

Rules of engagement: Minimise awkward client/agency physical interactions

 By [Mike Silver](#)

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In many ways, the new business-development game has many parallels with dating. It all starts with making eye contact from across the room (or PC), then the manipulative schemes to frequently 'bump' into one another at random. This leads to the exchange of personal details, the initial credentials coffee-date, the follow-up credentials date, the opportunity to prove your worthiness and trust and, finally, all things going well, the moment of actualised coming together, the first kiss.

While the above is fraught with analogies, make no mistake about the last bit. By kiss I refer not to exchange of PO numbers; I refer to the invasion of personal space, extreme intimacy and all the awkwardness that outstretched lips bring with them.

We've all been there before

We've all been there before. New(ish) client; you've had a few formal meetings together, spoken a little about a holiday in Mauritius, the rising price of petrol and her husband's chronic back problems. In truth, though, the focus is on timing plans and budgets.

In terms of greetings, it's been a pretty straightforward handshake (and by straightforward I'm referring to my gentle wet-fish chivalrous palm and her feminist "I didn't get this far being a Barbie doll" bone-crushing iron grip). It all worked! She had her place; I had mine. Awkwardness, personal space and innuendos never existed; we knew where we stood.

That is, until the inevitable social run-in.

Some say the meaning of life is the mystery of life itself. Nice in a horoscope column but, being a control freak, this doesn't really suit me. I don't like delays. I'm petrified of flying. I'm uncomfortable around doctors. And I dread bumping into clients outside of controlled corporate environments.

Out-of-body experiences

Having been on the receiving end of these corporate happenstances recently, I've had numerous out-of-body experiences as I observe my awkwardness in all its glory. The storyboard looks as follows:

1. *Distraction*: I'm on my Crackberry, trying to be witty and charming to the girl I met the night before
2. *Disruption*: Without looking up, I hear the word "Mike" repeated in a similar vein to the seagulls in *Finding Nemo*
3. *The culprits*: To my horror, it's a gang of three female clients, from the attractive intern to the battle-hardened senior
4. *Processing*: I freeze. Time stands still. Three processes kick off at this stage: A. Was biltong really a good choice? Can the tongue provide the simultaneous role of chewing gum and toothpick in five seconds? B. What are all their names and what do they enjoy doing on the weekends? C. The most worrying: what will be my next physical interaction with them?
5. *The engagement*: So the intern I saw in a bar a few weeks back and have already been through the embrace. Check. But if I go in for the kill with her, agency socialism dictates hugs and kisses all round, doesn't it? Can I really have different levels of affection discriminating on age and looks? Can they see me thinking?!

Choose your own adventure

It's at #5 where this really becomes a *Choose Your Own Adventure* story. As the new business hero, you are faced with a

number of paths, all laden with uncertain social pitfalls and danger. It would only be fair to elaborate on some of these:

1. *Unwavering shaking*: With this option, you choose not to blur the work/pleasure line. Keep it professional, regardless of the setting. Key here is making your intentions clear from the start by outstretching the arm as a single movement when the hand returns from the wave. Will always be reciprocated (caution: they may be left wanting more and, in turn, questioning how close the client/agency relationship REALLY is)
2. *Shake into hug*: Really the no-man's-land of client greetings. The shake is used to draw in a hug leaving one arm holding on and one arm embracing. Useful for warmer male on male greetings (caution: shaking arm may stray across the client's torso so try maintain firm grip)
3. *Bear hug*: Shows more commitment than 2. Like 1, wave should turn into the hug with arms forming an inviting 'c shape' opening (caution: client has little room for escape and rigidity may occur)
4. *Cheek kiss*: This is big; make no mistake! Your lips are locking with her cheek. The same cheek her grandmother kisses; the same cheek her husband adores. Also known as the point of no return; get it wrong (or, worse, don't reciprocate the outstretched side profile) and you face an uncertain future (excuse the pun)
5. *Continental kiss*: Best used with clients with European experience, numerous PR agencies, a portfolio of luxury brands or any double-barreled surname. The kiss on each cheek shows sophistication and a zest for life and is best executed as if you really do live in Paris (caution: should the client not turn the other cheek, you are in real danger of actual lip-locking due to disorientation from both parties)
6. *Kiss into hug*: To say you need to be convinced this is the right action is an understatement. Executing this greeting implies you have crossed the 'old friend' threshold. Not only do you believe you deserve their cheek but also their upper body (EXTREME CAUTION: this move can lead to confusion with client offering a hug during the kiss or vice versa. Neck kissing should be regarded as a 'friendly fire' risk)



Corporate embracing awkwardness not exclusive to media. Sarah Palin exhibits kiss surprise on political circuit. Source: twoguysatlunch.blogspot.com

No correct answer

Having been through all routes, it is my opinion that there is no correct answer. One must take a 'horses for courses' approach. Consult colleagues, therapists or fortunetellers because gut instinct unfortunately cannot be trusted in these instances.

The other point is: if you are going to flash, flash hard! Stay committed to a choice and see it out. The only thing worse than making the wrong call is increasing the tension by the live acknowledgement of the wrong call being made.

Lastly, all clients ask for is consistency. After a period of formal meetings, when you do decide to take the plunge, you MUST repeat that action on every future interaction, treating all members of the opposite sex equally.

#thoseawkwardmoments

Maybe one day client meetings will happen over Skype or, better yet, physical contact will be banned like in that futuristic film classic, *Demolition Man*. Until such time, though, we are faced with living in a creative Material World surrounded by Material Girls. Xs are distributed willy nilly at the end of text messages, Os (hugs) pop up at the end of emails and all along we are "roff'ing" (rolling on the floor laughing) as we share #thoseawkwardmoments on Twitter.



Cher believed the kiss said a lot about the man. Source: www.escuchar-musica-

In a recessionary climate with desperate agencies fighting for every scrap of business, it would be wise to heed the advice of a diva that knew a thing or two about commitment:

*If you wanna know
If he loves you so
It's in his kiss!
(That's where it is!)*

-Cher

ABOUT MIKE SILVER

Mike Silver is the founder of Elevator, a brand experience agency now part of the Smollan Group. Mike has been working in the below-the-line and brand experience arena since 2000. Current clients include Lipton Ice Tea, Old Mutual and Pernod Ricard.

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