go network

WHITEPAPER · 2026 EDITION

The Deciding Factor

What brand feedback reveals about why one agency gets chosen over another

Inside: what brands cited at each stage of the search, what influenced the final decision, and practical tools for agencies and brands.

The GO Network's largest analysis to date of brand feedback from agency searches managed in 2025 and 2026

PUBLISHED
November 2026

FOR
Agency leaders and new business teams.
Marketing and procurement teams appointing agencies.

FROM
The GO Network

Every agency search creates more than a final decision. It creates a record of what brands responded to, what gave them confidence, what raised concerns and what ultimately separated one agency from another.

At The GO Network, feedback has always been an important part of the search process. We ask brands to tell us what they liked, what held them back and what influenced their decision at each stage of a search, then share that feedback with the agencies involved wherever we receive it.

Over time, those individual responses build a much broader picture of how agency decisions are really made.

> **Building on our first analysis of pitch-process feedback, published in 2024, this is the largest analysis The GO Network has conducted to date.**

It brings together 411 coded feedback records from 207 brands and 165 agencies, gathered through 520 agency searches managed by The GO Network between January 2025 and 11 November 2026.

We value this evidence because it gets us closer to the real decision.

It is one thing to ask brands what they say they want from an agency. It is another to look at what they actually praised, questioned and cited after reviewing credentials, meeting teams and choosing who to appoint.

That gives us a view of where confidence grows, where it falls away and what ultimately separates one credible agency from another.

Our analysis suggests that agency selection is rarely about one thing. Across the feedback, brands referred to strategic and creative thinking, relevant experience, commercial value, delivery and the working relationship, with different factors coming into focus at different stages of the search.

That is what this whitepaper is designed to explore.

It is not a formula for winning a pitch, and it is not a ranking of agencies. It is a practical look at the evidence brands use when deciding whether an agency is right for the work: how clearly its experience connects to the brief, how well it understands the problem, the strength of its strategic thinking, the credibility of its delivery plan, the commercial case and the working relationship.

For agencies, the aim is to make the next pitch more focused, more relevant and more useful.

For brands, it is to help design a clearer search, test the right things at the right stage and make the final decision easier to explain.

Most importantly, I hope it helps both sides get more value from a process that asks a great deal of everyone involved.

I hope you find it useful.



Russell Oakley
MD & Co-founder
The GO Network

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01 Where this evidence comes from

GO FEEDBACK

After each stage of a GO search, the brand is asked, agency by agency, what it liked, what held it back and what influenced the outcome. Where we receive a response, we share that feedback privately with the agency. This paper brings those responses together to identify recurring patterns without naming individuals or organisations.

Reading the evidence

Four labels are used throughout the report so you can see **where each point comes from**.

GO FEEDBACK

Measured evidence.

What brands told us in the 2025-26 feedback analysed for this report.

EARLIER GO EVIDENCE

Kept separate from the current 2025-26 data.

Findings from a separate, earlier GO analysis.

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

Guidance, not a measured finding.

Our interpretation of the findings and practical recommendations for brands and agencies.

SUPPORTING INDUSTRY CONTEXT

External statistics are not included in GO percentages.

External research and guidance used to check whether GO's findings are consistent with the wider market.

The sample

During the period, The GO Network managed 520 agency searches. This analysis uses the 411 feedback records available for coding. A feedback record is not equivalent to a search: one search can generate feedback on several agencies and at several stages. An agency may therefore appear in more than one feedback record.

THE EVIDENCE · 1 JANUARY 2025 TO 11 NOVEMBER 2026

520	411	207	165
Agency searches managed during period	**Feedback records analysed**	**Brands represented**	**Agencies represented**

Feedback records by stage

Every feedback record is assigned to one stage of the search.

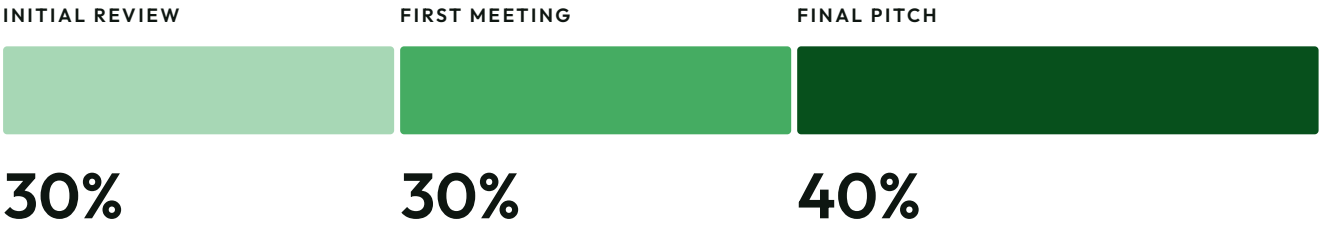


FIGURE 1 Share of the 411 feedback records analysed, by stage of the search. A feedback record is one brand's feedback on one agency at one stage. One search can generate several records.

How the feedback was read

Each feedback record was reviewed against the same themes.

THEME	WHAT THIS MEANS
Understanding of the brief	Whether the agency understood the problem, answered the brief directly and addressed what the brand had actually asked for.
Relevance of expertise and case studies	Whether the agency showed experience that was relevant to the brand's problem, audience, channel, operating environment, scale or budget, and made that connection clear.
Tailoring	Whether the response was clearly built for this brand rather than being a general credentials presentation with the brand's name added.
Strategic input	The quality of the agency's thinking: its diagnosis of the problem, insight into the audience and a clear, realistic recommendation.
Creative input	The strength of the ideas and the reason behind them. Only recorded where creative work was part of the brief.
Expected delivery	How the agency said it would deliver the work: the stages, outputs, responsibilities and timing.
Team and personnel	Who the agency brought into the process and whether those people would actually work on the account.
Chemistry	How the interaction felt: whether it was a two-way conversation, whether the team listened and contributed, and whether the brand could see itself working with them.
Price	The cost of the proposal and how clearly the brand could understand what it would receive for the money.
Timings	How long the agency said the work would take before it was live, and whether that fitted the brand's deadline.
Fit and scale	Whether the agency's size, capacity, pace and way of working suited the brand and the scope of the work.
Challenge	Whether the agency was willing to question the brief or the brand's assumptions and offer a better alternative.
Process	How clearly the agency explained its way of working and the methods behind it.

How to read the numbers

▲ Praised

WHAT IT COUNTS

The share of relevant feedback records in which the brand said something positive about that theme.

● Criticised

WHAT IT COUNTS

The share of relevant feedback records in which the brand raised a concern about that theme.

● Cited as a reason for the decision

WHAT IT COUNTS

The share of relevant decision explanations in which the brand cited that theme as one of the reasons for the outcome.

These measures answer different questions. A theme can be praised or criticised frequently without being one of the reasons a brand gives for its decision.

- A single feedback record can contain more than one positive point, concern or decision reason. Percentages across themes therefore do not necessarily add to 100%.
- Where a brand explicitly said why an agency was selected or rejected, we recorded that as a decision reason. Praise and criticism elsewhere in the feedback were recorded separately.
- The themes are The GO Network's structured coding of free-text feedback. They were not categories selected by the brands themselves.
- Where the paper compares years, 2025 means 1 January to 31 December 2025. The 2026 period runs from 1 January to 11 November 2026.

02 What makes an appointment convincing

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE ☐ EARLIER GO EVIDENCE ● GO FEEDBACK

Across the feedback, five areas recur in the way brands build confidence in an appointment: relevant experience, understanding and strategy, commercial value, delivery and the working relationship.

1

Relevant experience and evidence

Builds confidence that the agency can do the work.

2

Business understanding and strategic response

Builds confidence that the agency knows what to do and why.

3

Commercial value

Makes clear what the brand is buying, what it costs and why it is worth the money.

4

Delivery

Builds confidence in how the work will happen.

5

Working relationship

Shows how the teams listen, challenge and make decisions together.

We use these recurring themes as five practical confidence areas for assessing an appointment.

FIGURE 2 The five confidence areas. The GO Network's practical framework, not measured weights.

☐ EARLIER GO EVIDENCE

Earlier GO evidence points in the same direction

The GO Network first published an analysis of agency pitch-process feedback in November 2024. That earlier, non-overlapping study also highlighted understanding, relevance and delivery as recurring themes. This 2026 edition continues that biennial research programme.

75.0%	Successful final-pitch feedback mentioning understanding of the business or brand
52.8%	Unsuccessful final-pitch feedback mentioning lack of depth or understanding
30.2%	Unsuccessful final-pitch feedback mentioning practical resource or delivery concerns

Earlier GO evidence: based on 128 chemistry-call feedback forms and 132 final-pitch forms. The records do not overlap with the current 2025-26 sample. Multiple themes could appear in one form. Figures are mention frequencies, not win probabilities.

A positive meeting is not a complete case for appointment

The feedback shows that brands can respond positively to an agency's people and still choose another proposal. That makes it important to distinguish between what the brand praised and what it explicitly cited as influencing the decision.

"We loved them. But the other agency understood exactly what we wanted without us having to give any further direction."

Our reading of this feedback is not that the working relationship matters less. It is that a positive interaction still needs to be accompanied by relevant evidence, a clear response to the brief and confidence in delivery.

BRAND FEEDBACK, EDITED FOR CLARITY

FOR AGENCIES

If the feedback you receive is mostly about how much the brand liked you, look for the one line about what the winner did differently. That line is the lesson.

FOR BRANDS

"We really liked you" is kind, but an agency cannot act on it. Say what the winner did that this agency did not. One specific reason is more actionable than a paragraph of general praise.

03 Three stages, three questions

GO FEEDBACK

Across the coded feedback, the same broad themes recur throughout the search, but different evidence comes into focus at each stage.

The initial review asks whether the agency has made the relevance of its experience clear for this brief. The first meeting asks whether it understands the problem and has a useful point of view. The final pitch asks whether this is the strongest answer and whether the team can deliver it.

Three stages, three questions

What the brand needs to know at each stage of an agency search.



INITIAL REVIEW

Can we clearly see why this agency is relevant to this brief?

Credentials, written responses and the first shortlist.

COMES INTO FOCUS

Relevant experience

FIRST MEETING

Do they understand our problem, and do they have a useful point of view?

What credentials alone do not fully establish: understanding, judgement and the working team.

COMES INTO FOCUS

Understanding and point of view

FINAL PITCH

Is this the strongest answer, and can we believe it will work in practice?

The proposed answer, commercial value and delivery plan, in sharper comparison.

COMES INTO FOCUS

The answer, value and delivery

FIGURE 3 The same broad themes recur across stages, while different evidence comes into focus as the choice narrows towards one appointment.

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

For brands, the implication is equally practical: each stage should be designed to resolve a different uncertainty, rather than asking agencies to prove everything at once.

PRAISED

69%

Chemistry shows why praise and reasons for the decision need to be kept separate. Positive chemistry is common among unsuccessful final-pitch agencies too: 69% of unsuccessful final-pitch feedback praised it. In this sample, a positive working relationship was therefore not, on its own, a reliable explanation for who was ultimately appointed.

Base: Unsuccessful final-pitch feedback records: n = 100.

04 Stage 1: the initial review

01 02 03

GO FEEDBACK

Credentials, written responses and the first shortlist. At this stage a brand is reading, not meeting, and it is asking one question.

Can we clearly see why this agency is relevant to this brief?

The most commonly cited initial-review issue was the relevance of the experience or evidence presented.

Our reading of the comments is that, in some cases, the brand was being asked to make too large a leap from previous work to this brief.

What brands cited at the initial review

CITED AS A REASON FOR THE DECISION

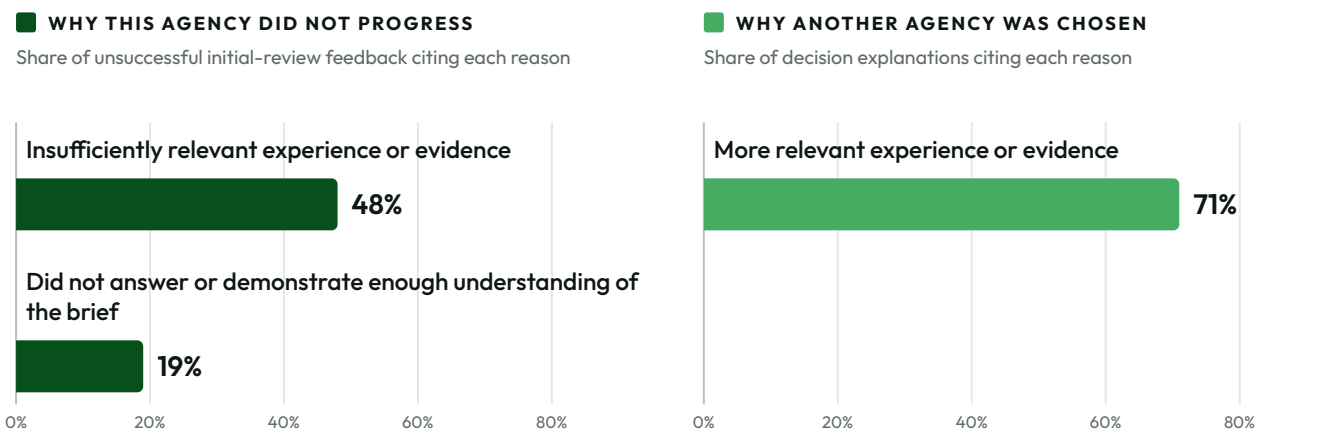


FIGURE 4 These are reasons cited in brand feedback, not win rates. A feedback record may contain more than one reason, so percentages do not add to 100%. Source: The GO Network brand feedback. **Base: Unsuccessful initial-review feedback: n = 84; initial-review decision explanations: n = 31.**

CRITICISED

57% of unsuccessful initial-review feedback raised concerns about the relevance of the experience or case studies presented

In the qualitative comments, this sometimes reflected a failure to make the connection to the brief clearly enough. That did not always mean the agency lacked relevant capability: in some cases, relevant elements were present but their link to the brand's problem, audience, channel, operating environment, scale or budget was not made explicit. **The brand was being asked to connect the dots.**

“The experience was relevant, but the connection to our brief wasn’t clear enough for us to see how it would translate.”

BRAND FEEDBACK

What loses

Leaving too much for the brand to infer

In several feedback records, the issue was not an absence of experience but that its relevance to this brief had not been made clear. This suggests that relevant does not have to mean identical: the important step is making the connection to the problem, audience, channel, operating environment, scale or budget explicit.

Not answering what was asked

DECISION REASON

Understanding or answering the brief was cited in 19% of unsuccessful initial-review feedback. One brand scored written responses against 14 scored requirements. Every agency taken forward met at least 86% of them. One met just over a third.

> “The case studies were impressive, but other agencies connected their experience directly to our brief, and gave us a clearer sense of cost.”

PARAPHRASED FROM BRAND FEEDBACK

What this means in practice

- A small number of case studies chosen for this brand’s category, audience, budget and channel.
- A response that follows the structure of the brief, so every requirement has an answer the brand can find.
- Early signs of thinking about this brand’s problem and, where it is asked for, an indication of cost.

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE: A PRACTICAL TEST

Remove the brand’s name from the response. Could it be sent unchanged to one of their competitors? If so, it needs more work.

FOR AGENCIES

If your closest example is a stretch, say so and explain what carries over. Do not leave the brand to make the connection.

FOR BRANDS

Put your category, audience, channels and budget in the brief, and ask for no more than three case studies. You will get relevance you can compare, and agencies that are not right can rule themselves out early.

05 Stage 2: the first meeting

01 — 02 — 03

GO FEEDBACK

The first meeting tests what credentials alone do not fully establish: how well the agency understands the challenge, what it thinks the brand should do and why, and how the proposed team approaches the discussion.

Do they understand our problem, and do they have a useful point of view?

Understanding the brief is not the same as repeating it.

What brands cited after the first meeting

CITED AS A REASON FOR THE DECISION

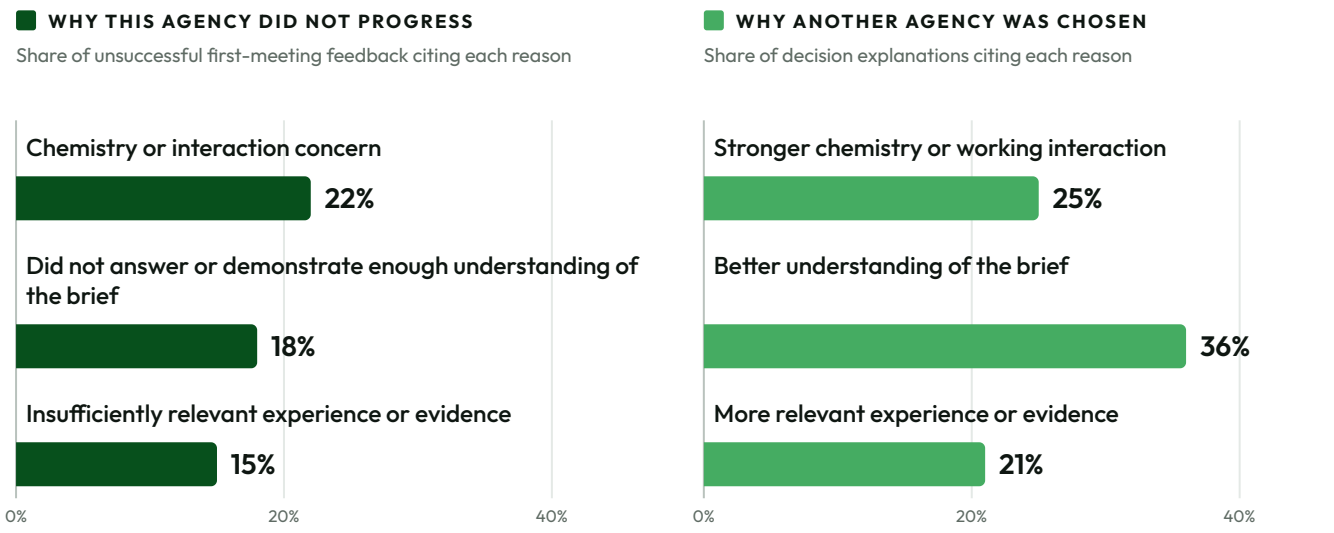


FIGURE 5 The two panels answer different questions and should not be read as a single ranking of importance. These are reasons cited in brand feedback, not win rates. A feedback record may contain more than one reason, so percentages do not add to 100%. Source: The GO Network brand feedback. **Base: Unsuccessful first-meeting feedback: n = 60; first-meeting decision explanations: n = 53.**

PRAISED

83% of feedback on agencies that progressed praised the working relationship or quality of the interaction

PRAISED

78% of feedback on agencies that progressed praised the relevance of their experience or evidence

Base: Feedback on agencies that progressed: n = 63.

Progressing agencies were frequently praised for both relevant experience and the quality of the interaction. But when brands explained why another agency was chosen, better understanding of the brief was cited most often of these three reasons. The feedback suggests that, as the choice narrows, the response to this particular problem becomes increasingly important.

“Bring the people who will actually do the work. We want to hear how they think about our challenge, not just what the agency has done before.”

PARAPHRASED FROM BRAND FEEDBACK

What loses

A presentation instead of a conversation

DECISION REASON

Chemistry was cited in 22% of unsuccessful feedback at this stage. In the comments coded under chemistry, brands used the term to describe practical aspects of the interaction: whether the meeting was two-way and whether the team listened, contributed and engaged with the problem.

Not showing you have read the brief

DECISION REASON

Understanding of the brief was cited in 18% of unsuccessful feedback at this stage. Feedback at this stage included criticism where agencies repeated the brief, overlooked a requirement or required the brand to re-explain the problem.

The wrong people, or the wrong fit

QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK

Some first-meeting feedback also referred to who attended, the quality of the interaction and whether the proposed team appeared compatible with the brand’s way of working.

What this means in practice

> “It felt like a working discussion. They asked good questions, everyone contributed, and they gave us something new to think about.”

BRAND FEEDBACK, EDITED FOR CLARITY

- Make the meeting about their brief. Save the credentials for the follow-up.
- Do your homework on the business: what it already does, and what it has tried before.
- Ask good questions, and leave room for the brand to talk.
- Bring the people who would do the work, and let them speak.
- Show a point of view. Some positive feedback referred to constructive challenge when it was tied to a clear recommendation.

FOR AGENCIES

Treat the first meeting as a working discussion, not a short pitch. Show that you understand the problem, ask useful questions and explain what you recommend and why. Show a point of view and make any challenge constructive and actionable.

FOR BRANDS

Tell agencies it is a conversation, not a presentation, and ask them to bring the people who would do the work. Leave half the time for questions in both directions. You will learn more about how they think than any credentials deck can show.

EARLIER GO EVIDENCE

Earlier GO feedback: avoidable signals that weaken confidence

Earlier GO feedback also identified patterns that can undermine confidence even when the agency is capable.

	SIGNAL	WHY IT CAN WEAKEN CONFIDENCE
01	**One senior voice dominates the discussion**	The delivery team is not visible.
02	**Limited visibility of the day-to-day team**	Continuity becomes uncertain.
03	**Criticism without a workable alternative**	Challenge becomes theatre rather than useful judgement.
04	**Proposals the available team, budget or brief cannot realistically support**	Delivery confidence falls.

Our reading of these earlier comments is that agencies can reduce these concerns by making the reasoning, delivery team and practical plan more visible. In practice, that means letting the people who will do the work own relevant parts of the discussion, turning challenge into a recommendation, and making scope, capacity and assumptions explicit.

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

For agency leaders, the implication is an operating-model one too: the team that helps win the work and the team expected to deliver it should not feel like two different agencies. Senior leadership can add judgement and credibility; the day-to-day delivery team needs to be visible and credible as well.

SUPPORTING INDUSTRY CONTEXT

This interpretation is consistent with wider 2026 client research on strategic challenge, assertiveness and discussion-led new-business conversations. Those studies are used here only as contextual support; their statistics are not reproduced in this paper.[1,2]

06 Stage 3: the pitch

01 — 02 — 03

GO FEEDBACK

The final pitch brings the proposed answer, commercial value and delivery plan into sharper comparison. Positive chemistry was common even among unsuccessful final-pitch agencies: 69% of that feedback praised it. The final-pitch analysis therefore points to the proposed answer, value and delivery as additional sources of differentiation.

Is this the strongest answer, and can we believe it will work in practice?

Strategy was the reason most often cited in unsuccessful final-pitch feedback.

What brands cited at the final pitch

CITED AS A REASON FOR THE DECISION

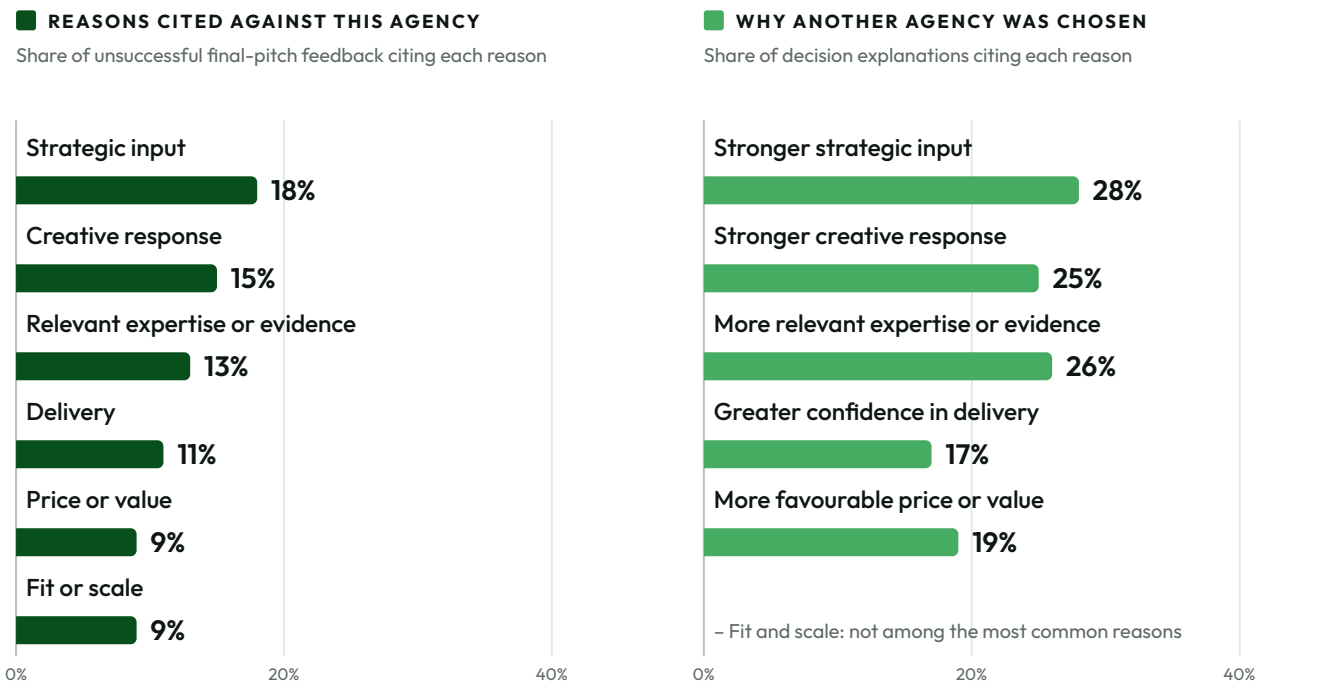


FIGURE 6 The two panels answer different questions. These are reasons cited in brand feedback, not win rates. A feedback record may contain more than one reason, so percentages do not add to 100%. Source: The GO Network brand feedback. **Base: Unsuccessful final-pitch feedback: n = 100; final-pitch decision explanations: n = 69.**

CRITICISED

31% of unsuccessful final-pitch feedback raised a concern about price or value

The final-pitch feedback also shows that value and delivery featured in appointment decisions. Expected delivery was cited in 11% of unsuccessful final-pitch feedback and in 17% of explanations for choosing another agency.

“We had to justify a £250k spend. One agency made it clear where the money would go; the other didn’t.”

BRAND FEEDBACK, EDITED FOR CLARITY

What loses

A strategy without a clear argument

DECISION REASON · CRITICISED

Strategy was the reason most often cited in unsuccessful final-pitch feedback (18%). It was also cited in 28% of explanations for choosing another agency. An unclear strategic direction was criticised in 36% of unsuccessful final-pitch feedback.

Leaving the delivery plan unclear

CRITICISED

Delivery was criticised in 34% of unsuccessful final-pitch feedback. The feedback suggests brands distinguished between confidence in the proposed direction and confidence in how it would actually be delivered.

Make the business case as clear as the work

CRITICISED

Price or value comments were not always about affordability alone. Brands also referred to clarity around cost, scope and what they would receive for the money. For agencies, that means making the cost, scope, value and trade-offs easy to understand.

What this means in practice

One appointed agency was described as clear, practical, deliverable and within budget. Our reading of that feedback is that confidence grows when scope, flexibility and financial risk are explicit.

- A strategy built on insight about this brand’s audience, not a general approach.
- Creative with a clear reason behind each idea. When creative is part of the brief, the brand needs more than an idea it likes: show what informed it, why it fits this brand and how it supports the intended outcome.
- The how, stage by stage: outputs per stage, who does what, and when.
- Costs priced to the budget and broken down so they can be compared, with fees and project spend shown separately.
- A realistic timeline on one page.
- The specialists in the room, sharing the delivery of the pitch.
- Constructive challenge. One brand chose partners who “constructively challenged our approach and proposed alternative methods”.

FOR AGENCIES

By the final pitch, the agencies still in the process have already progressed through earlier stages of the search. Focus on the strength of the answer, then make the value, trade-offs and delivery plan easy for the brand to compare and explain.

FOR BRANDS

Give every agency the same budget, the same information and the same access to your team. Ask for costs in one format, with fees and project spend separated, so that you are comparing value and not presentation.

When the final decision is close

17%

of final-pitch feedback described the decision as particularly close.

At the final pitch, 17% of feedback records described the choice between the final agencies as particularly close. We do not read a close decision as evidence that the agencies were interchangeable. Instead, the feedback is most useful when it identifies the specific difference the brand valued more.

> **“It wasn’t really a decision not to appoint them. It was a decision to appoint the other agency.”**
>
> BRAND FEEDBACK, EDITED FOR CLARITY

The comments suggest looking for the specific difference the brand valued, for example the evidence it trusted more, the requirement that was answered more clearly, or the commercial and delivery case it could explain more easily.

◇ SUPPORTING INDUSTRY CONTEXT

This reading is consistent with current advertiser guidance and wider client research on commercial transparency, evaluation and the internal pressures surrounding agency decisions. The supporting sources reinforce the interpretation; they are not used to create or adjust any GO percentage.[2,3]

07 2025 and 2026

GO FEEDBACK

Some differences appear between the 2025 and 2026 feedback. They should be treated as directional rather than as evidence of a market-wide shift.

Failure to answer the brief remained a recurring reason in unsuccessful feedback

Share of unsuccessful feedback citing failure to answer the brief as a reason

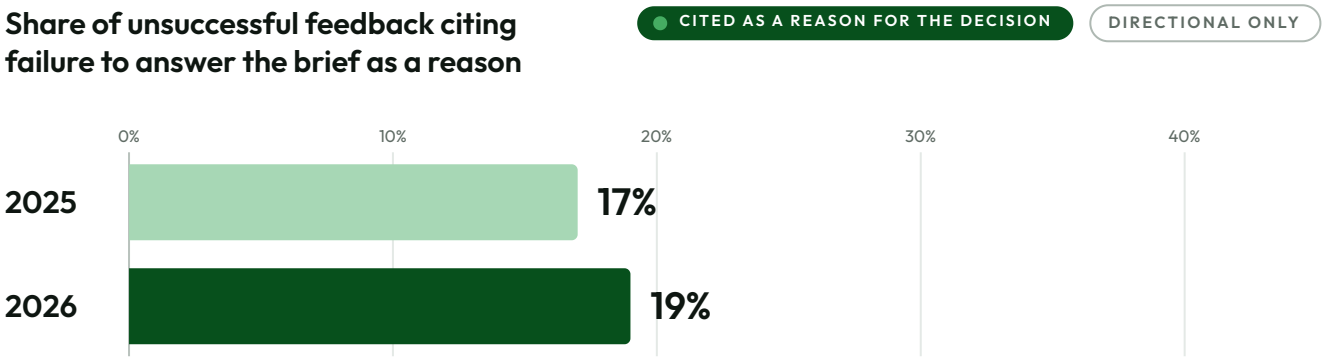


FIGURE 7 Directional only. The feedback questions changed in October 2025 and the periods are not perfectly comparable. 2025 means 1 January to 31 December 2025; 2026 means 1 January to 11 November 2026. Source: The GO Network brand feedback. **Base: 2025 n = 118; 2026 n = 126 unsuccessful feedback records.**

Failing to answer the brief, or failing to show clearly how the agency would answer it, appeared in 17% of unsuccessful feedback in 2025 and 19% in the 2026 sample. Given the small difference between the percentages and the change to the feedback questions, our reading is that the recurrence of the issue is more informative than the year-on-year movement itself.

The feedback contains very literal examples of this problem. Agencies were criticised for answering a different question, recommending activity the brand already had under way or overlooking an explicit requirement.

> "They recommended influencer activity even though we had explicitly said we were already doing it and did not want it duplicated."
>
> BRAND FEEDBACK, EDITED FOR CLARITY

> "If we had only been looking for a UK agency, we probably would have selected them."
>
> BRAND FEEDBACK, EDITED FOR CLARITY

That second brand's brief covered three markets.

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

If you think part of a brief is wrong, say so openly. Challenge can be useful, but only when it is deliberate and tied to a clear alternative.

Price or delivery timescale was cited more often in unsuccessful final-pitch feedback in the 2026 sample

Share of unsuccessful final-pitch feedback citing price or delivery timescale as a reason

CITED AS A REASON FOR THE DECISION | DIRECTIONAL ONLY

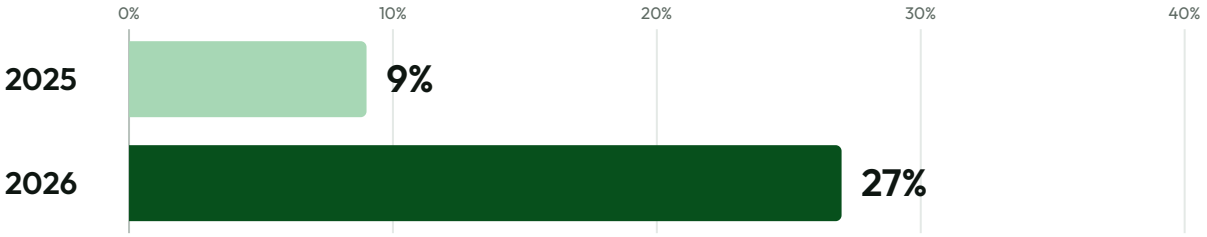


FIGURE 8 Directional only. The feedback questions changed in October 2025 and the periods are not perfectly comparable. 2025 means 1 January to 31 December 2025; 2026 means 1 January to 11 November 2026. Source: The GO Network brand feedback. **Base: 2025 n = 44; 2026 n = 56 unsuccessful final-pitch feedback records.**

Price or proposed delivery timescale was cited in 27% of unsuccessful final-pitch feedback in the 2026 sample, compared with 9% in 2025. Delivery timescale means how long the agency said it would take before the work was live, not the length of the pitch process.

The 2026 figure is based on a smaller subset of the overall feedback, and the two periods are not perfectly comparable. It should therefore be read as a signal worth investigating rather than proof that commercial considerations have become three times more important.

In one 2026 decision, a five-month implementation was the longest option on the table and was cited in the choice of another partner.

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

The practical lesson is not simply "faster wins": if your timeline is longer, explain what the extra time delivers and whether anything useful can go live sooner.

08 What to show, by discipline

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

The underlying buying questions recur; the evidence needed to answer them changes by discipline.

The feedback in this paper has not been cut by discipline, so this section is guidance rather than a ranking. For each type of search, it sets out what the agency should show, what can weaken the case and one live test a brand can use without asking for disproportionate speculative work.

WHAT TO SHOW	WHAT WEAKENS THE CASE	A LIVE TEST FOR THE BRAND
01 Creative and brand strategy		
The route from diagnosis to strategic choice to creative idea, and why it belongs to this brand.	A strategy that restates the brief, or an idea with no clear rationale.	**Ask about one route they rejected, why, and what would change their mind.**
02 Media planning and buying		
The growth logic behind the plan, with fees, media, technology and data costs shown separately.	Opaque bundles, unexplained incentives or measurement the buyer cannot test.	**Take one proposed investment: what is being bought, why, and how you would know it worked.**
03 Performance, search and e-commerce		
A business definition of success, such as margin or lead quality, with a case study that shows the starting point.	Channel metrics disconnected from business value, or forecasts that hide assumptions.	**Cut one channel budget and ask for the trade-off and what they would watch.**

◇ SUPPORTING INDUSTRY CONTEXT

Selected checks in this section were also cross-checked against current trade-body guidance for media and PR. These sources are used only as contextual support; they do not generate GO statistics or rankings.[3,4]

WHAT TO SHOW	WHAT WEAKENS THE CASE	A LIVE TEST FOR THE BRAND
04 PR and communications		
Judgement beyond coverage: what they would pursue, what they would decline and how they would measure it.	A coverage plan without a diagnosis, or measurement with no decision use.	**Describe a tempting opportunity that does not fit the brand. Ask whether they would take it.**
05 Social and influencer		
The role of social in the customer journey, and a plan for choosing creators, checking fit and handling a difficult response.	Trend-led ideas with no customer role, or creators chosen mainly for reach.	**Ask the team to assess a creator with strong reach but a question of fit.**
06 CRM and customer experience		
How one customer problem is solved across data, content, technology and teams, with the first usable output and its owner.	A joined-up promise with undefined owners, handovers or data dependencies.	**Follow one customer event through the system: where data enters, who acts and what could fail.**
07 Websites and technology		
What connects to what, who owns each part, and committed work kept separate from estimates.	A polished prototype that leaves integration, migration or support unresolved.	**Pick the riskiest integration. Ask for the fallback, the owner and the acceptance test.**

09 Fit, scale and location

GO FEEDBACK · THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

Some final-pitch feedback shows that the proposed work was not the only consideration: brands also raised questions about the shape and operating fit of the agency.

Fit and scale was cited as a reason in 9% of unsuccessful final-pitch feedback. In the feedback, fit-and-scale concerns were described in terms of pace, capacity and attention rather than agency size alone.

> **"We're really fast paced and we queried whether they could match that, as they expressed that they would like extra time on the pitch process."**
>
> BRAND FEEDBACK

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

Test how the relationship will work in practice

Agree what the relationship requires: access to specialists, response times, decision-making, cover, on-site work and coordination with other teams. Then ask each agency to show how it will meet those needs. A smaller agency should show that it has enough capacity and cover; a larger agency should show who will stay involved and how quickly decisions can move.

THREE OPERATING SITUATIONS

Lean team

Needs specialist execution.

EVIDENCE WORTH ASKING FOR

Named capacity, the inputs the agency needs from you, and a realistic response and escalation plan.

Growing business

Needs direction and delivery.

EVIDENCE WORTH ASKING FOR

Senior judgement, plus a clear plan for what happens when workload or scope changes.

Complex organisation

Needs coordination.

EVIDENCE WORTH ASKING FOR

Who decides what, how stakeholders are managed, and one line of accountability across teams.

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

Assess location against the practical requirements of the work

The question is not the postcode. It is whether the work requires people to be in the same place: access to sites or customers, on-site collaboration, local market knowledge or physical production. If it does, ask how the agency will meet that need and what it will cost. If it does not, do not assume that being nearby means the agency will work better with your team.

Test the requirement, not the postcode

Does the work require:

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Customer or site access?	**Physical production?**	**Local-market knowledge?**	**Frequent in-person collaboration?**	**Specific coverage hours?**

If yes

Ask how the agency will meet that need and what it will cost.

If no

Location itself should not become a proxy for fit.

◇ SUPPORTING INDUSTRY CONTEXT

This approach is consistent with wider client research reviewed for this edition, which suggests agency location should be treated as a practical consideration rather than a stand-alone indicator of fit. External statistics are not reproduced or included in GO percentages.[5]

FOR AGENCIES

Disclose the real shape of the team you are proposing: who is employed, who is freelance or a partner, and what happens when a key person is away.

10 For brands: running a search that gets a better answer

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

Even a strong agency response can be difficult to compare if the search process does not test the differences that matter.

The feedback analysed in this paper shows which factors brands actually cited when explaining their decisions. The practical step is to define those decision factors at the start and tell the agencies.

Set the conditions before asking for ideas

- Agree the business problem, the decision owner, the budget and the things an agency must have.
- Settle disagreements between marketing, procurement and other stakeholders before the brief goes out.
- Share how you will judge the responses, and what each stage is meant to establish.
- Give every shortlisted agency the same information and the same access to decision makers.

One brand in this feedback scored written responses against 14 scored requirements and shared the list. It could see at once which agencies had addressed the brief. Where a requirement is genuinely mandatory, label it separately from preferences that can be traded off.

Use each format for the evidence it can give

How to test the uncertainty

Name the doubt you need to resolve, then choose a proportionate way to test it.

THE UNCERTAINTY	A PROPORTIONATE TEST
Do they understand the problem?	A focused diagnosis and discussion.
Can they make the right specialist choices?	Relevant case studies and one targeted challenge.
Can this team work with ours?	A realistic working session with the people who would do the work.
Can they deliver what they promise?	Resourcing, commercial and technical checks.

FIGURE 9 These are options, not four more stages. Reuse evidence where you can, and remove any task that would not change the decision.

Finish this sentence: “The answer could change our decision because…”

If you cannot finish it, drop the task.

Give feedback an agency can act on

- Name the reason that decided it, and the evidence you saw or did not see.
- Separate a must-have that was missed from a preference where another agency was stronger.
- Describe behaviour, not personality. “The call was a presentation, and we wanted a conversation” is useful. “The chemistry was off” is not.

Specific feedback makes the process more useful for agencies and helps preserve goodwill for future searches.

Tools for agencies

TOOL 1: AGENCY QUALIFICATION GUIDE

Should we pitch, and do we have the evidence?

Use part one before you accept an introduction. Use part two before each stage. Both are built from the findings in this paper.

Use this as a leadership decision, not simply a new-business checklist. The aim is to decide where the agency genuinely has a case to make, and where senior time is better spent elsewhere.

IN THIS SECTION

Part one: five questions before you say yes 28

Part two: readiness check before each stage 29

A checklist for each stage 30

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE The tool pages can be completed in this PDF.

Tool 1

Agency qualification guide

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

Should we pitch, and do we have the evidence?

Part one: five questions before you say yes

	QUESTION	YES / NO	NOTES
1	**Can we show up to three examples that make our relevant experience clear for this brand's problem, audience, channel, budget or operating context?** WHY IT MATTERS In 48% of unsuccessful initial-review feedback, brands cited insufficiently relevant experience or evidence. The practical test is whether the connection to this brief is obvious from the examples you choose.	☐ YES ☐ NO	
2	**Can we address every requirement in the brief, and make any deliberate challenge explicit?** WHY IT MATTERS Failure to answer the brief clearly appeared in 19% of unsuccessful feedback in the 2026 sample.	☐ YES ☐ NO	
3	**Can we make the commercial case work inside the stated budget?** WHY IT MATTERS Price or value was criticised in 31% of final-pitch feedback on agencies that were not appointed.	☐ YES ☐ NO	
4	**Will the people who would do the work be in the meetings?** WHY IT MATTERS Brand feedback in this analysis included explicit comments about who attended the meeting and whether those people would actually do the work.	☐ YES ☐ NO	
5	**Do we have a point of view on this brand's problem?** WHY IT MATTERS Strategic input was the most frequently cited decision reason in unsuccessful final-pitch feedback (18%).	☐ YES ☐ NO	

Start with the requirements that cannot be compromised: capability, capacity, commercial viability and any mandatory conditions. If one cannot be met, resolve it before committing to the pitch. Then look at the strength of your evidence. Pitch when the opportunity genuinely fits the agency and the remaining gaps can realistically be closed before the next stage. This checklist is a prompt for judgement, not an automatic instruction to pitch.

Part two: readiness check before each stage

Score each proof test from 0 to 3 for the stage you are about to enter.

0	1	2	3
Not demonstrated.	Asserted, or supported only indirectly.	Relevant evidence, but incomplete.	Specific evidence, with the main assumptions tested or confirmed.

PROOF TEST AND THE QUESTION THE BRAND NEEDS ANSWERED	OUR EVIDENCE	SCORE 0 TO 3
1. Business understanding and strategic response Do we understand the problem, and can we explain what we recommend and why?		
2. Relevant expertise and evidence Have we shown credible evidence that connects to this brief?		
3. Commercial value Can the brand see what it gets for the money, and compare the trade-offs?		
4. Delivery Can we realistically deliver the scope, team, timeline and handover we are proposing?		
5. Working relationship Have the actual people shown how they listen, challenge and make decisions together?		

Treat any score of 0 or 1 as an evidence gap to address before the next stage. Do not average it away.

A checklist for each stage

INITIAL REVIEW 01

- [ ] Choose no more than three case studies, picked for their relevance to this brand's problem, audience, channel, budget or operating context.
- [ ] Follow the structure of the brief so every requirement has an answer the brand can find. Where you challenge a requirement, make the challenge deliberate and explain why.
- [ ] If your closest example is a stretch, say what carries over.

FIRST MEETING 02

- [ ] Read up on the brand's history: what it already does, and what it has tried before.
- [ ] Make the meeting about the brand's brief, not your agency. Ask good questions.
- [ ] Bring the people who would work on the account, and let them speak.
- [ ] Show a point of view.

PITCH 03

- [ ] Check every requirement in the brief has an answer you can point to.
- [ ] Build the strategy on insight about this brand's audience, and give each creative idea a reason.
- [ ] Show the how: stages, outputs per stage, who does what, and when.
- [ ] Price to the budget. Break the costs down so they can be compared, with fees and project spend shown separately.
- [ ] Put the delivery plan and timescale on one page.
- [ ] If you disagree with the brief, say so and explain why.

AFTER THE DECISION 04

- [ ] Ask for feedback, every time, and read past the compliments to the line about what the winner did.

Tools for brands

TOOL 2: BRAND DECISION WORKBOOK

Why this agency, for this work, on these terms?

The workbook helps a buying team reach a decision it can explain, internally as well as to the agencies that pitched. Use it before the shortlist is final, during evaluation and at the decision meeting. It creates a record of what mattered, what evidence was seen and what trade-off ultimately decided the appointment.

Used well, it also makes disagreement visible. Where decision-makers see the evidence differently, the discussion returns to what was actually seen rather than whose reaction is strongest.

IN THIS SECTION

The Five Proof Tests 32

How to use it, and Step 1: the decision, written down first 33

Steps 2 to 5: score the evidence and record the decision 34

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE The tool pages can be completed in this PDF.

Tool 2

Brand decision workbook

THE GO NETWORK GUIDANCE

Why this agency, for this work, on these terms?

The Five Proof Tests

Each test is a question that needs an evidenced answer.



FIGURE 10 The five tests do not carry universal weights and there is no automatic pass mark.

FOR BRANDS

The five tests do not need equal weight. Set the priorities to suit the work, and write down why. The workbook has no pass mark and no automatic winner. Its job is to help you reach a decision you can explain to your business and to the agencies that pitched.

How to use it

1 **Write down the decision first.** The outcome you need, the budget, the owner and the requirements an agency must meet. A missed must-have cannot be made up for by high scores elsewhere.

2 Agree what evidence would satisfy each test before you see any response.

3 Score the evidence, not the presentation. Use the same 0 to 3 scale as the agency guide.

4 **Score separately, then compare.** Where panel members disagree, go back to the evidence. Do not average the scores.

5 **Record the decision.** Appoint, resolve a named gap, or do not appoint, with the trade-off that decided it.

6 Turn the record into feedback. For each agency: the strength, the reason that influenced the decision, and the evidence that was missing.

STEP 1 · THE DECISION, WRITTEN DOWN FIRST — WORKBOOK

The outcome we need	
Budget	
Decision owner	
Requirements an agency must meet A missed must-have cannot be made up for by high scores elsewhere.	
Priorities for this work, and why The five tests do not need equal weight.	

Agency _____ **Scored by** _____

0 Not demonstrated.	**1** Asserted, or supported only indirectly.	**2** Relevant evidence, but incomplete.	**3** Specific evidence, with the main assumptions tested or confirmed.

PROOF TEST	EVIDENCE WE SAW	SCORE	RESERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS
1. Business understanding and strategic response Have they understood our problem and made a clear recommendation?			
2. Relevant expertise and evidence Have the relevant people shown expertise and evidence that connect to this work?			
3. Commercial value Can we understand the value, costs, measurement and trade-offs?			
4. Delivery Are the scope, capacity, dependencies, timeline and handover realistic?			
5. Working relationship Have we seen how the actual teams listen, challenge and make decisions together?			

The decision record creates a simple audit trail of the evidence, reservations and trade-off that led to the appointment.

Decision ◯ **Appoint** ◯ **Resolve a named gap** ◯ **Do not appoint**

The trade-off that decided it

_____

Feedback for the agency

The strength, the reason that influenced the decision, and the evidence that was missing.

_____

13 Method

What was analysed, how it was coded and how to interpret the figures.

Source	Brand feedback gathered by The GO Network after each stage of an agency search, by form, email and call.
What was analysed	During the period, The GO Network managed 520 agency searches. This analysis uses the 411 feedback records available for coding, relating to 207 brands and 165 agencies. **A feedback record is not equivalent to a search: one search can generate feedback on several agencies and at several stages.**
Period	1 January 2025 to 11 November 2026. Earlier records are not included in the current 2025-26 coded analysis. Historical GO evidence used elsewhere in the paper is identified separately.
Coding	Each feedback record was reviewed against the same themes: the brief, relevance, tailoring, strategy, creative, delivery, team, chemistry, price, timing, fit and scale, challenge and process. These are The GO Network's structured reading of free text, not categories selected by the brands. **A record may contain more than one theme or more than one reason influencing the outcome, so percentages across themes do not necessarily total 100%.**
Stages	The initial review covers credentials, agency profile and case study review. First meetings were recorded in the source material as chemistry or introduction calls and were usually one-hour video calls. Final pitches were usually held in person. **Stage-level percentages use only the feedback records from that stage.**
Years	For year comparisons, 2025 means 1 January to 31 December 2025. The 2026 period means 1 January to 11 November 2026.

A change to the questions	The feedback questions changed in October 2025, which may affect comparisons between the two periods. **Year-on-year figures should therefore be read as directional signals within this sample, not as definitive market-wide trends.**
Names	No brand or agency is named. Quotes are lightly edited for spelling and to remove names. Where a quote has been tightened for clarity or paraphrased, its label says so.
Guidance pages	Sections 08 to 12 contain The GO Network guidance alongside selected findings from the analysis. **Guidance is identified separately and should not be read as a statistically validated selection rule.**
Close decisions	Feedback was separately flagged where the brand explicitly described the choice as a close call or a difficult decision between agencies. This flag is separate from the thematic coding above.
Price or delivery timescale	For the year comparison, price and timing are combined into a single "price or delivery timescale" measure. **A record is counted once if price, timing or both were cited.**
Decision reasons	Where a brand explicitly stated why an agency was selected or rejected, each stated factor is recorded as a decision reason. Praise and criticism are recorded separately. **A single explanation can contain more than one decision reason, so these percentages may add to more than 100%.**
Terminology	A "feedback record" is one brand's feedback on one agency at one stage of a search. An agency may therefore appear in more than one record. "Appointment decision" refers only to the brand's final choice of agency. **Several feedback records can relate to the same search or appointment, so record counts should not be read as counts of distinct decisions.**

EARLIER GO EVIDENCE

Historical GO context

Selected historical comparisons use a separate GO analysis based on 128 chemistry-call feedback forms and 132 final-pitch forms. **The underlying records do not overlap with the current coded sample.** That analysis was first published in November 2024 and forms the earlier edition of The GO Network's biennial research into agency pitch-process feedback. It was subsequently republished in September 2025.

SUPPORTING INDUSTRY CONTEXT

Supporting sources cited for consistency

External research and industry guidance are used only to corroborate or contextualise themes identified in GO evidence. Their statistics are not reproduced or included in GO percentages.

[1] **IPA / Tracksuit**. Bridging the gap: Redefining the value of agencies. 8 July 2026.

[2] **Design Business Association / Up to the Light**. Key take-aways from What Clients Think 2026. 22 April 2026.

[3] **ISBA**. Proprietary media guidance for advertisers. 18 February 2026.

[4] **PRCA**. Pitch Forward research announcement. 25 October 2024; historical process context.

[5] **Up to the Light / Design Business Association**. What Clients Think 2024. March 2024; historical UK and international client interviews.

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