

# GLOSSY

## How agencies are changing the way they work with fashion brands to better meet new needs

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Alisha Goldstein didn't want to let Lucky Brand Jeans give in to the urge to tear the house down and start over.

It was 2015, and Lucky, a heritage denim and apparel brand, was seeing sluggish sales and increased competition from upstart brands. Goldstein, a former brand director at BCBG Max Azria, was freelance consulting for the brand in-house, working across departments and with different C-suite executives to revamp their creative strategy and brand repositioning.

"This was a brand that had a good heritage, but with customer behavior changing and market pressures, that branding got muddled," said Goldstein. "I wanted to understand where the brand was coming from, its heritage and how to use what was still strong within that, while modernizing. The goal is to build off of things, and not knock everything down and start from scratch. Some agencies might rub their hands together at that opportunity, but it didn't seem right internally."

While working across Lucky's internal teams to not just plan a new marketing campaign for an upcoming collection but also to align other departments on the budgeting and fresh direction for the brand, Goldstein saw an opportunity to take a new approach to traditional brand-agency relationships. After working in-house at the brand for a few months, she could identify what the brand needed to outsource, like photoshoot production, and what it could handle in-house, like day-to-day campaign management and social media copy. She pulled together a network of freelancers she worked with on past projects and, in August of that year, launched Jane Smith, an agency that operates a hybrid model of in-house consulting and external agency services to better meet brands' evolving needs.

Jane Smith, which has now worked with brands including Lucky, Chanel, Sephora, David Yurman and Elie Tahari, is offering brands an alternative to traditional agency services that aims to better serve individual brand needs, while maximizing their budgets. Part of the goal is that, eventually, brands will be able to do more on their own and complement those internal resources with agency services as needed. At the same time, the way brands operate has changed: Fashion houses are expected to produce more content more periodically, with similar budget restrictions. Meanwhile, young consumer startup brands have begun to eschew the agency model altogether, a cost-cutting strategy that also gives them more control over branding and customer data.

"The agency-as-service model has fallen out of favor," said Chris Fryburger, a business development consultant. "Brands are more often seeking to build up their own creative capabilities, which they see as making them more competitive in the market, as well as getting them more consistent results for the investments they're making."

To survive, agencies have been changing the way they work with brands in order to align with their needs.

"A couple of things have changed: We're tasked with producing more content, and we have to have more of a narrative with our target audience. But you want to keep your stability and be on brand with everything you're doing," said Deanna Bedoya, the senior director of brand marketing and creative services at Lucky. "This model gives us agility to work with creative agency talent alongside an internal team that's more organized and efficient. It's not an agency as service, but an agency partnership. The most important thing is that the people you're working with know how you operate as an organization."

Other agencies have risen up specifically to fill gaps for brands that want to bring more talent in-house. Vitamin T, a staffing agency, works with brands like Louis Vuitton to help them fill both temporary and full-time positions for new roles they're hiring for, where they might have sought out agency services in the past.

"We've seen roles moving in-house, so there's a need for more hiring to keep control of the creative lens along with the message that brands are putting out there across platforms," said Colin Kerr, a business development manager at Vitamin T. "Brands today are more interested in spending money on people who can immerse themselves in the brand, not spending money to keep an agency on retainer."

The outcome is twofold: Brands' in-house teams are getting better at fielding the right work from agencies, while agency and brand relationships that form are becoming closer.

Work & Co, a digital product agency that counts brands like Celine and Aldo as clients, works with brands to develop new platforms, like websites and apps, as those areas have become more important. The team found brands that bring more talent in-house are better equipped to know what they need from agency partners.

"As our client partners come in with a better understanding of not just the power of digital to open up possibilities — but the complexities inherent in redesigning a website or building a new app or launching a conversational interface — that means we can spend more time actually working on products and refining them, versus a lot of up-front explaining," said Jon Jackson, design partner at Work & Co. According to Jackson, the best agency work comes out of long-term brand relationships.

For Goldstein, her approach was to bridge the disconnect between what agencies are tasked to do — a silo in and of itself — and how brands are operating internally. So, that work includes setting up brands' internal processes to succeed when the agency steps in to assist on creative projects.

"Typically, agencies get one assignment and work on that assignment. It's not that agencies don't want to succeed, but there's a separation and lack of integration with the daily happenings of the brand's in-house environment," said Goldstein. "By getting inside and understanding the mentality behind the decisions and why those are being made, you can prioritize properly and bring projects to life."