clients to do – well, now is the time to be sure you're doing that for yourself. While the adage of cobbler's children having no shoes is true of nearly every business, it seems rampant in the advertising industry. Get some articles out there, drive leads through a properly promoted trade show appearance, distribute a press release, get a mailer or email blast ready, sponsor an event, run some ads – do something. And, if you feel you can't find the time or objectivity or focus, there are firms out there that actually specialize in doing public relations and advertising for public relations and advertising firms. I wouldn't necessarily recommend your competitor, but if you're a firm in Dallas, nothing wrong with calling a PR firm in Cincinnati to help you out.

Some simple (and free) things to do: networking events, blogging and social media, and one of my favorites – ask your current clients for a referral.

### 5. Do Your Research

RSW has some of the most detailed information and data that peers into the minds of agency clientele. This data shares information as to why agencies typically lose clients, in what areas clients wish agencies had more expertise, and how agencies can best improve. RSW also has a section where agencies can test their Brand Potency (ABP Index) to see how they measure up to the competition. In addition, there are dozens if not hundreds of data collection resources agencies can use to develop a more specific pitch and share some best practice advice without investing huge amounts of time and hard dollars to create something compelling for a prospect. Knowledge is indeed power.

If all this feels overwhelming, it just may be – which is exactly why outsourcing could be an excellent option for you. Whether outsourcing some of your marketing or outsourcing the sales function, most agencies who have

done so have found they have spent less, gained more control, and secured better results than attempting it in house. There are no office politics, outsourced experts won't call in sick, take personal days, increase your overhead or drink your coffee.

The bottom line is that you owe it to your organization to be sure you are proactively taking the proper steps to attract new business, as the landscape continues to become more competitive and clients ever more discerning with their marketing investments. What are you doing to stand out? Do you have a proactive sales and marketing program? Is what you're doing now satisfactory, or could it be better?

The poor track record of internal sales has been well documented, but it still seems as though many agencies are comfortable continuing to hope that "this time, it will be different," or worse, doing much of nothing – clearly not a good business development approach. And, while it's easy for me to plug the services and the value of RSW and what our team offers to our agency clientele, the reality is that business development must be an ongoing priority and work to secure those new clients needs to have already started or begin soon as clients are readying to review the efficacy of 2008 and slate budgets for 2009.

So ask yourself, "Is Silly Season something you embrace, or fear." Regardless, consider this your motivational speech.

#### About the Author

Mark Sneider is the Managing Director of RSW/US. Mark opened RSW's U.S. office in 2005. Prior to RSW, Mark spent ten years working for two top tier packaged goods companies, and ten years on the marketing services side of the business. He started his career at DDB Needham in Chicago. Mark is a graduate of Northwestern's Kellogg Graduate School of Business with a major in Marketing and Economics. He can be reached at [mark@rswus.com](mailto:mark@rswus.com).

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