

TONIC

FUTURE  POSITIVE

THE NEW STANDARDS FOR AGENCY SUCCESS

**EARNING AND GROWING CLIENT COMMITMENT
AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE**

THE FUTURE IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE

Success in the past does not guarantee your future.

The world has changed significantly and agencies need to change with it.

The challenges of recent months have been a catalyst for real change in the agency sector that's long overdue and should not be underestimated.

At Tonic, we have relevant experience as a business consultancy helping agencies navigate this kind of significant change. And now more than ever we want to bring a level of clarity, colour and confidence to all founders and leaders looking to emerge stronger and lead the way.

So, we've developed a series of Future Positive guides to support you.

This edition focuses on how to earn and grow client commitment to build agency value.

The guide draws together our frontline client experience, extensive research into changing expectations, and a range of expert perspectives from an industry going through and seeking positive change.

We share insight and practical advice across a range of areas, including offer and targeting, positioning, client development and winning new clients.

We'd like to thank everyone who has contributed to this guide and encourage everyone to take a Future Positive approach to this new era of work.

NEW NORMAL. NEW WORLD.

There's no escaping talk of the new normal. On one level the term feels apocalyptic and on the other completely unremarkable.

But the reality is that many aspects of how we live, work and behave – as businesses and communities – have needed an overhaul for some time.

This is especially true for agencies, with very few taking the initiative and action pre-Covid to adapt to changing client expectations and find faster, smarter and better ways to do and deliver.

The majority of agencies have become too elaborate, rigid and predictable, and new competitors have emerged with an edge.

If you've yet to act or change, you'll need to think more radically to compete in the future. And if you're looking for any kind of normal, you will be disappointed.

Now is the time to start as you mean to go on and commit to an approach that's more effective, more inclusive and more rewarding for everyone involved.

Expectations and attitudes are different across the board. Whether you're looking at better returns for clients, greater flexibility for employees or higher profitability for your business, things will need to be different and standards much higher.

You may not be in a position to change things quickly, but having a clearer and more positive view of the future will mean that every decision and action will be a step in the right direction.

Don't start by just looking for incremental improvements, otherwise you'll never engage with the bigger picture.

You'll need to look beyond the obvious and conventional and take the opportunity to raise your game.

FUTURE  POSITIVE

CLIENTS

Earning and growing client
commitment in the new era



CLIENTS

Clients have been searching for better value and stronger relationships for some time.

Pitching, switching and in-housing have all increased in the quest for good partners capable of delivering smarter and more effective solutions.

Recent months have forced the issue, and in many cases clients have found better and faster ways of getting things done. As a result, the standards expected of agencies have been raised and redefined.

89.7%

Of clients are considering changing their ways of working in the second half of 2020.

BIMA — STATE OF THE DIGITAL INDUSTRY, 2020

So, when it comes to client expectations what's changed and what's more important than ever to their success and yours?

Put simply, clients will need agencies to be on point with every action, interaction and deliverable. They will want more for less and this isn't limited to budgets. In fact, there will be a new premium placed on exceptional work and effective results delivered with maximum efficiency.

There will be less time or patience for ambiguous offers, generic approaches or average work and more time for genuine partners who share the challenges and smartly solve them.

NEW EXPECTATIONS

- Highly effective, specialist expertise that adds value in smarter and faster ways
- Absolute clarity on what agencies are offering and stand for, with no unnecessary complications
- Committed partnerships based on deeper understanding and shared success
- More thoughtful engagement that inspires trust, confidence and creativity

NEW STANDARDS

Clients are under pressure to bounce back and, in many cases, build on new-found momentum. They need experienced and exceptional partners to help them solve, adapt and succeed at speed.

Agencies are under the same pressure. Raising your game and being laser focused in every aspect of your approach will ensure that all future partnerships are a genuine win-win.

- High quality and focused service offering, underpinned by expertise and effectiveness
- Straightforward, honest and gloss-free communications and delivery
- A highly committed and win-win approach to developing and growing client relationships
- A relevant, compelling and confident approach to pursuing and creating new opportunities

In this new era, agencies will need to be genuinely brilliant and completely tuned into what their clients really need.

The emphasis will be where it should always have been – on what you can deliver exceptionally well rather than simply what you can do.

And the best work will be the result of true agency-client partnerships that prioritise openness and lead to shared success that everyone can be proud of.

Let's look at how to achieve these new standards in practice.



“Strong businesses, with sound management teams that lead with agility and imagination, who can take a client and agency team with them to meet new challenges. This is what will separate future winners.”

CHAIRMAN — PROFESSIONAL BODY FOR AGENCIES

SPOTLIGHT ON

WINNING NEW CLIENTS

Win the battle for new clients with a highly skilled operation and a thoughtful and compelling approach to building trust...



CLIENT DEVELOPMENT

Get closer to and develop the clients you can really grow with. Work as one team to tackle challenges in smarter and faster ways...



POSITIONING

Update your view of the competition and be straightforward, honest and gloss-free in how you position yourselves...



OFFER + TARGETING

Focus your offer where you can be genuinely brilliant and effective. Be more exact in your targeting, basing it on win-win potential...



SPOTLIGHT
ON CLIENTS

OFFER + TARGETING

Gone are the days of broad offerings and long shopping lists of disconnected services. Clients are interested in solving specific and significant challenges in smarter and faster ways. They will look for great partners and genuine problem solvers who will help them adapt to, or take advantage of, new opportunities.

Quality and effectiveness are everything and should be the focus for, not only what you offer, but also which clients you choose to partner with.

Nothing short of exceptional will do and this may require you to make brave decisions about where to focus your efforts.

FOCUS YOUR OFFER

Considering your offer in the context of these changing client expectations will help you focus on what you deliver that is genuinely brilliant and most effective.

This might narrow your services and/or lead to a change in how you work, who you bring onboard and how you collaborate with other partners. It might also call for you to be brave when it comes to cutting underperforming or average parts of your offer that drain resources and negatively impact your bottom line.

Either way, be sure to underpin your more focused offer with proven expertise, experience and results. Leveraging a proven track record is essential when it comes to driving the preference of clients you want to attract and where you know you can make a difference.

“We don’t need generalists. We have them in-house. We need agencies with heavyweight specialist knowledge and influence. That’s why we go to them.”

MARKETING DIRECTOR — CULTURAL INSTITUTION

“We need agency partners to be clear on what we’re going to get, why they do it better than others, why we should buy and what impact can they bring.”

CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER — FMCG

BE EXACT IN YOUR TARGETING

Targeting is complex, especially with current pressures to recover and retain as much business as possible. But being more exact about the clients you want to work with, and have the greatest likelihood of winning, is critical to future success. Without this, you will perpetuate past losses and reduce your potential to grow.

Start by looking at what's behind your previous successes and failures. The latter you obviously shouldn't repeat and the former will help you define clear criteria for where you know you can exceed expectations. Be sure to broaden the criteria beyond the obvious and consider factors like cultural match and growth potential.

“Agencies must keep scanning the horizon for opportunities and be prepared to move the business in new directions to stay in the game.”

CHAIRMAN — CRM AGENCY

Use these criteria to identify your optimum clients and screen the ones you already have, because they may not be the ones you need to take forward. Then rebuild your new business database and prioritise where you focus your outbound efforts and investment.

And don't forget to share this bullseye with your whole team so they are clear and have a vision of where this more focused approach can take you.

TAKE ACTION

ONE

Look at your offer against changing client expectations and focus where you can deliver exceptional and effective results. Be brave and cut anything generic or average.

TWO

Define clear targeting criteria for the clients and type of work you want in the future. Match to your expertise and experience, but also use factors like culture and growth potential.

THREE

Align your team, data and content approach around your optimum clients. This includes screening the clients you already have, because they may not be the ones you want for the future.

SPOTLIGHT
ON CLIENTS

POSITIONING

In recent years the traditional categories of marketing services agencies have become over-complicated, making it harder for both clients and agencies to find each other. And throughout the recent crisis clients have been open to – and exposed to – a greater number of agencies and partners looking to solve their problems.

As a result, they've seen some smart, efficient ways of working that will condition their expectations for the future and sharpen their agency selection process.

Having a clear view of where your agency fits in this new world and communicating it simply and consistently, will help bring you closer to your ideal clients.

START WITH SIMPLICITY

It's easy to over-intellectualise when it comes to positioning, something agencies encourage their clients not to do on a regular basis. But now, more than ever, there's a need to get back to basics and remember that the role of positioning is to narrow the clients' choices significantly in your agency's favour.

Clarity trumps the desire to be clever and emotive, so prioritise simplicity and strip away any unnecessary gloss and lengthy descriptions of what you do. This just gets in the way of clearly communicating an offer that's highly valued by your target clients.

“Put simply, be honest about what you're good at.”

PROCUREMENT SPECIALIST

Focus on your unique way of adding value and why that makes you the best partner to solve the significant challenges your clients will face now and in the future. The bottom line is that your positioning should help you successfully attract the right clients and deter the wrong ones, who will just become a distraction you cannot afford.

“What we most need from agencies is agility, flexibility and effectiveness. Deliver the basics well and build trust in what's possible.”

CMO – TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

MAKE IT COMPELLING

With a renewed focus, ask yourselves whether you have a core idea that captures your agency in a clear and compelling way. This should drive everything you communicate about your agency and what makes you special.

Don't be seduced into thinking you have differentiated yourself just because you have an idea around growth, change or transformation – this is only likely to put you in a group with many others.

Reconsider and update your view of who really qualifies as a competitor so that you can sharpen your position and make the client's choice even easier. The chances are that your competitors are different or broader now and all trying to offer smarter alternatives. So don't stray from what's authentically you and resist the urge to cover all bases.

“The agencies with a strong point of view need to stand by it.”

PROCUREMENT SPECIALIST

Once you're clear and confident in your position, align all content and communications so that every effort and execution reinforces what you want to be known for. Not only will this be more effective but also more efficient from a marketing point of view.

TAKE ACTION

ONE

Focus your positioning where you are 100% clear and confident on the qualities and capabilities that set you apart and have the power to drive client preference.

TWO

Update who you consider as competitors to sharpen your story further and double down on what's authentic to you versus just 'different' to them.

THREE

Strip out the gloss, keep it simple and align all content and communications so that every effort and execution reinforces your positioning.

SPOTLIGHT
ON CLIENTS

SYNCHRONISED WINNING IS THE NEW SPORT

Agencies who collaborate well and solve the difficult challenges across client organisations will build trust and create new opportunities.

CLIENT DEVELOPMENT

As momentum starts to return, it will be vital that you consider your future approach to developing existing client relationships – and with the new client expectations very much in mind.

During recent months clients have seen more agencies, listened to new ideas, found better ways of getting things done and redefined the standards they expect. You'll need to respond to these changes, recognising that you'll have to be better than ever before.

Many agencies think they actively develop their clients, but even based on the old standards, most fail to build the broadest and deepest relationships and so they limit their potential opportunities.

THINK, LISTEN + LEARN

As work-life boundaries have blurred, relationship dynamics have evolved, and engagement has become much more personal and human. This isn't just about being in touch more often, it means a deeper and closer connection to people as we transition into a new era.

The risk for many agencies is that their client relationships revert to a 'normal' style of functional communications and project delivery, rather than moving up to the next level through greater empathy, understanding, activity and commitment.

Before returning to business as usual, you should reflect and review the style and strength of your different relationships.

70+%

The amount of revenue that should be generated from existing clients.

Agencies often think they know how they are viewed by a client – but this is invariably based on narrow perceptions, many of which are now likely to be out of date.

So ask your clients. Carry out a rigorous client listening study to understand their needs and how you can do your best for them.

You'll then be in a position to adapt your offer, delivery and engagement to maximise your return from each client. And you'll be able to focus on the clients that genuinely offer you the best potential for the future.

WIN BETTER TOGETHER

Ways of working are becoming seamless, blurring the lines of the traditional client-agency divide. Clients now expect a much higher level of collaboration in identifying and solving problems. They want great work to be delivered at record speeds, with total transparency across all agency activities.

Your teams will need to be sharper, smarter and faster to match these expectations and create value for your agency. Ask yourself if you've got the right people with the right attitude and skills in the right roles. Are those on the frontline, closest to the opportunities and problems, properly empowered to act? And is your whole team fully engaged in meeting these new client service and development standards?

“This is the moment for truly agile agencies to stand forward. We need to work together to share ideas and solve the challenges we are all facing.”

VP MARKETING — TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

In this new world, client development plans are even more important. Not the old, formulaic type of documents containing stacks of irrelevant information and a few checklists that give the account team a nice warm feeling, but rarely see the light of day. We mean plans that define a vision, inspire collaboration and focus activity to create the relationships you and your clients desire.

Client relationships will be different – but not unfairly so. Clients will honour and support the agencies who are really on their side. It will just be more about mutual respect and about a win-win outcome.

TAKE ACTION

ONE

Understand the current needs of your clients and their perspectives of your agency. Adapt your offer, delivery and engagement to maximise your return from each client.

TWO

Reassess the skills, attitudes, responsibilities and authority of your client facing team and adjust to align with the new expectations.

THREE

Build adaptable client plans that inspire collaboration, focus activity and promote transparency while delivering good results for both you and your clients.

SPOTLIGHT
ON CLIENTS

WINNING NEW CLIENTS

Winning new clients will be one of the biggest challenges agencies will face in this new era. With fewer opportunities and reduced budgets, there's no denying that it's going to be tough for many. It's not a time for sticking your head in the sand or for anything half-hearted. It's a time for coming out fighting to create the right opportunities and get back to growth.

We've already discussed how you'll need to adapt your offer, targeting and positioning. Now we'll look at the frontline challenges of engaging, inspiring and bringing in those new clients. Like any battle, it has to be won with a highly skilled operation, all the right resources and a realistic view of what will be required.

GET WELL EQUIPPED

You know new clients will be very important to fill the gaps left by those who have reduced their spending, gone elsewhere or you no longer want to work for. So don't undermine your chances of success with false economies on skills, data or systems.

You should assemble the strongest team possible, by shuffling roles, hiring or outsourcing. You'll need the capabilities to confidently reach out and engage potential clients, to write and produce compelling content and to manage the detail of data and tracking.

Good quality and volumes of data are vital, together with a highly efficient CRM system to record, track and focus activity. Without these elements in place all your other efforts may just be a waste of time.

You won't need to do many different things every day. In fact, in the new era you'll benefit from being more focused. But all your activities will need to be of high quality and delivered to a plan, with a frequency that will drive the pipeline you require.

64%

Of agency leaders intend to change their marketing strategy dramatically.

BIMA — STATE OF THE DIGITAL INDUSTRY, 2020

SPOTLIGHT
ON CLIENTS

WINNING
NEW CLIENTS

MAKE CONTENT COMPELLING

Whilst it may be tempting right now to throw everything at making yourselves more visible to potential clients, the key to developing opportunities is quality content that's tailored to inspire the specific clients you want to reach.

Understanding their current business challenges is vital. Then be specific and have something relevant, provocative and well-thought through to say about their situation. And always link your thinking and ideas clearly and credibly to your positioning and the services you're hoping to sell to that client.

Anything bland, ill-informed and lacking insight or authenticity will just get lost in the noise – or worse, create a negative impression of your agency.

And greater personalisation, focus and quality doesn't have to be at the expense of coverage or impact. Good compelling content will be multi-purpose and be effective in connecting with potential clients across all communication channels.

“Agencies that make approaches without understanding our challenges don't get the time of day.”

MARKETING DIRECTOR – CONSUMER SERVICES

44%

Of clients will choose a partner who can show multiple relevant case studies with clear return on investment.

BIMA – STATE OF THE DIGITAL INDUSTRY, 2020

SPOTLIGHT ON CLIENTS

WINNING NEW CLIENTS

LEVERAGE YOUR NETWORK

The move away from face to face meetings has greatly increased clients' use of trusted referrals and recommendations when selecting agencies. Influencing those around your target clients will take on a new significance.

Using all your networks has always been a valuable route to win new business, but now needs even greater attention. So, make the effort now to review or build up your database of former clients, contacts, partners and intermediaries who could become clients in the future or routes to potential clients.

And don't just think about your own business contacts and people you know. Place the art and action of business development at the heart of your agency culture so it becomes a genuinely important activity in which everyone is involved.

But do take control of things. Agree an approach and plan on how you are going to reach out to people and make sure your team, partners and intermediaries are fully briefed and incentivised so they can lead the way in creating new opportunities.

“Chemistry is harder to create from a distance. Leveraging trusted relationships and referrals will become even more important going forward.”

VP MARKETING — TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

TAKE ACTION

ONE

Assess the quality and volume of your data and your capability to reach out, engage and track potential clients. Act quickly to upgrade anything that falls short of the new standard.

TWO

Review, revise or develop your content strategy, including your ability to write and produce inspiring pieces. Implement, as planned, without compromising quality or timing.

THREE

Be proactive in developing and working your network of former clients, contacts, partners and intermediaries who can help win and influence new clients in the future.

ABOUT TONIC

We're a business consultancy, specialising in the agency sector.

We know what drives agency leaders because we've been there, but also because we're a trusted expert and guide to many across the agency world who want to realise the full potential of their agencies and teams. We've been in the thick of it with our clients over the last few months and we know it's not easy. This is why we've made it our mission to add more clarity, colour and confidence to the big decisions that leaders are now facing. Our goal is to help agencies succeed. It's as simple as that.

HOW WE CAN HELP YOU

We recognise that agencies will have different levels of capability, time and budget to deal with their challenges right now. So we've designed all our services to give you different ways of drawing on our specialist expertise and experience.

Whether your challenges are specific to a particular area or more holistic, we can work with you to get the right results.

We can be a hands-on partner – applying our expertise and delivering specific programmes tailored to your business challenges.

We can also work as a mentor – you and your team will handle most of the work, we will review, challenge and add ideas to keep you on track to deliver your objectives.

In every case, getting stuck in and making a difference is our remit.


GET IN TOUCH

Drop us an email if we can help. We'll show you a fresh perspective, challenge your thinking, and help you create a positive future for your agency.

✉ hello@tonicpartners.co.uk

We regularly share insights, knowledge and advice on our website, where you can access more Future Positive updates and our Essentials Toolkit. You can also follow us on LinkedIn.

🌐 [tonicpartners.co.uk](https://www.tonicpartners.co.uk)

 [LinkedIn](#)

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Hopefully, you'll have found this guide helpful and you have a better insight into how to earn and grow client commitment.

For a more objective assessment of your business, we have a specific Future Positive service to help you prioritise exactly where to put your time, energy, and investment over the coming months.

Please get in touch for a free consultation.

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