

With HR churn in new business departments at 49%* - how can I find *and retain* good business development people for my agency?

**Churn of new business executives, managers, or equivalent title in last 12 months from a sample of 8000 UK creative and marketing agencies*

Charlotte Fletcher, Director of Blossom, presents a solution to this problem.

It's no secret - churn of new business personnel is and has been a thorn in the side of many an agency: the agency sets expectations that the new business manager struggles to deliver on, while the new business manager struggles to get the support they need, when they need it, in order to do their jobs (see Fig. 1). Maybe you employ someone to forge new business relationships, only to discover at their six-month appraisal that they really want to work in account management and no longer enjoy the 'sales side of things'. Or maybe you simply don't know how to channel their efforts to get the results you so badly need. For whatever reason, agency new business has become a much-maligned role - from both sides of the fence, yet remains the critical lifeblood of any ambitious agency.

Reason For Leaving	%
Lack of training	23
Lack of support/resources	33
New business department felt isolated from the rest of the agency	10
Poor performance	20
Struggled with the complexity of the agency - too one-dimensional	10
Went into account mgmt/didn't enjoy sales	3

Fig. 1 - Feedback from new business staff and their managers on reasons for leaving employment

Is the only option to sit back and hope to hit lucky at the next recruitment attempt? Or the attempt after that?? Traditionally, in the absence of other options, the answer to this question has been 'yes'. Just a few months ago, the owner of a typical, medium-sized integrated marketing agency told me he estimates having spent around half a million pounds in the past 3 years on business development staff - none of whom are still with him today.

While many recruitment consultants do well irrespective of the final outcome, and often achieve great success with the more straightforward roles of account management, new business is not as simple, and something that recruiters and HR departments struggle to respond to. Sales ability is one thing, but marketing an agency isn't as simple as that: you need people who offer not only great commercial awareness and sales skills but also research ability, fantastic organisational skills and commitment to long-term relationship building (after all, how often do you come away from the first conversation with a marketing director with a new client?). And while recruitment consultants' fees might be prohibitively high, with little guarantee of success at the end of it, in the absence of an alternative, agencies continue to plough good money after bad, in the hope that eventually they'll see a return on their investment.

An Alternative

Newly there is an alternative solution - Blossom - that not only addresses the issue of finding the right calibre of employee, but also lays strong foundations for your business development programme.

Prior to launching Blossom, as HR Director of best practice new business leader Rainmaker, I was constantly frustrated by the poor quality of candidates that recruitment agencies would put forward to me and to my counterparts at marketing agencies. Our decision to handle everything in-house and, instead of looking for a 'finished article', learning to talent spot great raw materials and train them ourselves was a significant turning point. Furthermore, through Rainmaker's immersion in the new business world, we observed that the most successful new business managers were those who combined their individual skills with a supportive team, a strong, differentiated agency message and an integrated marketing programme - the whole being only as strong as its weakest link.

Based on these insights, we have created a model that is unique - and tailor-made for each agency to provide it with a means of identifying, recruiting and training new business personnel - as well as providing the personnel with the equipment to deliver on the expectations of the agency.

Understanding The Brief

Before you can even begin to look for the right person, it's essential to identify what your requirement actually is. Sounds simple - but many agencies make the mistake of assuming that more experience means better chance of success. And while a board-level business development director is right for some, many agencies find that this simply doubles up on the skills they already have within the agency, when what they really need is someone with freshness and enthusiasm to build relationships from scratch with decision-makers. This then leaves the directors to focus on closing the opportunities down. Maybe you need someone to spend 90% of their time prospecting - or perhaps responsibility for the production of marketing materials and PR is more suited to your business. With over 10 years' experience of providing new business consultancy to hundreds of marketing services agencies - from global leaders to the two-man bands, all with different challenges and different requirements - Blossom is ideally placed to assist in providing clarity at this first, but all-important point.

Talent Spotting

Finding the right person for the new business role requires a tailored approach and the ability to spot great raw materials in someone who may or may not have directly relevant experience. For example, we know that sales skills are a big part of the role - but we're looking for people who can engage senior level decision-makers through intelligence, tenacity and empathy - not through "banging down doors" or a gift of the gab.

After running an advert that is specifically tailored to your business, we offer an in depth screening process, involving phone interview, up to two further interviews face-to-face, written tests (a great conversation should often be followed up with a beautifully tailored letter or email) and a group exercise with other candidates for the same role. Having interviewed over a thousand applicants for positions at Rainmaker over the years - and often through making the odd mistake in the early days - we have developed a keen sense of what works for new business. And we know that it's only through a thorough examination of everything from how they conduct themselves on the phone, through to how they handle uncomfortable situations in groups that we can be confident that they'll be able to cope with the challenges that will inevitably come their way.

A Centre-of-Excellence

So you've found the perfect person... In the new business world of yesterday, this would be the point that you would take your new recruit in-house, talk them through your creds and hope they were up to the challenge. However at Blossom, we don't believe in leaving so much to chance. Before they are left to fend for themselves, each candidate we recruit undergoes 3 months on-the-job training with us, learning about everything from how to deal with objections over the phone, to closing meetings; and from writing a brilliant new business letter to assisting with pitch research - right through to the ever-tricky task of getting account teams to provide thorough briefings on their past projects. Our training combines the theoretical with the practical - the thinking with the doing. They will make their first prospecting calls on your behalf with our full-time trainer listening in, giving them hints, feedback and, where appropriate, constructive criticism. Fundamentally, this training is a critical factor in their success - but all too many agencies either lack the time to devote to it - or have limited experience of actually having done new business at the coalface to really know how to train them effectively.

Conversely, new business is our *sole* focus. We would never pretend to know your agency as well as you do - but, having constructed highly successful new business programmes for agencies such as WWAV Rapp Collins, Landor, and Design UK, we absolutely know how decision-makers respond to agency approaches - what they like and don't like, what triggers them to look beyond their current

suppliers – and how to establish a relationship that’s based on a genuine appreciation of how each agency might respond to the issues they’re facing (see Fig. 2).

Method of Engagement	%
Tailored & relevant direct mail	40
Effective message/good reputation	18
Direct marketing - incl. proactive phone prospecting	31
PR	8
Advertising	0.5
Good website	7

Fig. 2 - What do decision-makers look for from an agency when they're considering reviewing

Planning

Underpinning every successful new business programme is a sound understanding of what differentiates the agency in question. If you consider that an average marketing manager receives around 10 pieces of agency collateral every day, being “creative” and being “nice people to work with” is simply not compelling enough.

Running concurrently with the training, we provide a series of Rainmaker planning sessions to ensure that your new business manager has the right message to work with. This would include a review of the core business case for your agency, an audit of your competitors’ messages and the identification of the best positioning and articulation of your competitive advantage in the form of a sales logic – essential for your new business manager to have cut-through in those vital first few seconds of attention from a marketing director.

We would also look to define a targeting model – the most fertile audience for your message - and offer best-practice guidelines on the production of marketing materials. And at the end of the 3-month programme, your new recruit would be provided with a database of all the companies on their target list along with contact details; a subscription to Pearlfinders, which supplies a steady stream of new business leads and decision-maker intelligence, along with daily checked contact data; and a comprehensive set of best practice guidelines across all relevant aspects of new business to enable them to be effective in their job. And because we offer ongoing coaching and ‘surgery’ beyond the three-month period, they have a resource that they can turn to for additional support, guidance and advice, as they require it.

The Outcome

For agencies that have struggled for years to find a satisfactory solution for their new business resource, Blossom is a breath of fresh air. The CEO of a top 5 global branding agency recently told us that the decision to appoint Blossom “took milliseconds”. After years of struggling with underperforming new business agencies, they were nervous of taking on someone in-house, aware they didn’t have the resources to offer training or monitor performance. With its turnkey solution, Blossom gave them the confidence to take new business in-house, where for so many agencies it deserves to be, and invest in a long-term solution.

Their reasoning is logical – instead of investing thousands in recruitment, they are putting their money into creating a support system that their new business department can rely on going forwards. They’re investing in someone’s future career – but importantly, a career that’s perfectly tailored to the needs of their business. And they’re focusing on growing their business with a fresh approach, that sidesteps received wisdom, and ensures that the foundations are in place to deliver a well rounded and profitable new business programme for years to come.

Charlotte Fletcher – Blossom Director