



Pitching Guidelines

Creative Agency Pitching Guidelines

For Marketers, Agencies & Pitch Consultants

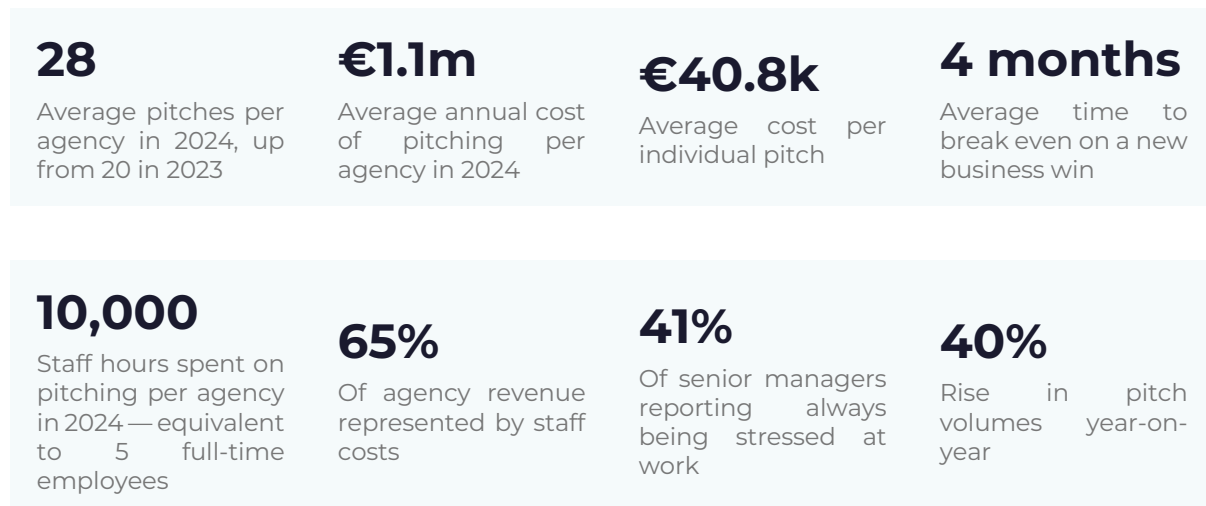


Introduction

These guidelines are published by the Creative & Communications Association as a professional standard for agency selection across Ireland's creative and communications industry. They cover three parties: the marketers who initiate and lead selection processes, the agencies who respond to them, and the pitch consultants who manage them.

The case for change

The 2025 Census and the 2024 Sentiment Survey put numbers on what the industry already knows: pitching has become a significant and growing burden on agencies, with real costs for people, businesses, and the industry as a whole.



The financial picture is equally stark. Despite revenue growth of 24% year-on-year, the average agency profit margin in 2024 was just 4%. Staff turnover is rising, skills gaps are widening, and agencies are spending more on pitching than they can sustainably afford.

The cost of a pitch is not only financial. Speculative creative asks require agencies to invest their most valuable and finite resource, creative and/ or strategic thinking, on a no-win, no-fee basis. Work that would command a significant fee if produced under contract is routinely produced for free in the hope of winning that contract.

The rise of AI in creative production has introduced new questions about ownership, transparency, and the nature of creative expertise. As enlightened businesses commit to responsible supply chain practices, fair creative pitch conduct must be part of that commitment.

While much of the focus on pitching has rightly centred on the strain placed on agencies, it is equally important to recognise the demands placed on marketing teams. Running a pitch process requires significant time, coordination, and accountability; from developing the brief and aligning internal stakeholders, to evaluating proposals and managing sometimes complex decision-making. These processes often take place alongside day-to-day business pressures and competing priorities. A well-structured, transparent approach to agency selection is therefore not only fairer for agencies, but also supports better, more efficient outcomes for marketers, enabling them to make confident decisions and build stronger, more effective partnerships.

The Creative & Communications Association will review and update these guidelines regularly in consultation with members, brands, consultants and the broader industry.

Guidelines For Marketers

01 Establish whether a pitch is necessary – use Profile & Project routes

- Before going to market, consider all three routes: Profile, Project, and Pitch. A competitive pitch should be a last resort, not a default. If you can make the decision through credentials alone or a paid project trial, do so.
- Profile-only selection is recommended for accounts under €300,000 (fees & production) or for project-based work. Assess agencies against the 5Cs: Credentials, Capabilities, Chemistry, Culture, and Client references.
 - Credentials – agency track record, sector experience, case studies, awards, scale of clients.
 - Capabilities – disciplines and services offered, specialist skills, breadth of resourcing.
 - Chemistry – the fit between proposed team and client, communication style, energy, and day to day collaboration.
 - Culture – agency values and ways of working: internal culture, D&I practices, sustainability approaches.
 - Client – the client servicing model. How the account will be run; team structure, seniority and continuity of staffing, responsiveness, governance and reporting processes and commercial transparency.

- The Project route involves engaging an agency on a defined, paid piece of work. It is the most underused and most effective option available. It lets you experience an agency's thinking in practice without asking them to speculate.
- If a competitive pitch is genuinely necessary, be clear on why before you initiate it.

02 Write a clear brief and disclose how agencies will be evaluated

- Provide as much business context as possible. Specify whether the appointment is for a project or a retained relationship, how many agencies are being considered at each stage, the contract term, and indicative budget including the split between fees, media, and production where relevant.
- A single creative brief. Regardless of internal stakeholder pressures, the creative ask within a pitch should be confined to one brief. The exception is where distinct lots within the same organisation will be awarded to different agencies.
- Disclose the evaluation criteria and their weighting before agencies begin work. Agencies producing speculative creative without knowing how it will be judged cannot respond fairly or strategically.
- Define what each stage of the process requires. Be specific about what a Chemistry meeting or a Tissue meeting is expected to produce and hold to that.

03 Govern speculative creative – define tissue meetings & limit asks

- Limit what you ask for to what is genuinely necessary to make a decision.
- Tissue meetings are for directional feedback on early thinking, not finished executions.
- Chemistry meetings, tissue sessions, and final presentations should take place in person. Creative work needs to be experienced in a room, not shared via screen. Remote should be the exception, not the default, and only where geography or genuine circumstance makes in-person impossible.
- Compressed timelines for speculative creative produce worse creative and place disproportionate pressure on creative teams. Build enough time into the process for agencies to produce work that genuinely represents their capability.
- Where the scope of speculative creative is significant, a pitch fee should be offered. Offering a pitch fee is best practice and the Creative & Communications Association encourages it.

04 Commit senior time, eliminate fairly, and debrief on creative work

- The most senior marketer responsible for the decision must be actively involved from day one, not only at the final presentation. Include procurement from the beginning to avoid conflicting signals on commercial terms.
- Treat all agencies consistently. Do not brief some agencies informally ahead of others, and do not retain agencies in the process beyond the point at which they have a realistic chance of winning.
- Communicate decisions promptly at each stage. Every agency that reaches the final stage is entitled to a verbal debrief with specific feedback on their creative work within ten working days of the decision.

05 Champion fair and transparent commercial terms

- Agencies operate on standard 30-day payment terms. Extended terms have a direct impact on cash flow and the agency's ability to pay staff and suppliers.
- The agency sets its price based on the team and skills required (rate), and scope of services. Negotiate from there. Do not ask agencies to reduce fees before scope is agreed, and do not use the pitch process to drive fees to an unsustainable level.
- Where risk/reward structures are appropriate, agree these as part of the commercial negotiation, not as a substitute for fair base remuneration.
- Only ask for production estimates for the creative work being proposed within the process— agencies are unable to price for work that they don't have concepts for.
- Where a creative concept presented at pitch stage subsequently gets produced, the agency is entitled to charge a concept development fee.

06 Respect the value of agency expertise

- Asking agencies to provide strategic advice, detailed planning, or proprietary analysis as part of a selection process is asking for work. Recognise it as such.
- Offering a pitch fee is best practice and the Creative & Communications Association encourages marketers to consider it, particularly where the brief asks for significant strategic output. Where this is not feasible, keep the scope of unpaid work to a minimum by focusing on a robust Profile phase.

- Intellectual property developed during a pitch remains the agency's unless paid for on agreed terms. This is a professional standard.

07 Respect creative IP and require transparency on AI

- Creative work produced by an agency during a pitch — concepts, scripts, visual directions, strategic frameworks belongs to the agency unless explicitly transferred on agreed commercial terms.
 - Do not use, adapt, or brief against ideas presented in a pitch by an agency that was not appointed, without their consent and appropriate compensation.
 - Require agencies to disclose what AI tools were used in developing pitch creative, and in what capacity. Where AI has been used to generate creative concepts or executions, this must be declared.
 - Establish clearly who owns AI-assisted creative developed during a pitch, and what the agency's and client's respective rights are if the relationship does not proceed.
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Guidelines For Agencies

01 Know your right to decline speculative work

- Participating in a pitch and producing speculative creative is a commercial decision, not an obligation. Assess each opportunity against the likelihood of appointment, the resource required, and whether the brief and process meet the standards set out in these guidelines.
- Always ask for a pitch fee before committing to speculative creative work. Even where no fee is forthcoming, making the request signals the value of what you are being asked to produce and over time moves the market in the right direction.
- Declining a poorly structured process, or one that asks for disproportionate speculative output, is sound practice. Suggest the Profile or Project route as an alternative where appropriate.

02 Protect your creative team's wellbeing

- The wellbeing of your creative team during a pitch is your responsibility. Speculative creative produced under unsustainable pressure is neither good for your people nor representative of your agency's best work.
- Stick to the scope. Do not encourage your team to over-deliver beyond what the brief asks for in the hope of standing out. Deliver the ask with genuine creative rigour.
- Be honest with your team about the odds and stakes. Monitor workload and, if a pitch is creating unsustainable pressure, escalate internally or, if necessary, withdraw.

03 Assert your IP and be transparent about AI from the outset

- Make an explicit statement about IP ownership in any documents or presentations provided as part of a pitch process. Do not assume the client understands that speculative creative remains your property unless transferred on agreed commercial terms.
- State clearly in your pitch materials what AI tools were used in developing the work and in what capacity, whether for ideation, execution, or production. This protects both parties and sets a professional standard.
- If you believe creative developed in a pitch has been used without authorisation following an unsuccessful process, raise it formally.

04 Present your real creative team and price your work sustainably

- The team you present should be the team that will work on the account. Do not showcase creative talent that will not be actively involved in day-to-day delivery. If you plan to recruit upon appointment, say so.
- If you are planning to outsource key elements of the required services, declare this in your proposal. Clarity at pitch stage is the foundation of a functional working relationship.
- Price the contract on a sustainable basis that reflects the team and expertise required. Build in annual inflationary increases from the outset and avoid pricing to win at the expense of long-term viability. Do not race to the bottom on fees.

05 Respect the process and deliver what is asked

- If you commit to a pitch process, deliver what has been asked to the best of your ability. Respond to the brief as set, demonstrate your creative thinking clearly, and represent your agency honestly.
- You will not always have full visibility of the business context behind a brief. Where you have genuine concerns about the approach, raise them. If you fundamentally disagree with the direction, consider whether participation is right.
- Where a process does not specify in-person attendance for chemistry, tissue, or final presentation stages, request it. Creative relationships are built in rooms. If a client wants to assess your creative thinking, they should be willing to be present for it.

06 Give and receive feedback constructively

- You are entitled to a meaningful debrief on your creative work, win or lose. If specific feedback on the work itself is not offered, request it — generic process feedback is not sufficient when you have invested in speculative creative.
- Receive feedback professionally. Honest creative criticism, delivered in good faith, is more useful than reassurance.
- Give feedback on the process constructively and through the right channels. Debrief internally after every pitch, share what you learned about the work and the process, and use it.

Guidelines For Pitch Consultants

01 Disclose your commercial model — fully and upfront

- Before accepting any engagement, disclose to the marketer exactly how you are remunerated whether client-funded, agency-funded, win fees, or a hybrid model.
- Any financial relationship between you and a participating agency must be declared to the marketer before the process begins and communicated to the agencies involved.

02 Act in the marketer's interest

- Your primary obligation is to the marketer. Every recommendation must be grounded in the client's needs.
- Actively recommend the Profile or Project route where a competitive pitch is not necessary.

03 Design and manage a fair process, and govern the scope of speculative creative

- All agencies must be briefed simultaneously, in the same format, with equal access to information. Any question from one agency must be shared with all.
- The scope of speculative creative requested must be proportionate to the contract value and the decision being made.
- Define tissue meetings clearly in the process brief and enforce that definition. A tissue meeting is for directional feedback on early thinking — it must not become a vehicle for a further round of unpaid creative work.
- Build in-person attendance into the process design for chemistry meetings, tissue sessions, and final presentations. Creative pitches in particular require presence. State the in-person expectation in the brief from the outset and accommodate exceptions only where location genuinely requires it. Virtual formats work for information exchange. They are not appropriate for major agency appointments.
- Set a realistic timeline and hold to it. Compressed creative timelines benefit no one and produce unrepresentative work.

04 Treat agencies with professional respect

- Agencies investing in a pitch are entitled to be treated as professional partners. Communicate clearly, respond promptly, and keep them informed of their status.
- Eliminate fairly and early. If an agency no longer has a realistic path to appointment, tell them directly.
- Every finalist is entitled to a specific verbal debrief within ten working days of the decision. As process manager, this is your responsibility to ensure.

05 Uphold creative IP and pitch fee standards

- Advise your client that speculative creative produced during a pitch belongs to the agency unless transferred on agreed terms. Do not allow ambiguity on this point to persist in any process you manage.
- Advise your client to consider offering a pitch fee where the scope of speculative creative is significant. It is not yet standard practice in the Irish market, but it is best practice.
- Ensure the brief does not ask agencies to produce executional creative the client intends to use regardless of the outcome. The pitch should evaluate creative thinking and capability — not extract finished work.

06 Be accountable to industry standards

- As a consultant managing creative pitch processes in the Irish market, you are a steward of the standards these guidelines represent.
- The Creative & Communications Association's pitch consultant accreditation framework sets out the competency and conduct standards expected of consultants working with member organisations.

07 Champion fair and transparent commercial terms

- Be clear with the commercial ask e.g. hourly rate, level of hours/ scope of work that needs to be priced.
- Ensure all commercial requests can be reviewed on a like for like basis e.g. annual production estimates are not realistic and may vary wildly.
- Be clear if a high level of seniority is required on a team, as this will need to be priced accordingly.

Summary

These guidelines are intended to set a clear and consistent standard for how agency selection should be approached across the industry. They are not about restricting choice, but about improving how decisions are made — ensuring that every process is fair, proportionate, and aligned to the value of what is being commissioned. When marketers, agencies and consultants each play their part with transparency, respect, and professionalism, the result is stronger partnerships and a more sustainable industry for all. The responsibility is shared, and the opportunity is collective: to raise the standard of pitching in a way that benefits not just individual organisations, but the long-term health and reputation of the communications sector as a whole.

The Creative & Communications Association is the business representative organisation for Ireland's creative and communications industry, providing professional member services to more than 70 companies.

Supported by a full-time executive team and governed by a board of ten directors, CCA brings businesses from across the industry together, represents their shared interests and helps create the conditions in which they can thrive.

CCA builds evidence, brings the industry's priorities to government, regulators and other decision-makers, provides practical business and regulatory support, develops people and creates opportunities for the industry to connect, learn and share expertise.

CCA is a member of the European Association of Communications Agencies, the licence holder and official representative for the Effie Awards in Ireland, and the Irish representative for Cannes Young Lions. It also has representation on the Advertising Standards Authority, the Government's Creative Industries Forum and JNLR.

CCA is the proud collective voice of Ireland's creative and communications industry.

What we share, we strengthen.