

Account Management

A Fortune 500 consumer electronics retailer wanted to reduce cost and increase efficiency in its in-house creative services group. To do this, the retailer decided to eliminate the account services function. Although the company did realize some savings, this action had the unintended effect of downgrading the status of the department to a service. The work coming in became increasingly executional in nature, and the strategic partnerships that the department had developed disappeared along with opportunities for growth.

This cautionary tale highlights the fact that account management, far from being a redundant, expendable, or merely administrative function, is actually critical to the successful operation of any in-house creative group.

As in the agency world, account managers can provide a broad range of valuable customer services that may properly be deemed “administrative.” They should oversee project intake and ensure that incoming jobs are assigned to the appropriate work flows. They should also handle all communications with clients regarding timelines, cost estimates, and project status. But while it’s hard to imagine any organization surviving without resources dedicated to these activities, the true value of account management emerges only when it moves beyond them.

Growth-oriented account management actively sells the capabilities of the creative group. This means cultivating a deep understanding of client needs. Good account managers engage clients at that level of marketing planning, providing counsel and guidance with regard to the most effective execution of marketing programs. They help maximize marketing spend by demonstrating the value of the internal group and encouraging clients to keep work in-house rather than sending it out to agencies. In fact, account managers should be so focused on bringing work to the department that their ability to grow accounts becomes a key measure of their effectiveness.

By bridging the divide between the creative group and its marketing clients, strong account management facilitates a valuable flow of knowledge between the two. On the one hand, strong account managers make recommendations to clients informed by the managers' knowledge of creative and the work the department has done.

On the other hand, good account managers' knowledge of upcoming marketing campaigns and programs allows the department to anticipate demands, project resource needs, and “gang” work.

Done right, account management does much more than simply drive growth in the creative organization. For example, at a major retailer of office supplies we work with, the introduction of account management transformed the company’s creative services organization into a virtual agency, one that parlayed its own customer service initiative — emphasizing how “easy” it was to work with the internal group — into a significant marketing campaign, rolled out in stores nationwide, emphasizing how “easy” it was to shop there. Account management didn’t just help the creative services organization work more efficiently; it actually elevated the organization's level of direct participation in the business.

There are challenges to building an account services group. If traffic and project management practices in the department are not sufficiently robust, then account managers will end up spending their time on these tasks and the full benefit of their function will not be realized. Additionally, it’s imperative that account managers truly understand what they are selling. If the department offers Web and multimedia capabilities, for example, there will be service failures and frustration if account managers are unfamiliar with the unique requirements of executing such projects.

While far from insurmountable, these challenges emphasize the importance of thoughtful organizational design and resource modeling when building a successful in-house group. They also point to the diverse skills required by the account management position: industry expertise – at least in print and multimedia design – coupled with the ability to develop strong relationships; act consultatively; and, when need be, step in and manage projects to completion. It’s a tall order, but it’s also the reason that with people like this in place, an in-house creative group cannot help but grow.

About Aquent Consulting

Aquent Consulting, a division of Aquent, provides companies with the expertise, data, and tools necessary to optimize the execution of marketing plans and programs.