

Episode #: 10

Episode Title: Unlocking the full potential of Client/Agency partnerships with Keir Mather

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Intro

Louise Everett (00:11)

Welcome to ClarityMatters. Today's episode is about a relationship that can make or break performance - the one between clients and their agencies. When these partnerships work, they can unlock smarter thinking, braver work, and faster progress. But when they fall short, the reasons often run deeper than they first appear. I'm delighted to be joined by someone who works right at the heart of this, helping clients and agencies build high performance partnerships that deliver real business impact.

Together, we'll explore what really holds client-agency relationships back, how leaders can unlock more value from the agency ecosystem, and how digital transformation, especially AI and data, is reshaping the way collaboration needs to work. I'm thrilled to be joined by Keir Mather, founder of Neon Bridge. Keir, it is a pleasure to have you on ClarityMatters - welcome..

Keir Mather (01:09)

Thank you, Louise. Nice to see you again.

Main conversation

Louise Everett (01:12)

It's good to see you. Keir, you've got almost 30 years of experience working both client and agency side, and have witnessed first-hand the friction and issues that can often derail these critical relationships. You set up Neon Bridge back in 2018 to help clients and agencies unlock high performance partnerships. When these partnerships underperform, what's the real issue you see most often, and how can leaders proactively prevent that?

Keir Mather (01:44)

Yeah, thanks. I think if you were to look at the macro environment at the moment of clients and agencies, I mean, they're both under significant pressure. The geopolitical situation with clients, low to no growth economies, that's led to decreased marketing budgets and boardrooms questioning marketing value. If I hear "we need to do more with less" one more time, that seems to be the narrative at the moment. And of course, that pressure is being passed on to agencies. They've got decreased budgets, they've got increased wage costs, but they still need to deliver a margin, and their margins are under pressure. Ultimately, I do sit at the heart of the client-agency relationship. The vast majority of the work I do is client listening.

So those are semi-structured conversations with clients to try and understand how the partnership is performing. You know what's working well, what's not working so well, where optimisations can be made. And I think that what I hear more often than not in those conversations, when the partnership is failing, is that the agency just simply isn't delivering a fantastic client experience.

And ultimately that's what clients are looking for. They want a brilliant client experience from their agencies. They want brilliant work delivered on time, on brief, on budget and through a kind of seamless process. And so that's what I hear a lot. And that's what agencies I think need to work on, is just making sure that with the resources they've got, that they can deliver, and they know what a fantastic client experience is for their clients.

Louise Everett (03:21)

Are there any common themes in there in terms of how agencies aren't delivering a good client experience, or a common thread of what that entails, what clients are looking for specifically?

Keir Mather (03:36)

Yeah, I mean, the same themes come up time and time again. They want great creative thinking.

They want great strategic thinking. They want the best people in the agency on their business. And if those people have to move on, which inevitably they will at some point, they want that replacement to be as good as, or better, than the person that was there. I think ultimately it comes down to agency process.

And I think this is what we don't talk about enough, because the first question I always ask a client in a client listening process is, how do you enjoy working with said agency? And it's fascinating that that reply always comes back with, I think they're really good. They always deliver on time. They're super responsive. I like this particular person. And that's where clients go, they go down to process.

They go down to: are they delivering for me on time, on brief, on budget. Because as we all know, the majority of the clients' role these days is internal stakeholder management. And often agencies don't appreciate that internal environment that clients have to deal with. And therefore, if they say they're going to deliver something at 3:00 and it gets delivered at 5:00, well, guess what? That client has missed their CEO meeting at 4:00 and nothing frustrates a client more than that.

Louise Everett (04:49)

Fascinating. And I think you and I both have been on both sides of that, probably. So if a CMO or CEO came to you saying: we want to maximise ROI from our agency ecosystem, what key strategic moves would you immediately prioritise, and why? What would you recommend?

Keir Mather (05:12)

I mean, the first thing I would do is order a strategic review of the agency roster because clients change and morph all the time. Either their organisations change, their objectives change, or clients and individuals change. People leave, people join. And the same with agencies as well. Agencies never stand still. They're always developing new capabilities.

They're always changing their structure and what they service, particularly in the world of AI and technology. The first thing I would do is order, as I said, a review of the agency roster to make sure it's still fit for purpose, to make sure and understand that the agencies you have to hand will be able to deliver against your marketing objectives for that year or that period.

One thing I hear often in client listening conversations with clients is that: oh, I didn't know that the agency did that. And I think agencies and clients can get very settled into a relationship one year, two year, three year, and they never stop to pull back and just take a macro view of that relationship to understand how it's performing, what's going well, what's not going so well, but equally where else the agency can help, because clients have got all manner of marketing tasks and problems that they need to solve.

If they have a stable relationship with an excellent agency that they really trust and rate and respect, then there's always more work and more things that they might be able to do for that client. I always advise my

clients, my marketing clients, and also my agency CEOs, to just take a step back and just go back in and pitch yourself. Go back in and pitch, you know, this is what you think you know of us, but actually, this is the new us. This is what's different. That's what's changed. And I think that's a really good marker for clients and agencies to kind of focus on, at least annually.

Louise Everett (06:59)

I love that, Keir. Actually it's something that I hear myself with the clients that we work with: we didn't know you did that, we had no idea. So pitch yourself, go back and pitch yourself. I think this is a fantastic summary and it's such a strong takeaway.

So in the work that you're doing, the crucial work that you're doing, where have you seen digital transformation efforts either help or hinder agency collaboration, especially with AI and data analytics now reshaping briefs?

Keir Mather (07:35)

I mean, it's really tricky, and this is the conversation du jour at the moment. It's, you know, how are agencies and clients going to work together in this brave new world? You know, we're now starting to see the impact. I think the promise of AI was there. I think we're starting to see the impact of AI and technology on workflows now. I think one of the big problems that agencies and clients are facing is the remuneration in this brave new world. The majority of agencies are remunerated on an FTE basis, it's time and materials.

Agencies are trying to change that model and clients as well, trying to change that model, so it's more focused on outcomes. But that's much, much harder to do when your outcomes are not tied to any revenue goals. So it's a conversation that's happening at the moment. Some agencies are managing to do it, other agencies are struggling a bit with it. But let's see where we are in a year or so time.

Louise Everett (08:30)

Are you supporting both sides, clients and agencies, in that transformation? Is it a topic that is, you know, really dominating a lot of the work that you're doing right now?

Keir Mather (08:41)

It's dominating the conversations, definitely. And of course, you've got a broad range of clients.

You know, you've got some clients that are fully invested in it. They've got their own GPT. They are empowering all of their workforce to embrace it, use it to see where efficiency gains can be made. And you've got the complete other end of the spectrum that where clients are very, very nervous of it, you know, they've got real IP issues there.

And, you know, you speak to them and they say, look, that's with our lawyers at the moment. It's highly unlikely that we're going to be able to utilise the technology. And then you've got agencies in the middle that are trying to work with both sets of clients. They're trying to demonstrate their value in this world, but at the same time, clients are saying, well, actually, we can in-house a lot of this stuff now, you know, so where is the value that an agency brings to a client organisation?

I think that's a question that is yet to be answered.

Louise Everett (09:36)

And asking you that question, do you see - so you sit firmly in the middle between clients and agencies – do you see through this transformation, do you still see the benefit?

Typically working with agencies, you get this outside-in thinking or outside-in experience, this outside-in judgment, you know, are you still seeing that even though there is the emergence and the increase of AI, and clients are equipped with more tools than they have been previously?

Are you still seeing that there is a benefit for that relationship and that model to maintain that judgment? This phrase around judgment keeps coming up time and time again, certainly in my everyday work. Are you seeing that?

Keir Mather (10:33)

Yeah. I think much has been written about, you know, the death of agencies. I just don't subscribe to that point of view at all.

I think clients always need that outside-in perspective. I think there's always a fine line. You know, clients want agencies that understand their category and understand their sector and can make a fast start. But equally, they want agency partners they can trust, that have that external judgment, that have that external validation that can come in and challenge them and push them and shake them and make them deliver the best possible work.

I think long gone are the days when agencies are kind of, you know, we'll do some stuff and you'll give us some money. You know, it has to be about outcomes. They have to come in and go, look, I think you're doing the wrong thing here. I think it's this, or that or the other, it's going to lead to a better outcome.

And I'd like to tie my remuneration to that outcome, please. Those are the conversations that I think agencies should be having at the moment.

Louise Everett (11:30)

This is fascinating. What would be the one key takeaway for both sides? For our listeners that are client side and for our listeners that are working agency side, what would be your one key takeaway for both of those audiences to improve or to enhance the relationship they have with each other right now?

Keir Mather (18:19)

Yeah, I always come back to human-to-human interaction. You know, client-agency relationships are based on human interaction. And, you know, in any other organisation or any other industry, clients might be called customers, customers that have a budget, a budget to spend. And they choose to spend that budget with that agency. But if you look at some clients, you know, clients are human - for now anyway.

You know, they're emotional, they're irrational, they've got foibles. They're ambitious, but they're under pressure. You know, they're under significant pressure to achieve. And they've got very visible deliverables with, you know, an average marketing person is putting out assets into the world that everyone has a point of view on, including the CEO. So I think agencies and clients just need to remember that human-to-human partnership is the reason that they work together and focus on that interaction and making that as good as it possibly can be.

I hear a lot now that client-agency relationships have become too transactional, and I think you need to put the emotion back into client-agency relationships. You know, things like Covid and video calls have kind of knocked the edges off those client-agency relationships. And it used to be back in the day that

agencies would spend significant amounts of money on client entertaining and building relationships outside of the workplace.

And I think, you know, we need to go back to that. You know, we need to go back to the idea that this is a partnership and we're in this together, and we're going to do whatever it takes to deliver for you. And we're not going to enter into this transactional, commoditised nature of a relationship. Because the minute you're in that area, that's the danger zone, and that's where you can very easily be replaced.

Louise Everett (13:47)

Such an important point, back to the old people buy people phrase, and something that is so important, equally for both sides, client side, agency side.

Keir, before we wrap up, can we take a step back for a moment? So a couple of questions that I like to ask all of my guests. This year marks 20 years of Claritas. Over that time, communications, as we've seen, has evolved rapidly in scale, speed and scrutiny. But some lessons still endure. If you could go back to your 20-year-old self, which I remember well, we've known each other for 35 years, what's the one piece of career advice you would give?

Keir Mather (14:38)

Tough, isn't it? I mean, I'd be excited as a 20-year-old entering the workforce today, I think the opportunities are most definitely still there. I think that notion of, you know, there are many things in life that require kind of zero talent. And I think being present, showing up, having energy, being coachable, demonstrating passion, you know, those kinds of things still really count in the workplace.

And I think that if you can be that person that manages up and takes, you know, takes stuff off your boss, understands what your boss needs, helps them deliver what they need to deliver, understands what the organisation you work for is trying to do and helps them deliver that through that passion and energy. I think that would be a really good thing to do.

Louise Everett (15:27)

That was lovely, very lovely. And I think you did always show up. I seem to recall you being quite like that at 20. If we look forward, if you could put one idea or piece of advice into a 20-year time capsule, what would it be? And why would that matter?

Keir Mather (15:51)

Yeah, I mean, who knows where we are we going to be in the next 20 years? Right now, my point of view on the world is that human-to-human interactions are essential for the world of work, and all clients are human for now, and all agency staff are human for now. So I think, let's not forget what makes us human.

You know, let's not forget that that we are individuals with our own idiosyncrasies and foibles and the rest of it. And I'd love us in 20 years' time to still maintain those human-to-human relationships.

Louise Everett (16:26)

This is lovely, so important. And let's hope that in 20 years, that is still something, who knows? You're right, it's anyone's guess right now.

Keir Mather (16:38)

Well, I look forward to revisiting that time capsule in 20 years' time when we're very old, very grey.

Louise Everett (16:46)

Older, greyer. Keir, thank you for sharing your insight and thoughtful perspective today that I'm certain so many of our listeners will find helpful. Thank you.

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Keir Mather (16:58)

Pleasure. So nice to see you again, Louise.

Louise Everett (17:01)

And you too.

Outro

Louise Everett (17:03)

If there's one takeaway, it's that client-agency partnerships need careful attention. They work best when expectations are clear, conversations are honest, and both sides treat the relationship itself as something to actively manage and evolve over time.

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