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Managing a strategic business relationship in an emerging market: Advertising agency-client relationships in Turkey

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Abstract

The advertising agency-client relationship is considered to be a key factor in the creation of successful, brand-building advertising. Despite a diverse and growing body of literature on the subject in developed countries, less is known about agency-client relationships in developing countries. This study aims to provide an overview of the issues prevailing in the advertising agency-client relationship in Turkey in order to offer some insights into improving this strategically critical relationship especially in the context of emerging markets.

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1. Introduction

The advertising agency-client relationship is a strategic partnership that may have a significant impact on the market performance of the client and the client's brands. For both the advertiser and the agency successful maintenance of this relationship has important business consequences (e.g., Wackman et al., 1986; Michell et al., 1992). A successful agency-client relationship may mean brand-building advertising and an increase in market share for the advertiser: While it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of advertising in the short term, there is evidence that in the long term it may increase brand equity (please

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see for example Wang et al., 2009) and thereby the profit margin of the firm. For the agency, a successful long-term relationship may mean stability of income, prestige, and a higher profit margin as there is some evidence that committed advertisers may be willing to continue to purchase the services of the agency even if the price is increased (Duhan & Sandvik, 2009). On the other hand, dissolution of the relationship may disrupt the continuity of advertising campaigns, undermine the hard-won position of the brands, and result in a score for the advertiser's competition. As establishing a new agency-client relationship takes time, a breakup also means time loss (Quinn, 1978, as cited in Davies & Prince, 1999). There is even some empirical evidence that suggests firing an agency or switching agencies results in stock price decline for the advertiser (Kulkarni et al., 2003; Hozier & Schatzberg, 2000; Mathur & Mathur, 1996). The consequences of an agency-client relationship gone wrong may be even more serious for the agency. The loss of an account may mean not only lost income, but depending on the circumstances, diminished prestige, personnel losses, and in some cases, demise of the agency. Examination of the issues surrounding the agency-client relationship may offer insights into the prevention of such a costly outcome as well as implications for business-to-business relationships in other contexts.

The research stream that focuses on the relationship between the advertiser and the advertising agency indicates that maintaining this relationship is not simply a function of the advertiser's satisfaction with the agency's output however important that aspect is (and a large body of literature supports the importance of advertiser's satisfaction with the agency's output as a determinant of account longevity. See for example, Waller 2004 for a literature review). Establishing mutual trust, loyalty, and a long-lasting relationship is predicated on a number of additional factors such as the agency's service behaviors, the advertiser's attitude towards the agency, the structural characteristics of the two companies, and the structure of the advertiser's industry, as well as the general business environment (Michell & Sanders, 1995).

The advertising industry in Turkey has achieved significant growth over the last twenty years. The level of occupational and industrial differentiation is considerable. Turkish advertising is winning awards at some of the world's most prestigious advertising competitions. Research suggests that successful advertising and brand-building are predicated on a long-lasting advertising agency-client relationship built on mutual trust and respect. This study is an attempt at assessing the state of advertising agency-client relationships in Turkey at the present time by examining academic research and reports of the business press. The aim is to be able to put forth some suggestions for improving the relationship especially in the emerging-market context.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: First, we provide a review of the theoretical background and literature on advertising agency-client relationships. Second, we provide an introduction to the Turkish advertising industry and an overview of the advertising agency-client relationship against this background. Third, we discuss the implications of the study, along with possible future directions for research.

2. Literature review and research framework

Writings on the relationship between the advertising agency and the advertiser in developed countries constitutes a rich body of literature. In the US, for example, an "advertising agency-client relationship"

category was formed in the *Business Periodicals Index* as early as 1946 (Keep et al., 1998: 32). Empirical research on the topic has already resulted in an extensive literature review (Waller, 2004), which delineates the main streams of literature within this corpus: agency selection, development and maintenance, and breakup of the relationship. Agency selection studies focus on the criteria advertisers use in selecting and evaluating their advertising agencies (e.g., Cagley & Roberts, 1984; Cagley, 1986; Harvey & Rupert, 1988; Dowling, 1994; Marshall & Na, 1994; Na & Marshall, 2001).

Studies on relationship development and maintenance examine predominantly the factors of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (e.g., Wackman et al., 1986; Verbeke, 1988; LaBahn, 1996; Halinen, 1997; Beverland et al., 2007). Agency termination research usually follows one of two tracks: While one track focuses on the reasons for the breakup of the agency-client relationship (e.g., Doyle et al., 1980; Michell et al., 1992; Durden et al., 1997), the other examines those factors that increase loyalty (e.g., Michell & Sanders, 1995; LaBahn & Kohli, 1997; Davies & Prince, 1999; Beverland et al., 2004).

Although there is a diverse body of literature on the relationship between the advertising agency and the advertiser in developed countries, the state of the relationship in emerging markets has not received as much attention. Emerging markets represent an interesting context for the advertising agency-client relationship because of the level of development of the advertising industry and the significant influence of multinational advertisers. Research suggests that developing markets may differ from developed markets by the shortage of advertising talent (Shao & Hill, 1992), less developed marketing infrastructure and low competition (Aydin and Terpstra, 1981). An interesting feature of the emerging-market context is the global alignment decisions characterizing the relationship between multinational advertisers and advertising agencies: The multinational advertiser's choice of local advertising agency is often dictated by the multinational's headquarters (Michell & Bright, 1995; Sweeney, 2005). The multinational subsidiaries are thus often committed to their advertising agencies so long as the global decision remains in effect, with some interesting consequences.

Advertising agency-client relationships in Turkey have been investigated by Kaynak et al. (1994), who found that the personal relationship between the advertising agency and its client was very important in Turkey, contrary to a more developed economy such as that of the Netherlands (Verbeke, 1988). Koç et al. (1993) also found that such relational aspects as ease of communication, trust and respect, and harmony between advertiser and agency played the most important role in the advertiser's satisfaction with the agency. On the other hand, in the agency's selection creativity – a work product – was deemed the most important element, supporting the Wackman et al. (1986) finding that the factors that influence the success of the agency-client relationship are different from the factors that influence agency selection. A later study affirmed the importance of creativity and other aspects of the agency's work product as the most important criteria in agency selection in Turkey (Gülsoy, 2007a) while some of the most important reasons for the breakup of the agency appeared to be weakness of creative ideas, agency's not giving the account enough time or resources and not being close enough to the advertiser's business anymore (Gülsoy, 2008).

The present study aims to review some of the existent literature on the subject with the aim of offering some insights to advertising agencies and advertisers on more effective management of this critical business relationship.

3. Methodology

To examine the current state of advertising agency-client relationships in Turkey this study reviews research studies and archival data on the Turkish advertising industry. In addition to the existent empirical research on the subject, the study has utilized the reports of the Advertising Association of Turkey and two leading trade magazines of the marketing communications industry in Turkey, *MediaCat* and *Marketing Türkiye*.

4. Advertising agency-client relationships in Turkey

First, an overview of the Turkish advertising industry is provided, and against this background we offer an examination of the advertising agency-client relationship in Turkey.

4.1. An overview of the Turkish advertising industry

The emergence of advertising agencies in Turkey can be dated back to the beginning of the twentieth century: In a business directory (*Annuaire Oriental*) that appeared in the Ottoman Empire in 1912 a handful of advertising agents were listed (Koloğlu, 1999: 171). This is a relatively young industry with only two of the advertising agencies who are members of Turkey's Advertising Association established before 1960 (Advertising Association, 2012a). From the mid-1980s onward, the industry also witnessed an increasing number of mergers and affiliations between local agencies and multinational agency networks (*MediaCat*, 1999) so that today most of the world's biggest multinational advertising agencies can be said to be represented in the market (please see Advertising Association, 2012b).

Despite its short history, however, over the past two decades the advertising industry in Turkey has shown a rapid development. This is evinced by the increasing number of agencies and total billings. There are about 100 agencies that are members of the Advertising Association of Turkey (Advertising Association, 2012b), with about twenty of them media agencies, and total billings in 2011 reached 3.4 billion US dollars, representing an increase of 9.30% over the previous year in dollar terms (Advertising Association, 2012c). The Association estimates the number of employees working at advertising agencies to be around 3,000 (Advertising Association, 2012a).

The level of occupational and industrial differentiation is considerable: A 2012 business directory aimed at the industries of marketing and marketing communications by one of the country's leading trade magazines lists besides advertising agencies and media planning and buying agencies, interactive agencies, production companies, post-production companies, casting companies, advertising photographers, jingle houses, health-care marketing communications agencies, and social media agencies, to name a few (*MediaCat*, 2012). Also part of the industry is marketing research firms of a wide variety

of expertise. The advertising industry has its advertising associations, an advertising foundation, association of advertising creatives, association of direct marketing communications, and association of advertising producers among others – most of them formed in the 1990s. Furthermore, the Advertising Association has been organizing an advertising awards competition since 1989, and besides creativity awards competitions, the industry has an advertising effectiveness competition since 2005.

Turkish advertising is winning awards at some of the world's most prestigious advertising competitions. In 2012, for example, Turkish advertising won eleven “lions” at the prestigious Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity in France, and the jury included two members from Turkey (Yıldız, 2012: 86).

The advertising industry in Turkey appears to be as resilient as it is vibrant. Its ability to bounce back from the impact of economic recession is remarkable. For example, in 2001, the year of one of the most severe economic crises in the country's history, total billings dropped by nearly half in dollar terms and the following year rebounded by nearly 30% (Advertising Association, 2012c). While this resilience is heartening, it also points to the brittleness of advertising investments in this market with implications for advertising agency-client relationships. Such sharp cuts in advertising expenditure often indicates a concomitantly sharp severing of the relationship between the advertiser and the agency. Where advertisers can so quickly cut their advertising expenditures (even if this budget cut is not accompanied by the advertiser's departure from the agency), agencies often resort to cutting down their staff. This frequently leads to lower morale of agency staff, withdrawal from the industry of advertising talent, and an increased employee turnover, which appears to be a problem for advertising agencies as it is ([Ajanslarda], 2007) and may also unfavorably affect the agency-client relationship.

4.2. Major issues in the advertising agency-client relationship in Turkey

The advertising agency-client relationship in Turkey is played out against this background characterized by periods of vibrant growth arrested by occasional economic downturns.

Research studies suggest that the relationship is of relatively short duration. Koç et al. (1993) found that more than 50% of the agency-advertiser relationships had a duration of at most two years. A later study indicated that local advertisers were found to be working with their agencies for about 2.74 years on average while multinational advertisers were found to be working with their agencies for 8.44 years on average at the time of the investigation (Gülsoy, 2007b). The tendency of multinationals to maintain a longer relationship with their advertising agencies was attributed to global alignment decisions that commit a multinational advertiser necessarily to the advertising agency indicated by the multinational client's headquarters for that particular market. This finding affirms that strong multinational managements may lean towards extended agency relationships (Michell, 1986).

Several important developments in the evolution of the industry over the past twenty years need to be treated here in more detail: One of them is the devolution of the media planning and buying function from the full-service agency, which began in the second half of the 1990s. This development that had occurred earlier in more developed markets (e.g., Miracle, 1977) ran contrary to the long-term general trend in the development of agency services: Whereas agencies had offered additional or more refined types of

services to advertisers before as noted by Miracle (1977), this time the service was being reduced though most full-service agencies continued (and continue) to offer media planning and buying through their affiliated media agencies. The Turkish advertising scene today also has many creative boutiques and below-the-line agencies that offer a plethora of services such as brochures, corporate reports, leaflets, and corporate identity design and implementation. The shift appears to be towards the advertiser's assuming the responsibility for coordinating an increasing range of specialized marketing services instead of sourcing them solely from the full-service agency. The reasons for the shift may be the increasing marketing maturity within the advertiser's company – a shift that had been observed by Chevalier and Catry (1978) in the French market in the 1970s. A similar finding surfaced from a comparative study of New Zealand and Korea (Marshall & Na, 1994; Na & Marshall, 2001): While in Korea there was a stronger need for marketing-related service such as sales promotion ideas, marketing analysis, and full range of services, in New Zealand, there appeared to be a strong need for an advertising account and creative-related service. In more developed markets media buying and planning services and creative boutiques have grown and undercut the full-service agency (Keep et al., 1998) though whether this will be the case also in Turkey remains to be seen.

There is some evidence that the advertiser's agency roster size is increasing: A 1993 study of agency-client relationships had found that 69% of the advertisers were working with a single agency (Koç et al., 1993), but in 2012 the fact was deemed prevalent and perhaps alarming enough to make the cover story of a leading trade magazine, where the advertiser's employment of multiple agencies was regarded by some agencies as a threat to the essence of the brand (Terzi, 2012). A study conducted over a six-month period in 2005-2006 found that the practice was more prevalent among multinational advertisers than local advertisers (Gülsoy, 2007b).

Strategy is an aspect of the agency-client relationship where the advertiser may be expecting a greater contribution from the agency. For example, in the Kaynak et al. (1994) study the most important factor in agency selection included the "leadership" shown by the agency. The agency's ability to provide marketing consultancy / strategic input appeared in another study as an aspect that advertisers indicated would be more important to them in agency selection today than in the past (Gülsoy, 2007a). Considering that an advertising effectiveness awards competition is being held in Turkey (jointly by the Advertising Association and the Advertisers' Association) since 2005, it can be inferred that advertisers are looking for both greater strategic input and greater accountability from their agencies.

A perspective on the relationship can be gained by examining the guidelines posted by the Advertising Association of Turkey on its Web site. Offered to help both advertisers and agencies place their relationship on a more secure foundation, these documents can also provide illuminating insights into some of the problems in the relationship. A document on quality and service standards drawn up by the Advertising Association includes the recommendation to advertisers and agencies that working with a commission rate below 10% will not be productive for the agency based on a survey conducted among the members of the association (Advertising Association, 2012d). According to a study, about 25% of Turkey's biggest advertisers did not have a contract with their agencies, when contracts of less than one-year duration were excluded (Gülsoy, 2007b). Furthermore, around 35% of these advertisers conducted no formal evaluation of their agency's performance, excluding non-written and irregular evaluations (ibid.).

One indicator of the robustness of the industry is the amount of billings. Judging by the often double-digit growth over the past twenty years (Advertising Association, 2012c) – excluding recessionary years –

the prospects of the advertising industry of Turkey appear bright. Whether those prospects will materialize may depend largely on healthy advertising agency-client relationships.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study aims to provide an overview of the advertising agency-client relationship in an emerging-market context. The Turkish advertising industry appears to have achieved a level of sophistication that puts it on a par with its counterparts in some more developed markets. As a key component of the industry, the relationship between the advertiser and the advertising agency has some issues to resolve, however.

Economic volatility appears to hit the advertising industry hard. When advertisers cut their advertising budgets, some of the most serious ramifications are diminished income and loss of human resources for advertising agencies. Agencies need to have the necessary human resource management systems in place to attract, develop, and maintain critical agency personnel. In order to increase the advertiser's awareness of their importance as strategic business partners, agencies also need to emphasize their own accountability in the advertiser's marketing communications investment.

Competition for the agency's business will always exist and may come from many quarters: Below-the-line agencies, media buying services, film production companies, theatre companies are just some examples. It is important to remember, however, that good advertising ideas will always be on demand, and that is where advertising agencies have a unique competence. Marshalling the resources of the agency to solve the client's marketing problems is where the agency can be an invaluable strategic business partner. A recognition on the part of advertisers of the importance of a long-term relationship with the agency in terms of maintaining the long-term health of their brands is necessary, and this recognition should include the necessity of a viable commission rate for the agency.

Michell (1996) suggests that advertisers involved in long-term relationships with their advertising agencies do not "simply treat them as reservoirs of creative talent but rather as equal business partners" (p. 160). Also, these clients appear to have identified "many of the important policies, processes, and attitudes" needed for building longer-lasting agency relations (pp. 160-161).

The policies and processes that are recommended by industry insiders such as advertising associations as well as industry observers agree on the necessity of a formal contract and a formal performance evaluation. It would appear that basing the agency-client relationship on a contract that clearly delineates the responsibilities of both parties would go a long way towards placing the relationship on a strong footing. Periodic performance evaluations of the agency and two-way evaluations that also give the agency a chance to evaluate the advertiser's performance in the relationship may help to maintain the relationship on firm ground.

Implications for further research may include a cross-country comparison of advertiser-agency satisfaction issues involving several emerging markets. The relationship of multinational advertisers to those advertising agencies to which the multinational is tied by global alignment decisions also bears

closer examination as it might serve to illustrate how the two parties solve their problems within the relationship. Research focusing on the policies and processes of advertisers and agencies involved in relationships of ten years' duration or longer in Turkey as well as in other emerging markets may provide invaluable insights into developing sustainable partnership strategies with implications for other business-to-business relationships.

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