

# Marketing

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## Can this marriage be saved?

What the wisdom of the Ladies' Home Journal can teach ad agencies and their clients

By ERIC BLAIS

"There's no winning in this. It's only degrees of losing." Those were the words of the divorce attorney played by Danny DeVito in the movie *The War of the Roses*. The same could be said of failed client- agency relationships.

While much has been written about what leads to a successful marriage between a client and an agency, very little is openly discussed in our industry about what constitutes grounds for divorce and, more importantly, how a costly divorce could have been prevented. Let's face it, it's not a pleasant subject. We would rather focus on client-agency relationships with a burning desire to renew their vows than on those in need of couple therapy, going through the seven- year itch or on the verge of legal separation.

How does something into which you have invested so much get to the point of no return?

**People change.** "You're not the person I married." It's often truly the case. Staff turnover on either the client or agency side, or both, is such that the parties hardly recognize each other. The people whose chemistry sealed the deal are gone and the new players have no idea what drove the attraction in the first place. Sometimes people simply change their mind or heart. They thought they would love to work with a small, upstart creative shop. But as exhilarating as life was with that partner, they now long for the stability and the deep resources of a larger agency.

**You weren't meant to be together.** "Marry someone like you." This might not be true of all successful unions but most experts agree that the success rate is greatly improved if you share similar values, background and outlook on life. Clients might be hoping to inject a new attitude into their culture by pairing with an agency with polar opposite values and business practices. Unfortunately-or fortunately- corporate culture often runs very deep and can't shift easily. Eventually values will clash and people will start complaining of organizational fit issues. Opposites may attract but wait until you have debates about creative pretesting.

**You rushed into it.** Some agency searches are the equivalent of speed dating. How well do you really get to know your future partner when you only spend 90 minutes in a boardroom with an exotic fruit tray before deciding to go steady? Even when search consultants act as matchmakers, how well do you really know your future partner?

**You weren't committed.** Some arranged marriages (read global alignments) work out while others fail miserably.

**You grew apart.** The day-to-day demands took over and you forgot to celebrate your successes. You stopped saying thank you and only met expectations instead of exceeding them.

**You argued about money.** Or you married for money. Both eventually put stress on the relationship. On-going compensation issues have a way of killing the romance.

So what can be done to save the marriage? Marriage counsellors might have some answers. For the past 50 years a column titled "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" published in the *Ladies' Home Journal* has shown its readers how couples wrestle with the difficulties inherent in sustaining a marriage. The editors of the *Ladies' Home Journal* boiled down 50 years of advice to six secrets of a happy marriage.

**Deepen trust.** In a trusting relationship partners are honest with each other. Their words and actions are not shadowed by deceit; they don't sacrifice a partner's need for their own or pursue their own goals at the expense of a mate's. Trust is earned by delivering on your commitments. Great campaigns are created and prosper with trust when client and agency understand each other's distinctive expertise.

**Communicate.** Couples who communicate well are empathetic listeners. They listen for intent, not just content. To be empathetic listeners, people must put their egos, feelings and judgements on hold. It's also about candour. David Ogilvy said: "It is important to admit your mistakes, and to do so before you are charged with them. I seize the earliest opportunity to assume the blame.

**"Fight fair.** Once couples learn to express their needs effectively, they can disagree constructively-brainstorming, negotiating, and, when appropriate, compromising. Fight, but don't make it personal.

**Defuse power struggles.** Couples must learn to express feelings and ideas clearly in the face of criticism or disagreement, without resorting to accusations or criticism of their own. Strive for objective assessments of each other's performance and create open forums to resolve conflicts and set an action plan.

**Be money smart.** Couples who keep money matters in perspective have hammered out the logistics of budgeting and money management. They've predicted and accounted for any financial changes. A financially equitable relationship is crucial.

**Make love.** The stress of juggling work and family obligations can be so physically and emotionally exhausting that couples forget the importance of expressing love. Celebrate your successes. Celebrate the work. You might become friends. I'd only add that, in our business, a good dose of strategic and creative talent is the glue that keeps it all together. Making living partnerships work is no easy task. Leo Tolstoy said it best: "What counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible you are, but how you deal with incompatibility."

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