

## Colette Brown, Prospect: Be As Cunning As A Fox

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**Experts with broad experience can be more beneficial to agencies than specialists.**



Sir Isaiah Berlin, the philosopher, drew a distinction between two types of thinker: 'those, like the fox, who pursue many ends, often unrelated, even contradictory, and those, like the hedgehog, who relate everything to a single universal organising principle.' This can equally be applied to agency thinking. There are specialist agencies that need specialist skills. Those working in healthcare still need people with a deep knowledge of their sector, the language and the audiences. Traditional tech agencies still do tech, although many drill down into areas such as cleantech. Crisis management specialists will also always be in demand.

However, if broader agencies get too caught up with specialisms, they could lose sight of the people who are more objective and bring different creative levels to the mix.

'Digital' is the area that has seen the biggest demand for specialist skills in recent years. Initially, agencies set up a separate offering, but increasingly have come to appreciate that social media/digital comms are as integrated as traditional channels, simply part of the daily comms landscape.

We are often asked for a 'head of digital', or 'head of social media' - as it's still quite new, agencies feel they need someone to lead it, to ease clients who feel this is an area they don't yet understand but need to explore. This client-facing element is important, but it will soon be seen as the latest

incarnation of the emperor's new clothes - most PROs worth their salt are already all over digital without the need for a specialist.

Specialisms can be a bit of a step backwards. Although there is still a call for some, we have found that many agencies are looking at offering much more, with creativity and ad agency genes in there too. It can be frustrating for PROs when they get pigeonholed.

There has been a move towards integrated campaigns. Agencies are offering clients 'sector disciplines', moving away from silos and having a stab at as much as they can. GolinHarris' restructure is all about individuals specialising, but the agency offering more. Its G4 model offers strategists, creators, connectors and catalysts. Within Hill & Knowlton's deep sector specialisms, it offers broad expertise. Blue Rubicon values people with broad minds and diverse experience, to deliver audience-led integrated campaigns.

Talent is in high demand and it is increasingly hard to recruit for a specialised post. At Prospect, we challenge agencies that focus just on experience, not skill-sets. If you have the applicable skills and are a good PRO, is it a prerequisite that you know the market inside out? Can it not be learned? The industry can be inflexible about switching staff between specialisms, meaning talent gets missed and staff risk getting stuck in one area. Candidates are seeking new challenges and want to broaden their horizons, so why not look at extending the existing team's skill-set? Our advice to agencies is to be open-minded when sourcing.

But should they be less afraid of challenging clients' demands for a specialist? A specialist is not the only person who can do a job; they're just the one who knows how to do it at the moment. A specialist is useful only as long as their knowledge is special. Recruitment consultants see this issue from both the employee and employer's viewpoint. We aim to benefit both sides. It quickly becomes obvious that the people who progress quickly are able to bring their skills to bear effectively and therefore most benefit an agency, with broad experience and good depth of knowledge in several disciplines. These people are experts, not specialists. Foxes, not hedgehogs.

## **VIEWS IN BRIEF**

### **Which film title best sums up the spirit of your agency?**

The Untouchables.

### **What is the most impressive piece of launch PR of the past year?**

Forever 21 was the year's biggest retail launch and showed how social media can be a fabulous tool to engage a target audience. Shine generated blanket coverage in every national newspaper and reached more than 80,000 people through social media, as well as achieving targets for awareness and traffic. It was a game-changing campaign that captured consumers and industry alike.

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