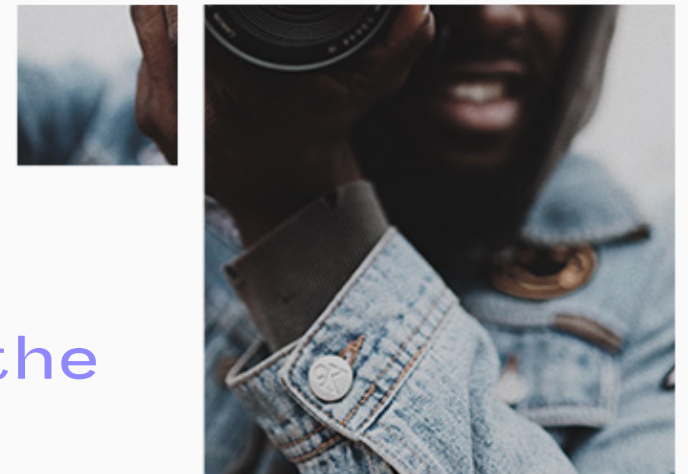


The Future of Creativity

Do Brands and
Agencies Have the
Same Vision?



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The Battle for Marketing's Creative Soul

Marketing often feels like a battle between parties with different priorities that must peacefully coexist for a campaign to be successful. Think about it: performance vs. branding; rational vs. creative; left brain vs. right brain; brands vs. agencies. It's not a new story.

But that battle has become even more pronounced in recent years. Budgets are stressed. Economic pressure and corporate mandates to show the value of every dollar spent have made marketing much more focused on short-term results. The creative efforts that align with long-term brand equity and overall brand values often feel like they've taken a back seat.

At the same time, marketers have to manage a plethora of new channels, new customer behaviors and new competition. It is harder than ever for a brand to stand out. Talk about conflict: Consumer attention has become a scarce commodity, but the tactics designed to get long-term traction and create loyalty—things like

brand equity/brand consistency, customer experience or even net promoter scores—don't feel like a priority.

Is this the creative future that marketers and agencies have in mind?

It's not that creativity itself is under attack. Marketers certainly understand the value of capturing an audience's attention in a way that's memorable and emotionally resonant. Multiple studies have found that organizations that embrace a more creative approach outperform their competitors. For example, research by WARC and Kantar found that high-quality creative drives more than four times as much profit as low-quality creative. Deloitte's Global Marketing Trends 2023 study found that half of high-growth brands strongly agree that creative ideas are essential to long-term success.

Instead, creativity appears to be rising in importance, and it is advancing beyond its traditional role in building brand equity to become a key part of performance-marketing success. But other parts of its evolution are difficult to predict.

To get a clearer picture of the future of creativity, Adweek Branded, in association with Frontify, conducted an exclusive survey of more than 200 creative marketing leaders at brands and agencies. The goal was to understand their vision of the creative future.

The survey results found that while brands and agencies are frequently in agreement about the importance of creativity, they often have contradictory opinions about what that will look like. Is creative success about the big idea or the execution of that idea? Must every campaign relate back to performance-based outcomes? Do agencies really have their brand clients' best interests at heart? These disparate feelings may be adding friction to the already tense brand-agency relationship.

Read on to uncover in-depth insights into what the future of marketing could look like.

MARKETERS ON MARKETING'S FUTURE

“Branding and marketing trends will change, but branding and marketing at their core have always been about human connection, clear communication and entertainment.”

- AGENCY LEADER



Key Findings



The market is noisy; creativity is the way to stand out

With so many channels, so many platforms and so much competition, it can be a challenge for any marketing campaign to stand out. The constant thrum of advertising makes it hard for consumers to know where to turn. Creativity may be the solution. In the survey, not only did brands and agencies say creativity in marketing is more important today than it was three years ago, but about two-thirds said it will be more important over the next 3 to 5 years (with just 12% of brands and 16% of agencies saying it will be less important). Asked why creativity will be more important, both brands and agencies overwhelmingly called out “a need to differentiate a brand in a noisy market” as the top reason. Separately, 77% of brands and agencies agreed that it is “harder than ever to stand out.”

Brands are struggling with the new creative marketing dynamic

“Do more with less” has been a common refrain for brands and agencies alike as marketing budgets are under greater pressure than ever. But the operative phrase may just be “do more.” And brand marketers are overwhelmed and stressed out. Survey respondents were asked whether brands were struggling or thriving across a dozen different creative marketing activities, and the only area where both brands and agencies agreed that brands were thriving was in “delivering short-term performance.” For example, 64% of brand respondents and 81% of agency respondents said brands were struggling with “responding to changing user behavior.” Overwhelmingly, respondents also felt brands were struggling with “managing a growing workload” (88% of brands, 79% of agencies) and “measuring creative impact” (82% of brands, 87% of agencies). And more than 90% of respondents said brands were struggling to stand out in the market.

Short-term results are out of balance with long-term brand value

Performance marketing—being able to correlate exposure to a specific message or campaign to a purchase—has become central to many brands' strategies. These short-term KPIs are critical to demonstrating marketing's value to the company's balance sheet. In the survey, 42% of brand marketers said they were mostly or exclusively focused on performance, and a similar percent of agencies (39%) said the same of their clients. But performance is a short-term result, and marketers overall indicated a greater struggle with building longer-term brand equity. As they search for ways to stand out in the market, they may need to turn their focus more strongly toward branding executions. But to do so, they will need to be able to measure creativity's impact, which, as noted, is a struggle.

Tension remains between brands and agencies

Brands and agencies live in a world of collaboration and conflict, and that friction was readily apparent in this survey. While there was perhaps more agreement about the creative future than anticipated, there were multiple instances where brands and agencies diverged in their understanding of the role each plays. Asked to choose from a list of adjectives to describe their relationship, both brands (41%) and agencies (47%) said it was "complicated," essentially calling out their differing expectations and a lack of effective communication. They both also called it "transactional" (39% of brands, 48% of agencies). They were also asked what they said about each other behind closed doors. Brands felt their agency partners don't understand what they really do. Agencies? They felt that brands don't give them enough time to create the great ideas they want from them.



MARKETERS ON MARKETING'S FUTURE

“Agencies feel they can solve a brand’s problems. They can’t. They invariably do not understand what the business needs.”

- BRAND MARKETER



AI looms large in brands' and agencies' view of the creative future

While the survey didn't ask specifically about the impact of generative AI tools on brands and agencies, survey respondents brought the technology up again and again in open-ended questions. To begin, more than 4 in 10 brands and agencies identified generative AI as a reason why creativity will be more important in the coming years (as they look to build campaigns that don't feel the same). But when asked about what people don't understand about how creative marketing will change in the future, respondents volunteered their thoughts about AI. "AI will be taking over most roles in the agency world in the coming years," predicted one agency exec. "With AI, there's no way to know what will be possible, and everyone needs to be okay with that and transparent with not knowing," noted a brand marketing leader.

A need to be business-first

So, what really drives creative marketing success? It's a business focus. Survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of five key factors that create impactful marketing: business focus (a clear understanding of the brand and its business); executional excellence (how to execute across media touchpoints); big ideas (a great creative idea); unified ways of working (brand and agency working as one team, aligned on goals and principles); and shared standards of creativity (a shared way to evaluate and get feedback on creative work). While 92% of agencies and 87% of brands said a business focus was extremely or very important, brands (53%) overwhelmingly called business focus the most important factor. Agencies (31%) agreed but were more likely to choose other factors. For instance, 28% of agencies said big ideas were most important, compared to just 13% of brands.

METHODOLOGY

Adweek Branded, in association with Frontify, conducted an exclusive, self-reported online survey of 98 brand marketers and 105 creative agency marketers to better understand their attitudes regarding the future of creativity in advertising, and to identify the hidden frictions that may exist between brand marketers and agencies.

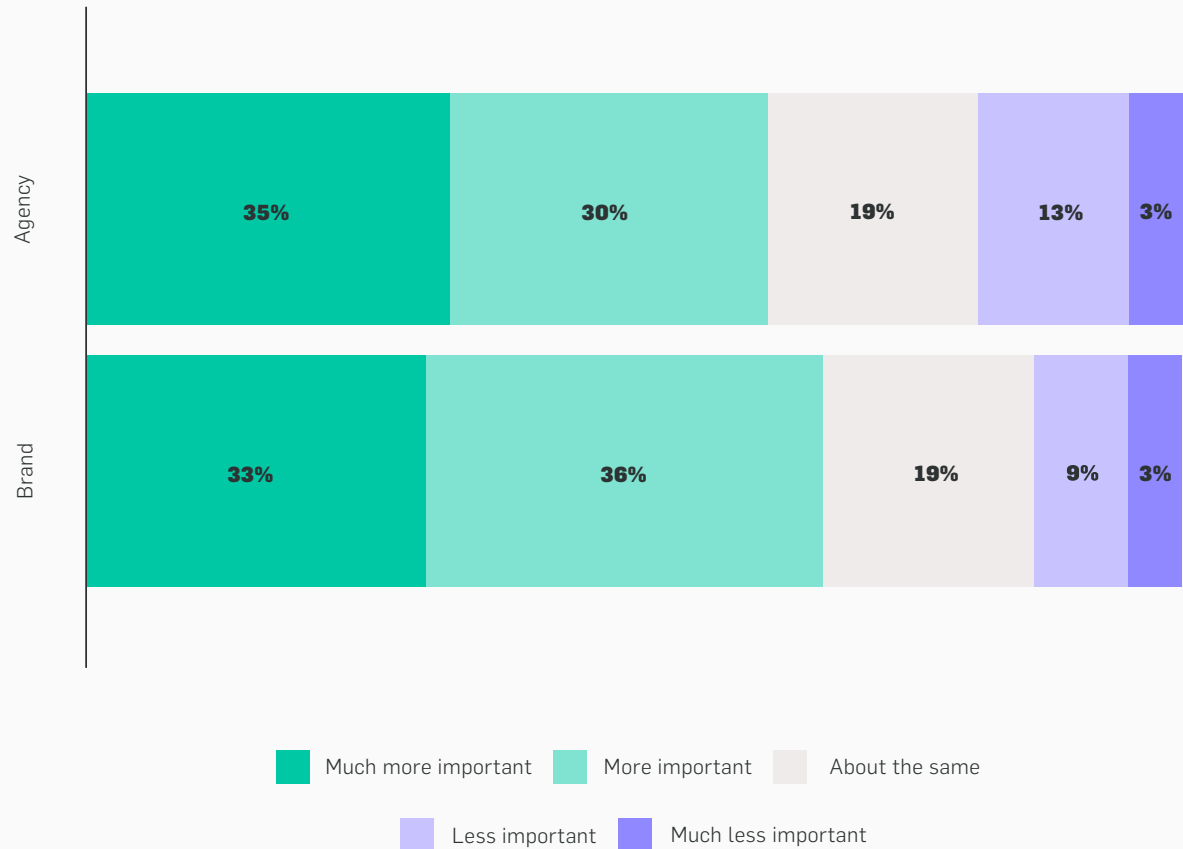
The survey was conducted in September and October 2023. All respondents self-identified as working for a creative agency or in brand marketing; respondents working in "business development" were excluded.

Unless otherwise cited, all figures and charts in this report are derived from this research.

A Need for Creativity

Despite a greater reliance on performance and measurement, fresh and innovative marketing is not going anywhere. Both brands and agencies clearly believe that creativity will become more important as they look for new ways to set their messaging apart. Interestingly, agencies appeared less bullish than brands, as a surprising 16% of agency respondents said creativity would be less important.

Looking ahead to the next 3-5 years, do you feel that creativity in marketing will be more or less important than it is today?

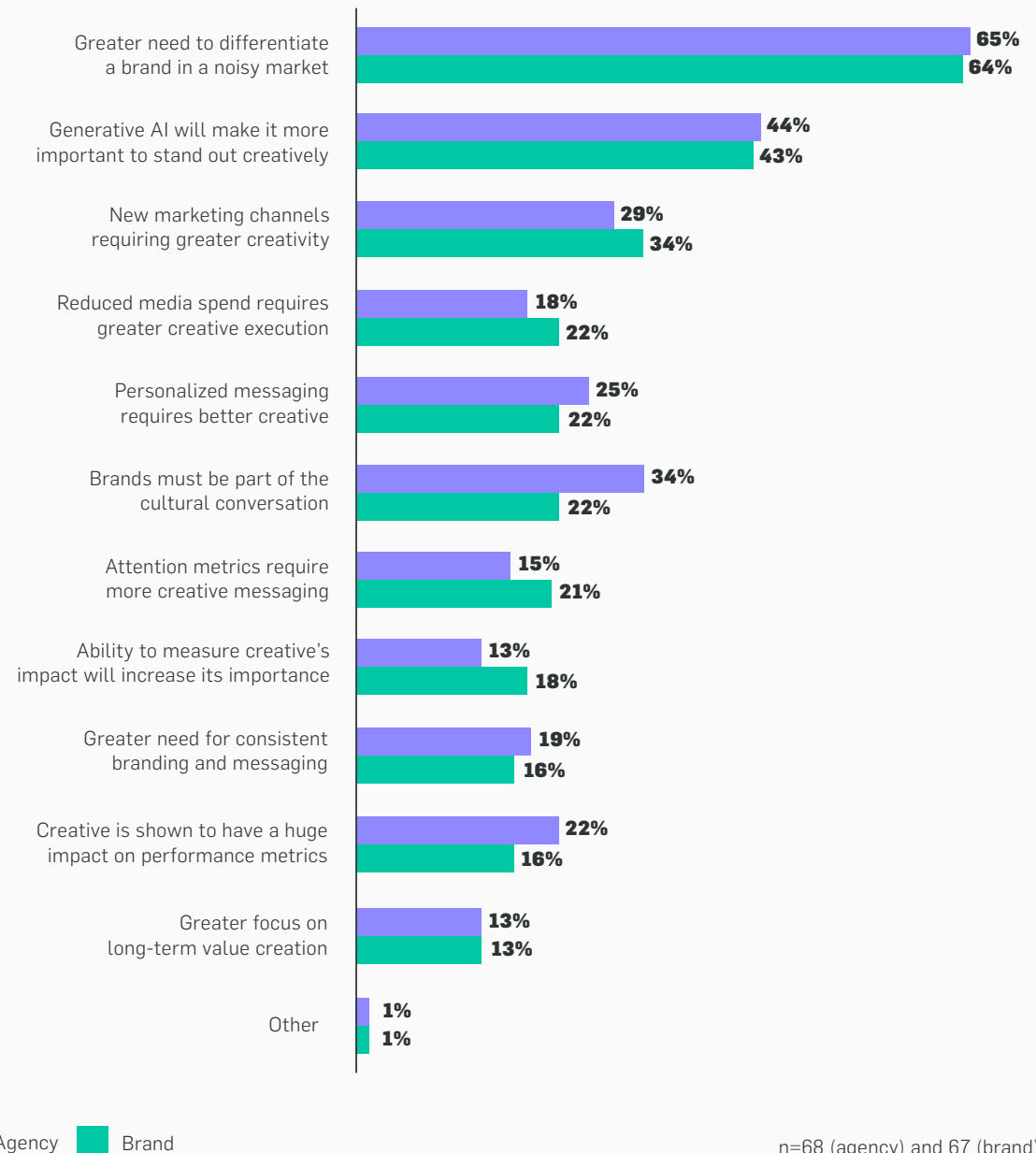


n=105 (agency) and 98 (brand)

Cutting Through the Noise

Why will creativity be more important? There's a clear need to stand out, whether to differentiate your brand in a noisy market, find a way to separate yourself from AI-created messaging or take advantage of emerging marketing channels. It's interesting to look at the two sides of AI's role. As noted here, more than 4 in 10 brands and agencies who said creativity would be more important pointed to the impact AI will have on creative. But AI also played a role for those who said creativity would be less important, as they pointed to the technology's ability to take on more creative duties. In addition, note how 22% of agencies point to creative's impact on performance metrics.

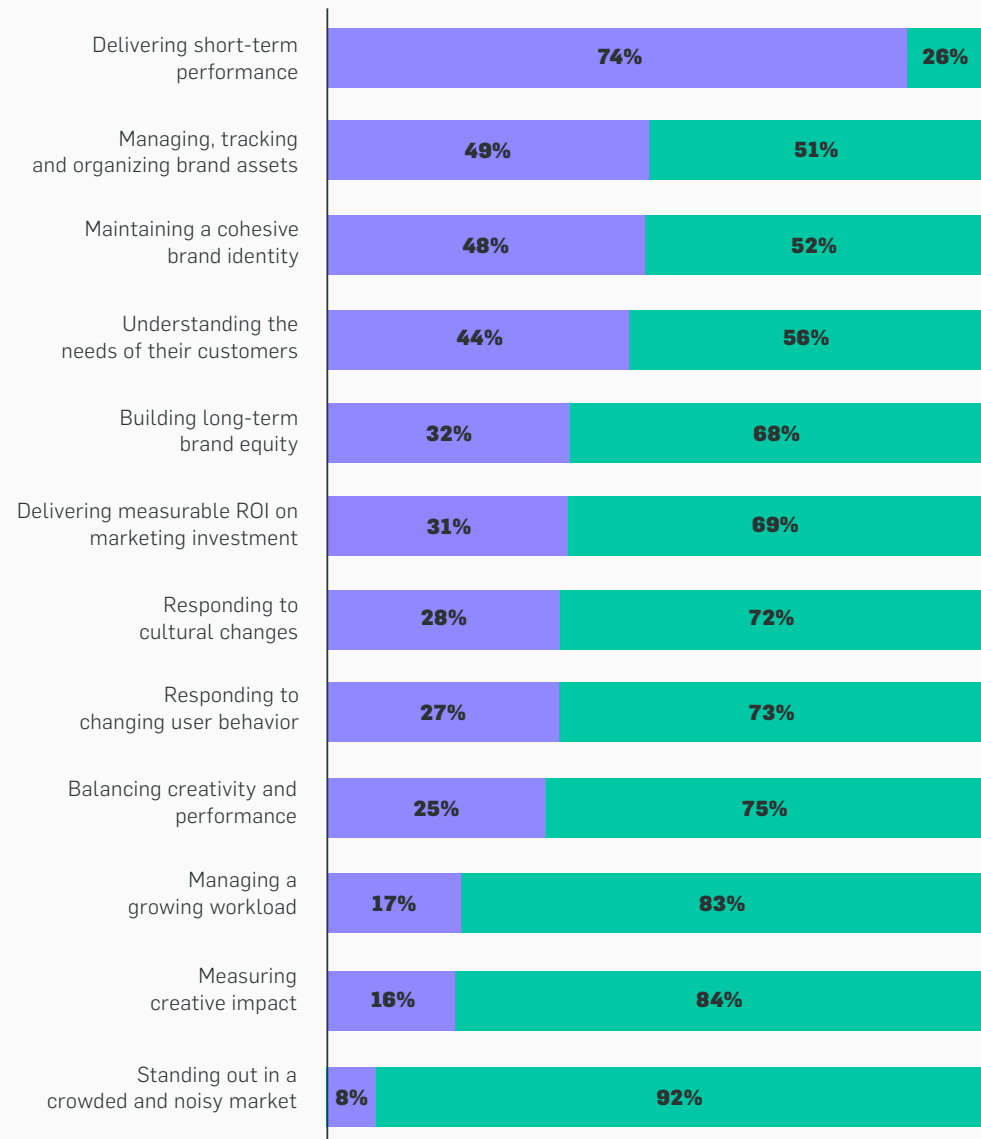
Why do you think creativity will be more important?



The Struggle Is Real

If you've felt overwhelmed by the number of things the typical marketer must manage these days, you're not alone. There was only one area where survey respondents said marketers were thriving: delivering short-term performance. And there were a handful of areas—like tracking brand assets, maintaining a cohesive brand identity and understanding customer needs—where respondents were split. But it is quite significant that more than 70% of respondents said brands were struggling in six key areas—like responding to cultural change or shifting user behavior. And fully 92% said brands were struggling to stand out in a crowded, noisy market.

Do you think brands are struggling or thriving in the following creative marketing areas?

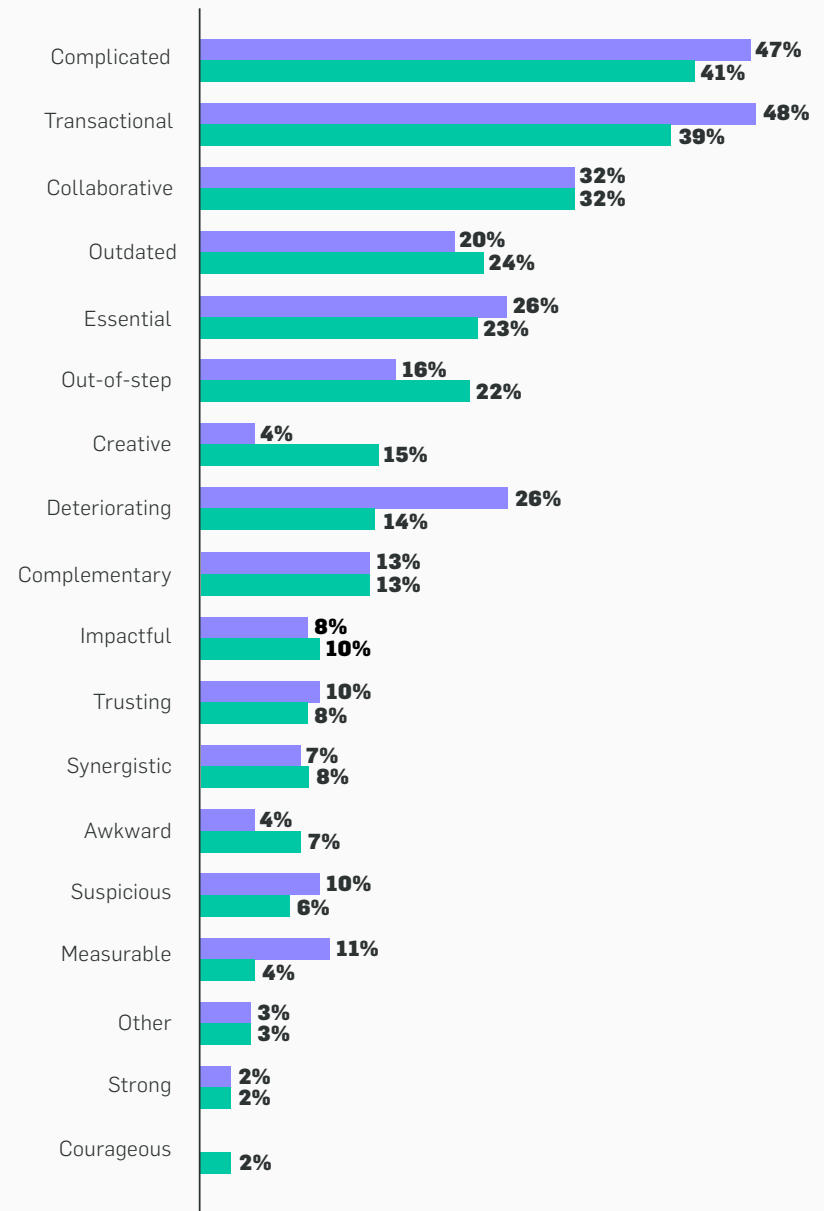


Thriving Struggling

The Brand–Agency Relationship? It’s Complicated (and Transactional)

The survey asked respondents to choose from a list of positive and negative adjectives to describe the brand-agency relationship. Both brands and agencies leaned into two: complicated and transactional. It is just as interesting to look where brands and agencies diverged. More than a quarter of agencies (26%) called the relationship “deteriorating,” compared to 14% of brands. But just 4% of agencies used the term “creative,” compared to 15% of brands.

How would you describe the relationship between brands and their agencies?



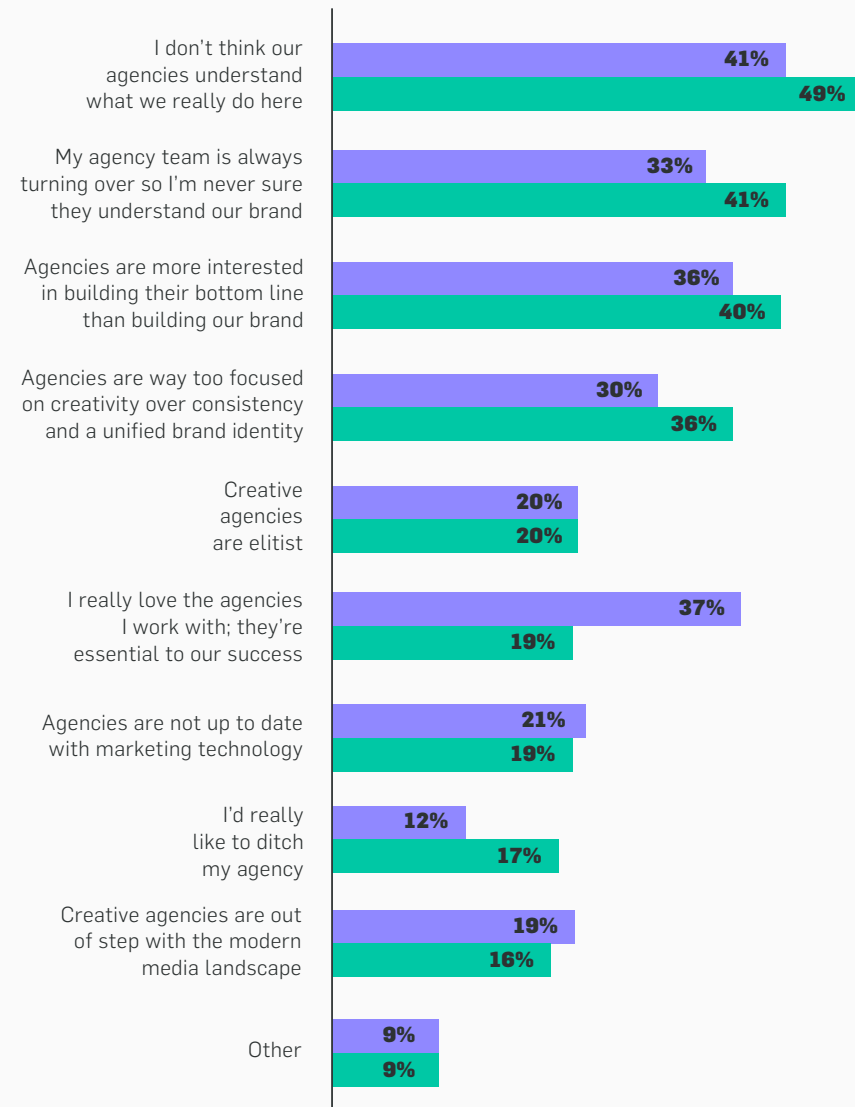
Agency Brand

n=105 (agency) and 98 (brand)

Know My Business, Please

What are brands saying about their agencies when they're not around? They're irritated that their agency partners aren't taking the time to understand what they really do. But they're also frustrated that the agency teams they work with turn over frequently, and that makes understanding their brand harder. Curiously, 37% of agency respondents thought brands were talking about how much they love their agencies, but just 19% of brands said that.

Behind closed doors, what do brands say about their agency partners?



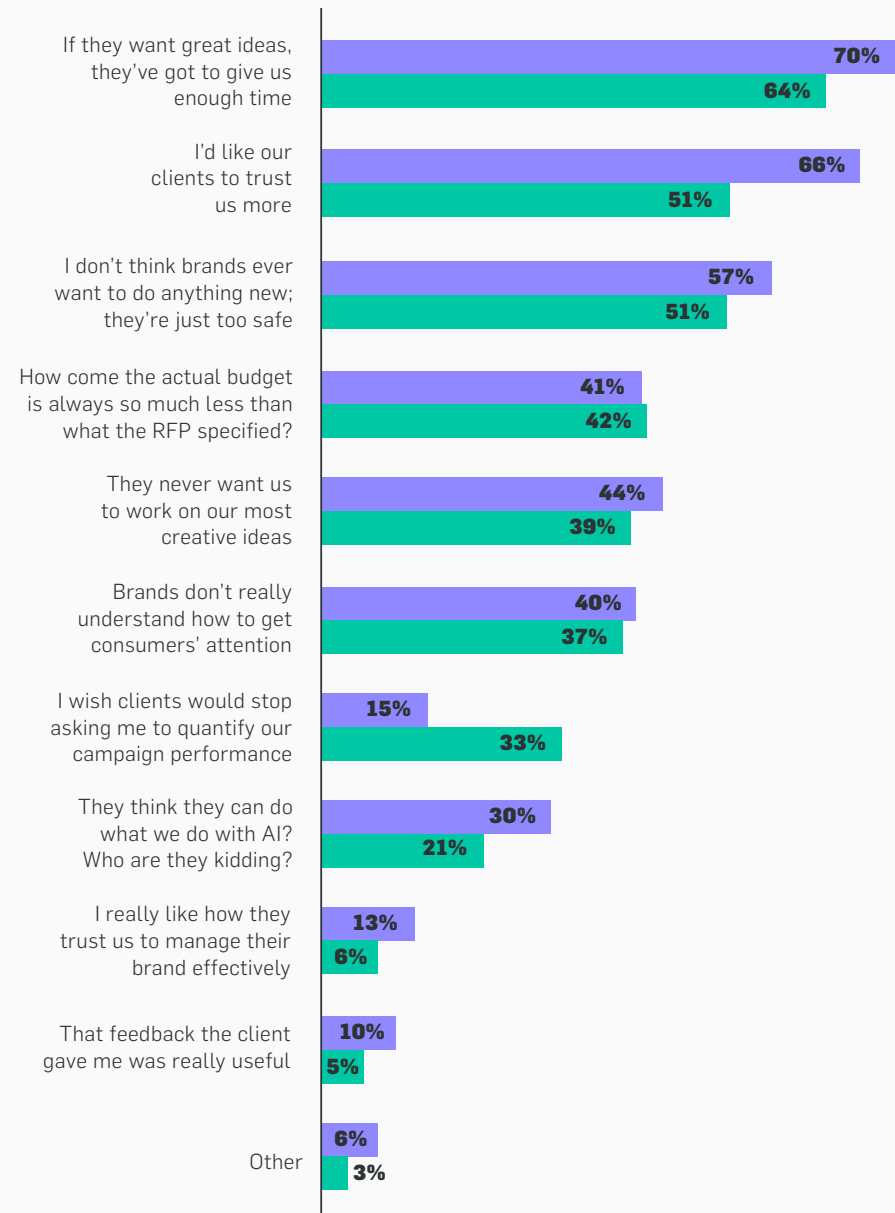
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n=105 (agency) and 98 (brand)

Stop Rushing Us

It's a pretty common refrain from agencies to their brand partners: If you want great ideas, you've got to give us enough time. And that's what rose to the top when respondents were asked what agencies said behind closed doors. But two-thirds (66%) of agency respondents said agencies want their clients to trust them more. And that feeling of suspicion will need to be overcome for the brand-agency relationship to be rebuilt. After all, 30% of agencies chose, "They think they can do what we do with AI? Who are they kidding?"

Behind closed doors, what do creative agencies say about their brand clients?



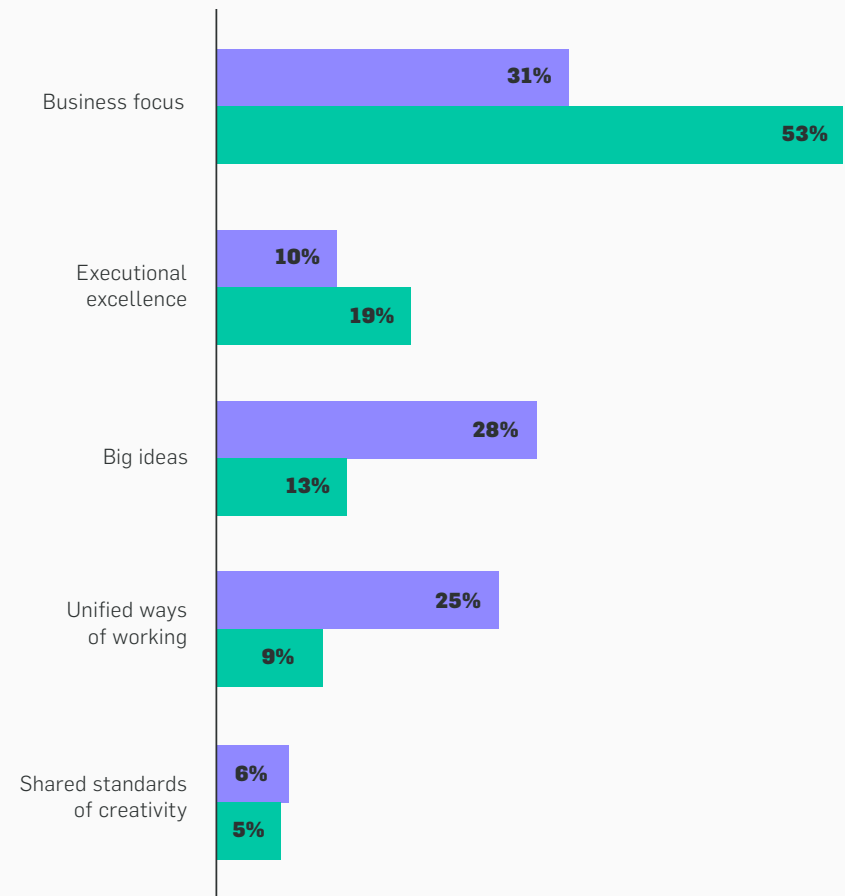
Agency Brand

n=105 (agency) and 98 (brand)

The Big Idea in Marketing? It's Being Business-Focused

When asked to identify the single most important factor in creating impactful branding and content, there were significant differences between brands and agencies. Both pointed to taking a business focus, where the brand and the agency have a shared understanding of the brand and its business and how to add value to it, but brands were resolute in their opinion. Agencies, however, were much more inclined to believe in the power of the "big idea," and the need for a unified way of brands and agencies working together.

What is the single most important factor in creating impactful branding and content?



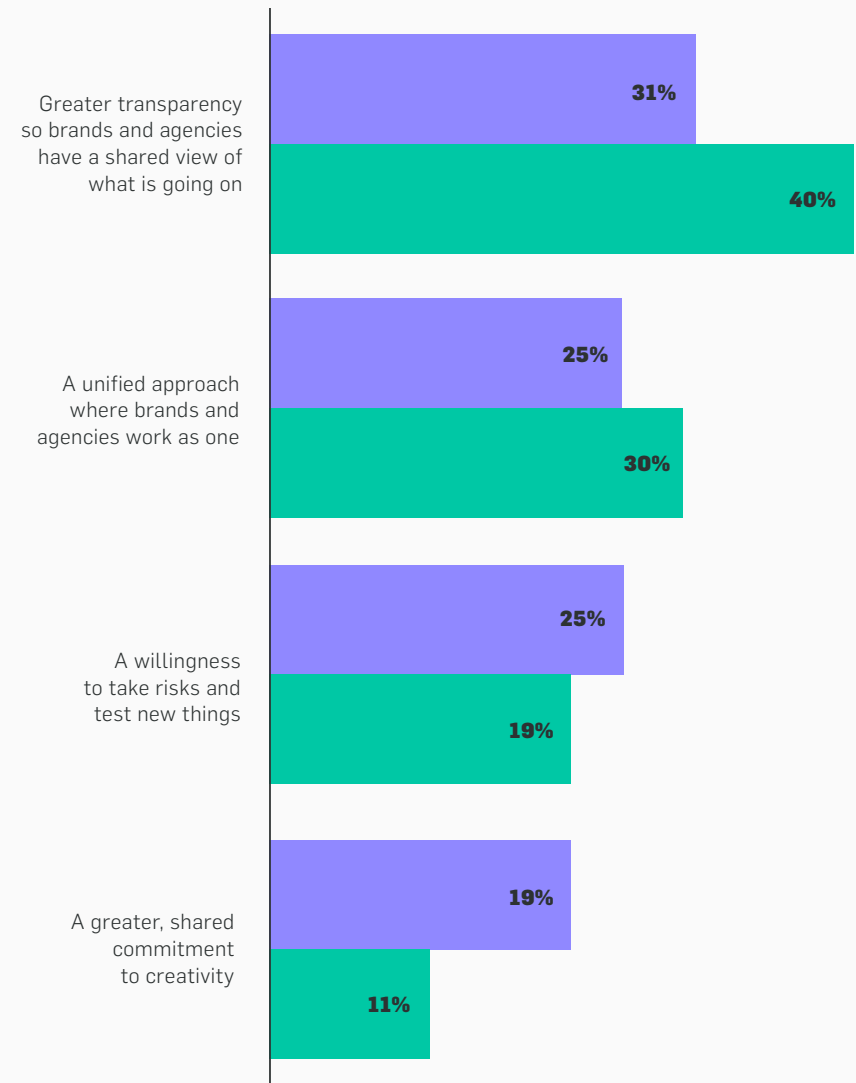
Agency Brand

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Restoring the Brand-Agency Relationship

As creativity becomes more critical, brands and agencies need to restore their working relationship to generate the kinds of campaigns that rise above the noise. But how? Brands contended it will come from greater transparency that gives brands and agencies a shared view of what's going on. Agencies were more likely to say that the biggest impact will come from a unified approach where brands and agencies work together as one, as well as a willingness to take risks and test new things.

What would have the biggest impact on improving the brand-agency relationship?



Agency Brand

n=105 (agency) and 98 (brand)

What Brands and Agencies Can Do Next

IT'S TIME TO PREPARE FOR
THE FUTURE OF CREATIVITY.
HERE'S HOW.



Prove the value of creativity

It's quite clear that creativity's importance is increasing as marketers need to find ways for their brands to stand out. But at the same time, marketers are often focused on short-term performance-oriented tactics that can meet the C-suite's desire for "show-me" results. To justify longer projects that build long-term brand exposure and recognition, look for ways to demonstrate the impact on the bottom line. Make sure you're doing things like A/B testing to maximize creative impact, and use outcomes-based metrics to see the effect on what matters to your organization. Remember, to strike a balance between performance and brand marketing, the CMO has to convince the CEO (and board) of the value of both.

Treat creativity and performance as complementary, not conflicting

Short-term performance marketing and long-term branding are not mutually exclusive; they each rely on creativity. Pitting them against each other can damage both. For instance, brand equity can be a KPI for your performance marketers and be used to identify things like poorly received messaging or bigger issues impacting brand growth. Similarly, branding can use performance's "test-and-learn" approach to help you adjust or amplify your awareness programs.

“With AI, it will be more important for agencies to collaborate with brands on the ‘big idea’ and provide a blueprint for brands to roll it out.”

- BRAND MARKETER

Agencies should know their clients' business

Brands truly feel that agencies are reluctant to understand how their clients go about their business. But if agencies truly want to be strategic partners of their clients, they need a rich understanding of their clients' goals. That means returning to rigorous strategic work that can deliver work that impacts marketing as well as the business' bottom line. They also need to ensure they have a talent pool that mixes highly creative storytellers with data-driven intelligence. It's both a smarter way of working and a way to develop the long-term client partnerships that fuel consistent growth.

Bring transparency to brand-agency communication

Brands and their agencies need to shift their relationship status from complicated to complementary. To re-instill trust, they must shift the style of their communications and become more transparent in their creative processes while taking a more unified approach to campaign ideation and execution. The days of an agency's “secret sauce” are long gone. But at the same time, brands need to acknowledge that big ideas don't arise out of the ether—agencies need time to come up with concepts that really move the needle.

Better manage the value of your brand

More channels, more problems. The survey made it clear that marketers are struggling with an overwhelming workload. The solution is to take advantage of advanced tools that are designed specifically to manage your company's most valuable asset—your brand. Frontify's brand management platform, for example, covers every aspect of the brand journey, including brand guidelines, digital asset management and creative collaboration. It brings greater efficiency to the process (necessary to improve operational excellence) while also ensuring the brand consistency that drives overall brand equity. Ultimately, this allows brands and their agencies to focus on business goals and big ideas while the platform handles the rest.

About Frontify

Frontify is a B2B software-as-a-service (SaaS) company that helps businesses effectively manage and grow their brands with a centralized online platform. More than 10,000 brands and over 2.5 million users trust Frontify to ensure consistent brand experiences. The platform integrates with popular tools and systems, making it easy to connect with existing workflows and enhance productivity. Established in 2013, Frontify is headquartered in St. Gallen, Switzerland, and has offices in New York City and London. Its more than 300 employees serve a global customer base, including Lufthansa, Uber and Kia.



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