

Getting more contributions that count from accounts

By [Lynn Madeley](#), issued by [Havas Johannesburg](#)

30 Apr 2010

Lynn Madeley, CEO of Euro RSCG South Africa, voices her concern about the passiveness of account management in the local industry.



Have you ever noticed how in an agency/client meeting, there are two members of the agency team who do little more than watch everyone else shine?

The creative director, the art director, the copywriter and the planner - all present their work and their views, all take part in the feedback and discussion. Yet the account director and account exec have little more than bit parts. They open the meeting and then sit silently, rarely contributing, until the very end when they commit to preparing the timing plan and budget.

Why is it that the account people contribute less than they probably should? What is it that stops them from saying anything?

In my experience, one of the scourges of South African advertising is the passiveness of account management. Our industry is young in comparison to Europe and the States, and so the icons of SA advertising are still in the business, or part of our recent past. Take Robyn Putter, Graham Warsop, Reg Lascaris, John Hunt. Notice they are all creatives who built their agencies around their personal talent and skill. Not only were they the creatives, they were also the owners of their businesses. So take one hot-shot, brilliant mind and mix it with a young person with, say, six years of work experience - it's likely they're not going to say very much in that rarefied company (unless they are a superstar).

And thus the habit begins. We learn from our bosses and leaders, and if the leaders of agencies don't think much about account management, and bosses don't know how to be good account managers, what chance does the discipline have?

Coupled with that, many account managers have come up from the administrative side of the agency. I often hear, "I was a PA before I became an account manager", but it's a totally different skill set.

Don't get me wrong - I'm not saying there aren't good account managers out there. There are many, some of whom are truly brilliant, but we need to be developing the discipline more.

So how do you get the contribution you want, and what can you do to encourage the contribution of account people?

First, we need to tell people what we expect. So what do you want from your account management? I believe account people should:

- have accurate reporting skills;
- be good at handling conflict;
- be structured;
- be disciplined;
- have good attention to detail;
- be able to cope with large volumes of work; and
- be energetic.

This sounds about right, particularly for entry-level account management. I believe however, that more is needed. A good account management person also needs:

- to be interested in brands and communications;
- a degree;
- a stint at one of the advertising colleges; and
- a keen interest in business generally.

But both these lists are really hygiene checks, useful when recruiting. Within your existing agency structure, if you want great account management people who think “why?”, and aren't afraid to ask “why?” and deal with the consequences of this question, you need to follow a three-step plan.

Step one: Tell people what you expect from them. Ask people to be curious, tell them it is not only acceptable to ask, it's in fact expected at your agency.

Step two: Live what you want from people. Ask people what they think and listen to them when they give input. There is nothing worse than a boss who asks a question and then fiddles with his or her Blackberry as the person tries to answer. Practise curiosity yourself. Read a great deal, watch movies, watch people, listen to the news, go to art exhibitions. And even better, involve your teams so that they can be part of the curiosity journey.

Step three: Empower people to give you what you want. Let people talk. It is so easy to shut people down once you've decided you know what they're going to say. Slow down, listen to what people are saying and engage with them. Nurture and draw out talent rather than only going to the obvious stars. Create an environment where talented people feel safe and where their opinions really matter.

Ultimately, it all comes down to fostering an environment of debate and questioning. In this mad world of advertising, we are all too quick to roll our eyes and assume the question is unimportant and irrelevant. If we slow down, listen and encourage, we would develop many more superstars in the account management field.

Our job is to want people to ask “why?”.

*First published in *Advantage Magazine*

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