Council Post: Need To Break Up With A Client? 14 Ways To Do It Respectfully

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Forbes Agency Council COUNCIL POST

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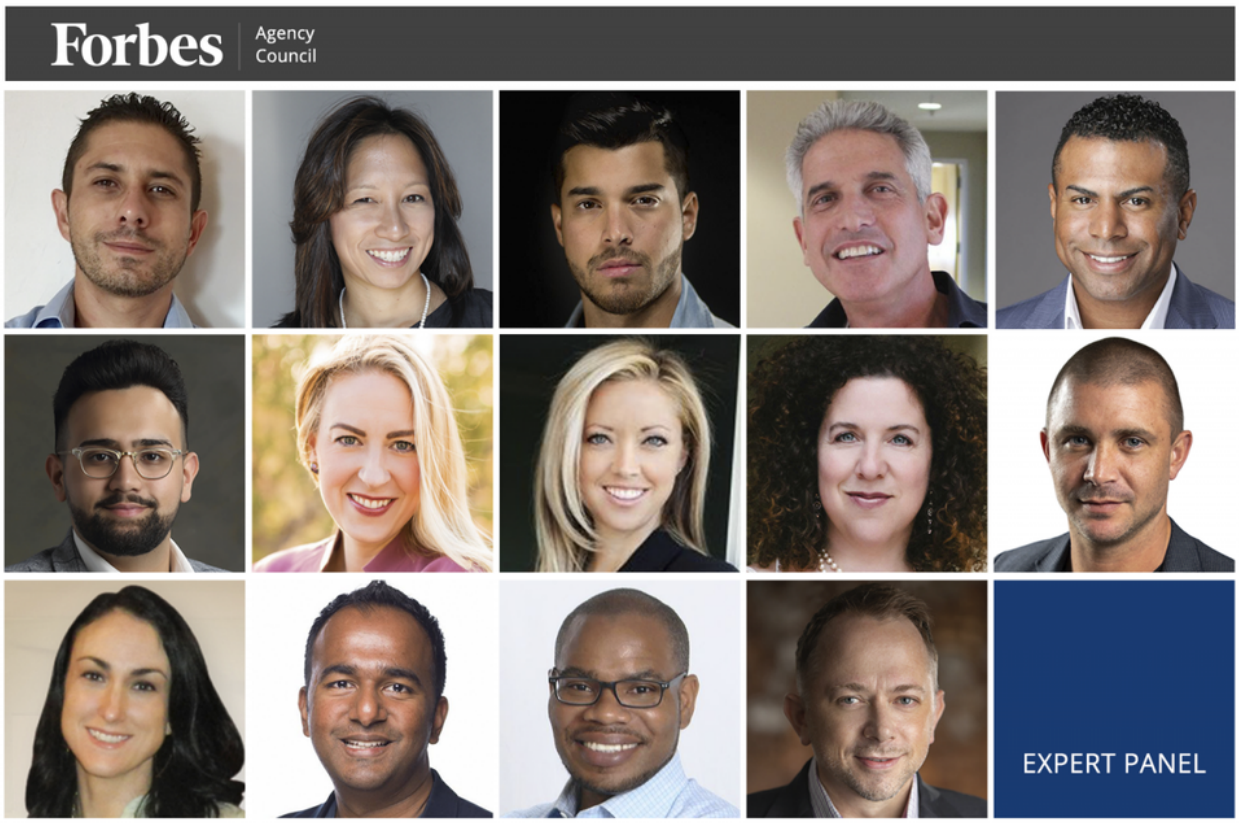
Successful PR, media strategy, creative and advertising executives from **Forbes Agency Council** share trends and tips.

Whether you have conflicting schedules, an expertise mismatch or different visions, sometimes a client and agency just aren't a good match. Rather than force a relationship that doesn't satisfy either party, you may need to "break up" with that client so you can both find a better fit.

At the same time, you don't want to burn any bridges—your situations may change in the future, or your client may even have a referral that would be perfect for your agency. Below, the members of Forbes Agency Council share how to respectfully end a client relationship that's no longer productive.



Members of Forbes Agency Council share ways to respectfully break up with a client who's not a good fit. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS.

1. Keep it friendly.

In the ad business, your reputation is just as important as your work ethic. You never want to end a personal relationship on bad terms because once upon a time you loved that person and had something special. Well, it's the same with clients. Just because the strategy and your vision didn't match your client's expectations and goals does not mean that you can't still be friends and do future business. - Jonnathan Trilleras, LEDTruckMedia

2. Help them through the transition.

Though a client may not be the right fit, it is important to remain professional and part on good terms. Be sure to provide them with the guidance and resources they may need to transition smoothly to another agency or internal manager. As an agency you know you did the right thing and left a lasting good impression. It also leaves the door open to a future relationship should circumstances change. - Valerie Chan, Plat4orm PR

Forbes Agency Council is an invitation-only community for executives in successful public relations, media strategy, creative and advertising agencies. ***Do I qualify?***

3. Be radically transparent.

Before working with a client, you should always look for your ideal client traits so there can be synergy and efficiency. If you ever find yourself having to consider "breaking up" with a client, you should be honest with them as to why you're having second thoughts. If it's a situation where you feel you are no longer benefiting you can communicate. You might find yourself getting a better deal. - Alex Quin, UADV

4. Break up with grace.

The more personal this conversation can be, the better. If in-person isn't possible, try a video. Explain that their success is your No. 1 goal and that at this time, for whatever reason, you're not the best match for that goal. Offer resources to help them transition. It may sound weird to "sell" a breakup. Just make sure your client understands that you are doing so in their best interest. - Bernard May, National Positions

5. Explain the lack of 'chemistry.'

When client relationships go bad, simply ask for a meeting with a set agenda. Discuss where you are with the scope of work, standing agreement and payments. Explain that you believe the "chemistry" of the two companies is not working out. You want to take the time to thank them for their business, turn over all completed deliverables and, if possible, recommend them to another agency. - Breynan Hammons, Innvio

6. Be open about where things went wrong.

Just like a business partnership or marriage, all relationships have to have chemistry, transparent communication and accountability. If something is not meant to be, remember to acknowledge red flags. When we approach clients that we "break up" with, we're just honest and transparent. We inform them where it went wrong, how we no longer can salvage it and we hope the best for them. - Zohaib Hassan Patoli, SnapWeb Services

7. Be honest, and don't assign blame.

If you know it's not a fit, chances are they know it too. Being honest about why you're not a great cultural or skills fit without pointing fingers or blame is the best approach. If you're upfront with them, they may respect you even more—and potentially refer you to other clients in the future that are a better fit. Also, you'll get bonus points for referring them to a firm that's a better fit for them. - April White, Trust Relations

8. Acknowledge and value differences.

With any client or relationship, if you have different value systems or priorities, the best thing to do is to speak about it openly. You can then try to point them in a direction that would be a better match but also acknowledge that all opinions are valuable, just different. - Jessica Hawthorne-Castro, Hawthorne LLC

9. Take the high road.

Client synergy usually reveals itself within the first three months. If that much time passes and it's still a rocky road, I have a non-blame-focused conversation in which I offer the opportunity for referral to an agency or pro they may be better suited to work with. Agency-client chemistry is a lot like dating—not everyone is the right fit! It's okay and healthy to walk away in a dignified manner. - Lynne Golodner, Your People LLC

10. Don't burn bridges.

Identify the problems. Carefully detail why you are not going to be able to maintain the relationship. Spend some time finding other agencies that you know would be better suited to this type of client and even speak to them in advance to ask if you can share their details. Handle it with care and ensure you do not burn bridges. - Aaron Agius, Louder.Online

11. Be firm but humble.

Whenever possible, give a straightforward answer for why the partnership isn't working, and be ready to document and defend your viewpoint. Maintain a courteous approach and avoid being confrontational or accusatory. The goal isn't to make the client feel like it's their fault, it's to solve a problem. Tell them what you learned from the experience and how you'll use it to improve your business. - Hannah Trivette, NUVEW Web Solutions

12. Be upfront.

You win in the long run by being upfront. Being upfront allows them to see you as a partner and trusted advisor, not a vendor. There are times a client can outgrow you and times you can outgrow a client. You have to make sure that you recognize when growth or lack thereof becomes a sign for you to move on. It's a mutual decision to work together, and it's also a mutual decision to break up. - Solomon Thimothy, OneIMS

13. Find another home for them.

Breaking up is never easy, but there is a right way and a wrong way. The right way involves making sure that your client is aware that it is not working and finding another home for them. The most successful agencies work to help others find another home. The messaging, as well as the timing, may simply be wrong for your operations, but that does not mean that the client is a bad client. - Jon James, Ignited Results

14. Never compromise your integrity.

If the client's business direction changes or expectations about our work's outcomes are vastly distorted, after trying to fix it, at some point we have to move on. A recommendation for a different service provider ends things on a high note. However, should basic rules of respect or integrity get repeatedly compromised, then it is time to clearly address this and end the relationship. - Lars Voedisch, PRecious Communications

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