



It's Not the 50% You Get Right That Matters

When treated as an annual formality, client–agency assessments will merely end up funding yet another avoidable agency review.

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Ask a CMO how an agency relationship is going, and the typical answer is: “Pretty good, for the most part.” And the scorecard seems to back that up. Average satisfaction sits, well, at midpoint. Creative gets a solid 4 out of 5. Agencies still complain about the quality of scopes or briefs. Nobody’s complaining loudly in the hallway of the business units. Case closed, file the report, see everyone next year.

“The process of performance evaluations deserves the same strategic rigor as any other major business decision.”

Eighteen months later, that same brand is knee-deep in a costly, disruptive agency review, wondering how a “pretty good” partnership went sideways so fast.

Here is the uncomfortable truth: it didn’t go sideways fast. It was visible the whole time, sitting quietly in the 20% to 30% of the assessment nobody looked at closely—the handful of dissenting stakeholders whose scores got smoothed into a comfortable average, the open-ended comment that was skimmed instead of read, the one category that consistently underperformed while everything else looked fine. Brands love to celebrate the 50% to 80% of the relationship that’s working. But it’s not the percentage you get right that determines whether the partnership survives. It’s what you do with the percentage you get wrong.

A Wave of Reviews That Didn’t Have to Happen

We’ve been tracking client–agency reviews for years at Agency Mania Solutions, and the pattern keeps repeating. Back in 2018, we wrote about a flurry of brands walking away from multi-decade agency partnerships in the same short window, including Campbell Soup Company (ending a 64-year relationship with BBDO), Southwest Airlines, IBM, Manulife, and Target, to name a few. The industry treated each one as a surprise. None of them were.

The wave hasn't slowed down—it's accelerating. Forrester projects that 85% of US B2C marketing executives plan to review their media agency contracts in 2026, up from just six major brands doing so in 2021 and 20 in 2023. Pharma and CPG are not sitting this one out: Mars launched a global review of its media, commerce, social, and PR roster in late 2024 to consolidate a sprawling partner list, and Bayer's consumer health CMO has been publicly candid recently, on industry stages like Cannes Lions, about overhauling her own agency roster. Every one of those brands almost certainly had some form of performance assessment already in place. Few of them, by the industry's own account, were using it effectively to catch the problems before they became review-worthy.

That should alarm every CMO reading this. In our own work running client-agency assessments for Fortune 500 brands, the pattern is remarkably consistent: It's rarely the aggregate score that predicts a future review. It's the handful of scores nobody drilled into, the comment that got skimmed instead of escalated, the category that quietly underperformed for two cycles in a row while the top-line number stayed flat. Boards and CMOs don't get blindsided by relationships that were actually fine. They get blindsided by relationships in which the warning signs were looming in the data the whole time, in the wrong 50%, unread.

Measuring Is Not the Same as Managing

We've seen brands run a technically sound annual survey for years and still end up in a disruptive review because the process stopped at measurement. The assessment gets administered, the scores get tabulated, a report gets circulated—and then nothing happens.

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No executive sponsor pushes for an honest conversation about the outliers. No documented action plan is built, assigned, or followed up on at the next check-in. They've built a machine that faithfully surfaces the wrong 50% of the relationship, cycle after cycle, and do nothing about it.

That is arguably worse than not measuring at all, because it manufactures the appearance of diligence—“we do an annual review, we're covered”—while the real issues compound, unaddressed, until someone with enough seniority loses patience and calls for a full-blown review.

This is precisely why we've long argued that annual or semiannual assessments earn their keep only when they're treated as a strategic governance tool, not a compliance exercise. Performance assessments should be:

- Focused on what really matters
- Honest and transparent
- Diligently timed and contextualized
- Translated into action plans with named owners
- Run with real participation, structured as a 360-degree, reciprocal process
- Properly resourced

Skip any one of those disciplines, and you're left with exactly the kind of hollow, checkbox process we just described—one that measures the relationship without ever managing it.

Stop Shopping for a New Agency. Start Being a Better Partner.

Every one of the brand departures we cited above—then and now—gets framed publicly as the agency falling short. Rarely does the coverage ask the harder question: What was the client doing, or failing to do, that let the underperformance persist for years before anyone acted? We've made this argument before, and it bears repeating, because it is the single most underappreciated fact in the entire industry: a client's own behavior is usually the number-one predictor of whether an agency can deliver against expectations. Unrealistic timelines produce rushed, uninspired creative. Vague briefs produce missed expectations. Thin budgets produce a lack of innovation. Weak feedback loops produce recurring, unresolved performance issues—the very issues a real assessment process exists to catch early.

Replacing the agency doesn't fix any of that. It resets the clock on the same root causes, with a new logo and a multi-month, multimillion-dollar transition to boot. More often than not, the reviews don't even improve satisfaction for long, because the client side of the equation—the briefing and work review discipline, the feedback culture, the willingness to act on uncomfortable findings—walked into the new relationship unchanged. If your organization doesn't have a rigorous, strategically run assessment

process, a new agency roster is not a fix. It's an expensive way for a brand to buy another 18 months before the same conversation happens again.

CMOs don't need to review more agencies. They need to review their own assessment process, and treat it with the same discipline, budget, and executive attention they'd give any initiative that touches hundreds of millions of dollars in marketing investment. That's exactly what's at stake.

The brands that keep ending up in expensive, headline-making agency reviews aren't unlucky. They're the ones that spent years congratulating themselves on the 50% to 80% they were getting right, while the smaller, less comfortable percentage they were getting wrong sat unaddressed in a report nobody read closely enough.

Fix that, and you'll need far fewer reviews—and will build the kind of partnerships that last a decade, not two years. In the end, agencies aren't lost over the 50% you got right—they're lost over the 50% you never got around to fixing. ■

What Brands Should Do, Starting Now

- 1. Put a senior marketing leader's name on the process, not just "Procurement" or "Agency Relations."** If a CMO or its leadership team doesn't personally review the findings and sponsor the resulting action plan, the rest of the organization will treat the exercise as administrative, and act accordingly.
- 2. Stop reporting only the average. Report the distribution.** Isolate your bottom-quartile scores, your detractors, and every direct verbatim comment tied to risk. That's where the signals are. The top-line number is the least useful data point in the entire report.
- 3. Run it twice a year, not once.** A mid-year pulse alongside the annual review closes the gap between when a problem starts and when someone with authority actually hears about it. Consider doing smaller reviews, or focusing on the most strategic or challenging relationships.
- 4. Make it reciprocal.** Ask your agencies to rate you, too, and compare it against your own self-assessment. If your team believes it's an easy client to work with but the agency disagrees, you've just found your next action item. It's not just about collecting the data, it's about being courageous enough to accept the feedback.
- 5. Require an action plan with an owner and a date for every material finding—and open the next review by reporting progress against it.** An assessment without follow-through is a survey. An assessment with follow-through is governance.
- 6. Ask your own organization the hard interdependency questions.** Are your briefs good enough? Are your timelines realistic? Is your feedback specific and actionable? Are you communicating well? Are the right people interfacing with the agencies or approving the work? Half of what shows up as "agency underperformance" traces back to answers you don't like giving.
- 7. Before you approve a review, ask what your own assessment process would have told you 18 months ago, and whether anyone acted on it.** If the honest answers are "we don't know" or "no," that's the problem to solve first.



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Bruno Gralpois is the co-founder of Agency Mania Solutions, a premier service and technology firm specialized in helping companies realize the transformational value of managed partnerships. Bruno is the author of bestseller *Agency Mania* and the former chair of the Association of National Advertisers Client/Agency Committee and a faculty member of the ANA School of Marketing.

Our clients' ongoing accomplishments result from cutting-edge practices in the area of client-agency performance evaluations. See how stronger relationships contribute to better marketing.

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