



REFRAMES FOR MODERN AGENCY LEADERS:

**HOW YOU CAN REWRITE
THE RULES AND CREATE
A LASTING COMPETITIVE
ADVANTAGE**

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In recent decades, the agency market has become a crowd of lookalikes.

Trading on services is no longer a viable means of differentiation. And even if your agency is objectively better, your statements of quality are lost in the noise of lesser voices claiming the same.

At the same time, agencies are running lean and being compelled to do more for less. You're also facing in-housing, fewer retained relationships, shorter client tenures and more frequent re-pitches. And now Artificial Intelligence (AI) is automating vast swathes of billable hours.

In this context, only the very best maintain an upward trajectory. The undifferentiated majority are wrestling with slow top-line growth, depressed profits and a stifling inability to hire, retain, and motivate great people.

The consequences of all this are not good. Depending on your size, according to 2023 research from the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4As) and the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), each lost pitch wastes hundreds of thousands of pounds or more. You're also leaving millions on the table in untapped organic growth. And replacing top talent costs tens of thousands of pounds while disrupting fragile client relationships.

If left unchecked, these dynamics—at best—handcuff you to an exhausting treadmill. At worst, your agency will cease to exist. Clearly a new approach is essential.

CHANGE IS IN YOUR HANDS

Whether your business identifies as an agency, a consultancy, a studio or something else, your various trade bodies and industry communities can only help so much. Real change comes from within.

It is about optimism as much as it is about practical change. It empowers you to take charge of your future by reasserting your right to be paid well for a job well done. And because your time is precious, let's cut straight to the big reveal:

The agency market isn't oversupplied, it's just under-differentiated.

Believing the former makes you a hostage to fortune. Embracing the latter means you can change the world. This reframe illuminates the road ahead. Just because there are countless agencies doesn't mean you can't stand out. And once your ideal clients see you as meaningfully different, everything changes. You earn the right to sell differently, which creates the opportunity for you to price differently and transform your commercial performance.

This liberates you to focus on the work that excites you, be handsomely rewarded for the impact you create, and become a beacon for the best talent around. It's how you stop agency life being a grind.

And guess what? None of this is possible by trying to be all things to all people. I mean, who knew? So how *can* you do it?

OWNING YOUR MARKET OF ONE

To thrive in this densely-packed market and consistently sell your work at a premium, your only option is to harness what makes you genuinely different. Uniqueness is absolutely possible—but only once you know what to look for.

By combining your experience, culture and beliefs, you can design a unique offering that your competitors simply cannot match. This sets you apart in a space that you can truly own.

This is your 'Market of One.'

To create this modern, industrial-grade differentiation, you can't rely on a pithy strapline. Creating your Market of One isn't about packaging—it's your business strategy. You need to carefully design your agency as a robust solution to your ideal client's most pressing problem.

This business-wide client-centricity is transformational. Clients will reward your focus with their business, their loyalty and their respect. Lead generation ceases to be endless door-knocking. Pitching becomes an act of energizing co-creation. And your client relationships evolve from uneasy power-plays to genuine partnerships.

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As an industry, agencies adhere to a *lot* of so-called best practice. Much of it is based on beliefs that are highly questionable, but rarely questioned. Unfortunately, that makes it far from helpful. In fact, most agency 'best practice' might as well have been written by the world's most self-serving and price-sensitive client.

So I've devised six essential reframes for modern leaders. Each one loosens a buckle on the straitjacket of under-differentiation and moves you closer to a more abundant mindset and a more profitable business. You can find all six in my book, *Market of One*. We have time for just three here.

REFRAME 1: CHASING EVERY CLIENT DOESN'T DRIVE GROWTH

Unless you recognize that your agency's not right for every client, you'll never achieve your potential.

If you want to create a Market of One, you have to be more discerning about which clients are right for you, as well as those that aren't.

Culturally, commercially and strategically, winning the wrong client will cost you more than losing the right one. Sure, you might secure the revenue, but at what cost? Working with people you're misaligned with is like pushing water uphill—as thankless as it is unappealing.

Just as importantly, how else could you have invested your precious resources to better serve your people and your agency? And how might your credibility as a leader have been enhanced rather than harmed?

Sadly, the urge to compete beyond your specific skillset is deeply ingrained by the scarcity mindset I mentioned in the introduction. Driven by the constant fear of not winning enough, many agencies are hard-coded to chase anything that moves.

Small agencies often mythologize this as ideal behavior. They wear 'scrappiness' as a badge of honor. Similarly, large agencies enter massive, multi-month pitch processes because they 'should' rather than because they can win. In either case, despite often valid concerns about protecting jobs, this lack of focus ends up hindering your commercial performance.

Trying to be right for everyone is self-defeating, self-commoditizing madness. It's the kryptonite to your Market of One. And it's a trap that you can fall into at any time—not least because it's so easy to tell yourself that you already say no often enough. Spoiler alert: you don't (more on that in Reframe 5).

For now, here's one simple phrase to etch inside your eyelids. Your ability to consistently believe, express and act on these words is the difference between a life of grind and one of growth and fulfillment.

That phrase is nothing more complicated than 'we're not for everyone.'

Yup, that's it. The hard part is truly believing it. Say it out loud to try it on for size. Practice in front of the mirror if it helps. Once this sentiment is enshrined in you and your agency, then the sky's the limit. Not being right for every client and every brief is to cherish and nurture your own expertise. By honoring the value you offer, you create a platform for profitable growth.

REFRAME 2: BEING 'DISTINCTIVE' WON'T MAKE YOU STAND OUT

Settling for superficial distinctiveness is a poor substitute for deep differentiation.

Agencies often assume they can stand out by making a few high-level claims. But that's just surface-level distinctiveness. This reframe recognizes that deep differentiation is a very different beast.

Think of 'distinctiveness' as a marginal difference. It's usually subtle and needs to be pointed out. Explaining your distinctiveness often demands heavy emphasis on one or two words and leaves clients none the wiser. This superficiality is a shortcut to invisibility and underselling your expertise.

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In contrast, deep differentiation is a lasting competitive advantage. It's clear, clients notice it and it can't be recreated by any competitor with a thesaurus. Depth of difference is how smart agencies grow.

SYMPTOMS OF MEH

Settling for distinctiveness over differentiation is endemic. That's why agency rhetoric is so similar. Witness wall-to-wall versions of 'we do great work for great brands.' I call these uninspiring attempts to stand out 'Symptoms of Meh.'

If you're unfamiliar with 'meh', just imagine a teenager expressing their withering indifference. Not the response you want from clients. Here are six of the most common Symptoms of Meh, along with tips on how to spot them.

1. SELLING SERVICES NOT SOLUTIONS | This is the classic, non-specialized claim of specialization, such as 'we specialize in these 46 services.' For clients, it's like arriving in a restaurant and being handed a menu of ingredients. So ask yourself—are you being client-centric or hard to buy from?

2. CATEGORY GENERICS | These are platitudes masquerading as points of difference, like 'we start with strategy' or—kill me now—'we're creative.' Ask yourself, could literally any agency say this?

3. TAME PROVOCATIONS | These are tepid perspectives that no sane person could ever disagree with, like 'we believe that brands should serve customers' or 'we believe in ambitious ideas.' Ask yourself, could the opposite ever be true?

4. REPHRASING YOUR DISCIPLINE | This is the enduring temptation to squeeze out a new definition of something well established. These might include 'we win, grow and keep customers' (like CRM, you mean?) or 'we create culture' (a well-trodden aspiration for advertising). Ask yourself, are you just reinventing the wheel?

5. INVENTING NEW DISCIPLINES | The more inventive cousin of symptom four, this involves fruitlessly devising an entirely new kind of agency, like being the ‘street culture agency’ or the ‘human potential agency.’ Ask yourself, do you always find yourself explaining what it means?

6. HEDGING YOUR BETS | Often an output of misaligned committees, this is where you take multiple passes at positioning and end up drowning in word soup. Something like this—deep breath—‘We’re a creative marketing agency. Our performance and digital marketing skills span data, media and creative. We help brands with media buying, search, content and social media.’ Ask yourself, do you get bored before you’ve finished saying it?

There are probably more than six, but you get the idea. For now, be honest, how many of them apply to your agency? And here’s a bonus ‘tell’—if few of your team love delivering your elevator pitch, then you’re probably guilty of at least one.

Interestingly, many agency leaders do recognize their lack of standout. When I point it out, there are often nervous grins. This works especially well at scale. Announcing from a conference stage that I’m about to review some real-world agency positioning statements creates a chill in the air. There’s a collective buttock clench as everyone in the room silently prays, ‘please, not ours.’

This collective inability to embrace difference is yet more evidence of the Oversupply Myth. Despite the awareness of genericism, there’s a herd mentality that makes swimming against the tide feel risky. No wonder Symptoms of Meh are so common.

Settling for distinctiveness reveals that you offer very little substance for clients—or your people—to buy into. In a crowded market, this is the epitome of playing small. So if you want your agency to reach its potential, then choose deep differentiation instead.

REFRAME 3: TO 'SPECIALIZE' ISN'T LIMITING, IT'S ESSENTIAL

To 'specialize' doesn't mean limiting yourself to a single discipline or sector, it just means applying expertise in ways that create value.

Choosing difference over distinctiveness means changing your relationship with the notion of 'specialization.' Unfortunately, this concept is very much maligned and misunderstood. Most people define 'specialism' in terms of vertical sector or agency discipline. Neither is the whole truth.

Of course there's nothing intrinsically wrong with focusing on a single vertical, be that healthcare, B2B or whatever else. Likewise, sticking to, say, media, creative or influencer marketing as your sole discipline is hardly a demonstrably bad strategy.

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The issue arises when these two examples of specialization—vertical or discipline—are seen as your only means of specialization. In that case, if you're a multi-disciplinary agency working in a range of sectors, to specialize would mean firing half your staff and two-thirds of your clients. That doesn't sound ideal.

This is why to 'specialize'—and its even more pernicious cousin 'niching'—is often seen as too narrow or restrictive, so focusing is dismissed as a strategic option. This makes standing out far harder.

BEWARE THE BLANDNESS TRAPS

The limited definition of specialization leads to what I call 'Blandness Traps.' They're 'traps' because blandness is the unintended consequence. As for 'blandness', that means you're the water in the sea of sameness.

Blandness Traps fall into two categories, each with two examples:

FEAR FACTOR: This is about remaining an undifferentiated generalist:

- Absolute rejection—you dismiss specialization out of hand because you believe it can only mean focusing on a single discipline or vertical sector.
- Presumed limitation—you accept the idea of specialization, but reject it based on the perceived risk of missing out on opportunities.

FAILURE TO SPECIALIZE: This is where you attempt to focus, but don't succeed:

- Losing your nerve—you dive into a single discipline or sector (or indeed both), but old habits die hard, so you gradually make exceptions and slide back into being a generalist. If you ever say 'we specialize in three sectors', then you've probably fallen into this trap.
- Tentative vulnerability—you decide to specialize, but don't fully commit. You fail to deepen your knowledge beyond your less focused competitors, leaving yourself at risk of being displaced. If your clients don't value your so-called specialization, then it's worthless.

As you can see, these traps are riddled with more fear than a haunted house. And there's that scarcity mindset again. It's the polar opposite of the conviction you need to own your Market of One.

APPLY YOUR EXPERTISE

Here's a much more expansive way to think about specialization—it's really just the specific application of expertise. So if you think about it, until you specialize in something, then you don't have a business strategy at all.

There's really no reason to limit yourself to a single sector or discipline unless you want to. This broader view opens up a world of possibility for ownable differentiation. For example, you could specialize in a certain stage of client maturity—a classic example being 'challenger brands', the long-term focus for the global independent agency, VCCP.

In fact, once you specialize in a specific client mindset, problem or use case, your options become almost unlimited. It creates a strong basis for effective differentiation—and that can be narrow and niche, or as broad as it gets.

After all, the holding companies are enormous, but they're highly specialized in serving global advertisers. Likewise, a PR agency working solely in the drinks industry could easily have a global reach. Neither of these routes is inherently limiting.

The irony is that rejecting specialization because it feels limiting is itself a dangerously limiting view. **Liberate yourself by thinking bigger.** 📌



Info



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