How does contact frequency affect team performance?

Rewards versus the toll on mental health

apraias
Anyone looking to improve team performance must balance optimisation with its members’ mental health. The business costs of poor mental health in the workplace are enormous. According to one study conducted by Deloitte in Canada1, 30 of every 1,000 employees missed work for mental health reasons each week.

Another study from McKinsey2 found that 40% of employees in the USA stated they are at least somewhat likely to leave their current job in the next three to six months. This is a dire prediction and bodes poorly for team-team relationships.

The Covid-19 pandemic has revolutionised the way we interact as humans and as teams. As our report will reveal, marketing teams initially responded by increasing the frequency of contact with one another.

The question is whether this change in frequency (and nature) of contact had a noticeable impact on client-agency relationships.

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1 The ROI in workplace mental health programs: Good for people, good for business. Deloitte Insights Canada. 
2 “Great Attrition” or “Great Attraction”? The choice is yours. McKinsey Quarterly. September 2021.
When participants log in to the Aprais online team evaluation system, they are asked how frequently they have contact with their partners.

We compared data from the first half of 2020 with the second half to identify changes caused by lockdowns and other changes to working practices brought about by the Covid pandemic.

The charts above show that in the first half of 2020, just 21% of clients touched base with their agency every day. But in the second half of 2020, this jumped to 35%, with 46% checking in one to three times a week.

This behaviour was even more pronounced for agencies contacting their clients. In the first half of 2020, 31% of agencies contacted their clients every day. In the second half (as of writing) this had increased to a whopping 50%.

However, in both cases (client of agency and agency of client) frequency of contact shows signs of returning to pre-Covid levels in 2021. Comparing H2 2021 with H1 2020, daily contact appears to be lessening in favour of weekly or infrequent contact (one to three times per month).

It should be noted that daily contact is still more frequent than in the first half of 2020, particularly in the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) region.
The value of increased contact frequency

What stands out from our data is that increased contact frequency had little effect on the client-agency relationship scores we measured during the same period. The charts opposite compare the global average evaluation scores by each party, with the incidence of daily contacts. Evaluation scores do not correspond to the significant changes in the frequency of contact – or, to put it another way, there is no increase in relationship scores to accompany the increase in contact.

There are obvious advantages to agencies and clients checking in with one another frequently. With so much uncertainty in the supply chain and new challenges confronting teams, increased briefings were welcomed by both parties to ensure each could react to the prevailing issues. Our data suggest this is now returning to pre-Covid norms.
Our data has long identified that clients and agencies evaluate each other differently according to cultural and regional influences. For example, North Americans generally tend to score higher than other regions.

A comparison of everyday contact frequency also exposes differences in business culture.

What is immediately apparent from the analysis below is that marketers in the Americas responded more radically than other regions at the onset of lockdown, with ramped-up contact. In the second half of 2020, 38% of clients and 53% of agencies in the Americas contacted each other every day. This is roughly 6% higher than the rest of world average.
Our work practices have been revolutionised by Covid. Work-from-home rules have propelled the use of instant messaging and video apps, and video meetings are now ubiquitous. For example, Zoom had 10 million daily meeting participants in December 2019, but by April 2020 that number had risen to over 300 million⁴. Other leading video conferencing platforms, such as Google Meet and Microsoft Teams, have also experienced dramatic increases in daily participants.

The convenience and productivity of messaging and video conferencing mean that they are likely to remain a favoured communication channel. Gartner predicts that by 2024, in-person meetings will drop from 60% of enterprise meetings to just 25%, driven by remote work and changing workforce demographics.

While online tools have made us all more accessible and available, our data suggests an ‘always on’ culture doesn’t necessarily translate into improved client-agency relationship scores. Qualitative feedback from participants in Aprais evaluations about the relationship in question shows increased comments about work stress, burnout and exhaustion and comments noting the impact of shorter turnaround times, additional briefs and multiple rounds of changes. The pressure has been felt both by agencies and by their marketer clients.

⁴ Evans, 2020: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/10464964211015286
‘Full-on and exhausting’: feeling the strain

Analysis of comments entered into our database from agency and client teams has revealed:

• Increased client needs of their agencies outside the planned and agreed scope of work, leading to an increased intensity day to day and a perceived lack of focus.

• A perception from agencies that working times were less respected and more last-minute changes were requested.

• A desire to return to more structured ways of working.

• Agency staff going on leave citing burnout.

• Increasingly packed agendas and back-to-back Teams and Zoom meetings, leading to a lack of time for valuable discussion.

• Working practices during Covid described as ‘extremely full-on and exhausting’ and a plea from agencies to restore balance and respect working times.

Contacts and mental health

Heavy workloads and tight deadlines have always been an idiosyncrasy of the marketing and communications industry.

A survey by marketing trade magazine The Drum⁴ published in May 2021 revealed that the mental health of workers across the global marketing industry is under severe strain:

• 75% said their mental health had got worse since the beginning of the pandemic.

• 62.6% reported that their workload had a major impact on their mental health.

A study by The Standard⁵, an American insurance company, revealed that:

‘Nearly half of American workers have been suffering from mental health issues since the Covid-19 pandemic began, at a significant cost to their wellbeing and potentially to their employer’s bottom line.’

⁴ https://www.thedrum.com/news/2021/05/04/overworked-marketers-and-agency-staff-say-employers-notdoing-enough-mental-health
Not so many years ago, most business meetings had to be planned in advance. Agendas were drafted and consolidated to ensure that relevant members from both teams were present and prepared.

Access to the speed and convenience of online platforms had already begun to change the way business teams interacted before Covid became a catalyst for rapid change. Now meetings can be held as spontaneously as phone calls once were. That benefit is not without a cost.

Our data shows the knee-jerk response to work-from-home confinement was that most marketers and agencies increased the level of contact with each other – agencies more so than marketers.

The increases in the frequency of contact and the return to ‘normal’ have differed by region.

One thing is universally clear – increased frequency of contact does not have a corresponding improvement on the evaluation scores of client-agency performance.

On the contrary, the always-on culture has added stress for teams and the individuals in them.
As we emerge from the crisis, clients and agencies need to take stock of the new ways of working and understand what is effective and what is detrimental to the overall relationship.

Our recommendations

1. Agencies and clients need to corral their teams and consolidate agendas so that multiple issues can be addressed in a single contact.

2. Clients should manage their agencies through regular, consolidated status updates to avoid multiple and duplicated calls with their agencies.

3. Communication between teams relies on appropriate and open sharing of information and facts, not just frequency of contact.

4. Clients and agencies should agree the appropriate contact schedule for specific projects, with more planned meetings for strategic campaigns and aligned frequency for tactical projects.
About Aprais

Stronger relationships build stronger business

Aprais are the global pioneers in building stronger business relationships. We act as a neutral and trusted third party between companies and their marketing suppliers. We identify problem areas and develop action plans to build stronger business relationships beneficial to both parties. Since we established the category over 20 years ago, we have advised the world's leading marketers and agencies on more than 24,000 relationships, across 92 countries, in 13 languages.

The 8 reasons your company will benefit from the Aprais process:

1. We only focus on building stronger relationships. We do not get distracted by agency searches, fee negotiations or running pitches.

2. Over two decades, we have built a unique global database of authentic industry benchmarks to measure your relationship scores against.

3. Because we know the industry benchmarks, you can immediately identify areas for improvement without waiting for your second round of results.

4. Unlike an off-the-shelf SAAS product, we can customise the Aprais process to meet your needs.

5. Any software is only effective in the right hands. Our consultants are experts at managing the process, defining challenges and interpreting the results.

6. As we supervise the entire process you don’t have to worry about including training or employee time in your budget.

7. Our 100-point scale shows changes far more precisely than marks out of 10. We have found that over time, this is significantly more motivating.

8. In dealing with some of the world’s most security-sensitive companies, we consistently exceed the strictest data security audits.
Contact and follow us

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