

The Suit: The first time I cried in advertising

By [Jason Harrison](#), issued by [M&C Saatchi Abel](#)

18 Apr 2019

I was just a 24-year-old account executive (a title which my mother thought was very important), going about my business writing a very important contact report. Then he called - a very senior and important client who couldn't get hold of anyone else, so he got put through to me by the receptionist. He was pissed off. Very, very pissed off.



He used the first 10 minutes of the call to tell me how rubbish the agency had been on a job and then he used the next 10 minutes to then tell me how rubbish I was, too. He was swearing, demeaning and out of control.

“You have no right”

As the saying goes, “Cometh the hour, cometh the man,” and I just thought to myself, “I’m not going to be disrespected like this.” So I very calmly interrupted him and said, “You have every right to be angry, but you have no right to speak to me like this,” and I put down the phone on him mid-blowout.

Then I started crying.

My first job. Blown. I was going to be fired. The agency was going to be fired. I was in so much trouble. And what was my mom going to say, seeing as I was no longer an “account executive”? At that moment, my boss (and my boss’s boss) came in and, seeing my ugly crying face, asked what on earth was going on. I relayed the story, fearing the worst, but they simply replied, “Leave it with us,” and walked straight out.

Thirty minutes later, the same client phoned me. He said that my boss had in no uncertain terms told him he was completely out of line and was to phone me immediately to apologise, which he was now doing. I was stunned. How had this happened? How had they managed to turn this around?

The first lesson

It was the first, and most-important, lesson I have learnt as a suit in advertising: respect. It is the start, middle and end of being a great suit. When it exists, great partnerships, great work and great friendships flourish in an open and honest manner. When it doesn’t, everything is stillborn.

As a young suit, you come up against disrespect in all shapes and forms in this business because it’s easy to shout at the person in the middle. I have seen average suits disrespect themselves, their clients and their creative partners in these

situations, all in the hope of “being liked”.

Your first job as a suit is not to be liked. It is to be respected. Then liked.

How?

The very best suits demand and command respect. How? They know their client’s businesses better than they do. They know everyone in the client’s organisation, from the receptionist to the CEO (and remember all their birthdays, too). They study their client’s category and their competitors’ every move. They love, debate and share great ideas with them. They get under their skin. They build their foundation off a deep and smart knowledge of the business.

They obsess about the work

They share their passion and knowledge inside the agency, continually trying to align business problems and creative opportunities. They never try to curry favour or play both sides. They obsess about creating and making the best possible work, because they love the work more than anything else. They understand that the product that gets made in the end might not have their name on it, but it does have their indelible fingerprint on it. They build their foundation off a deep and passionate knowledge of the power of creativity.

They care deeply

They understand that both clients and agency people are human with the same fears and dreams. They know how to connect with all of them in a real and authentic way. They call them on their nonsense and help them when they are in trouble, using a persuasive mix of intellect and compassion to align everyone behind the same goal: the best possible work. They build their foundation off a deep and authentic human understanding of what makes people tick.

Will it get rid of the sometimes-rampant disrespect in our industry? Not always. But now it’s a decision, because it’s very hard to disrespect someone who has the confidence and knowledge that comes from a strong foundation and the right attitude.

As appeared on MarkLives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Harrison is the Managing Director at M&C Saatchi Abel.

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