

MediaCom's year of extremes

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Recovering from a bad 2016 and flourishing in the aftermath.

Earlier this month, we heard the great news that MediaCom has been named [Adweek's Global Media Agency of the Year](#). That in itself is a huge achievement and something we're immensely proud of. What makes it even sweeter is that it comes on the back of three Agency Network of the Year wins with [Campaign](#), the [2017 Festival of Media Global Awards](#) and [2017 M&M Awards](#), making us the first agency to hold four Global Agency of the Year crowns at once.

For our teams across the world, the last couple of years have been exciting and filled with great work, and it's brilliant to see that recognised. This is especially true when we consider how differently it could have gone. 2016 was arguably the toughest year of my career and

certainly, it was the most challenging year in MediaCom's history.

Why? Because the nightmare scenario for any business happened to us – we lost our biggest client.

Volkswagen was our biggest account financially and had been our long-term flagship; a client we had worked with for 15 years and had delivered some of our best work for.

Before we won the VW business, we hadn't fully hit our stride. Winning VW was an agency-defining moment.

Anyone in business will have experienced that to some degree. The moment of "arrival" where you not only experience a buzz within the business but, externally, you are viewed differently. It's the moment when your business moves to a different level.

Suddenly, MediaCom was on the big pitch lists that are the lifeblood of any business. The confidence we felt in winning VW saw us create some of our best work and that set off a chain of wins which transformed us into one of the world's biggest agencies.

All good things must come to an end

The VW account was a symbol of success. And I can tell you that losing it was a blow like no other.

For us as a business, the impact was felt immediately. From the reputational impact to the fact that over half of our staff worked on the account. It was a hugely challenging and admittedly stressful time for everyone in the business at all levels.

As such, 2017 looked like it would be a rough year.

For the board, our main challenges and fears were focused on retaining staff, protecting our reputation to ensure no clients or prospects worried about our business, and of course, filling the financial and creative gap left when the account disappeared.

While I wasn't worried about MediaCom's survival, I knew we had an uphill task ahead and it would be remiss of me to claim that wasn't daunting.

Recovery and revival

Flash-forward to 2018 and MediaCom can look back on one of the best years we've ever had.

2017 saw us win a stream of clients including Peugeot-Citroen owner PSA Group, global retail group Walgreens Boots Alliance which counts Boots, Walgreens and Duane Reade amongst its brands, Whole Foods and Uniqlo in the US and FAW Group, China's biggest automotive company.

We're also the first media agency ever to have been named Agency of the Year in all major industry awards ceremonies.

Coming off the back of a rough 2016, the year we've had is a testament to the fact that in business, it's always darkest before the dawn.

When I look back at what has helped us thrive and turned what could have been our worst year into our best, there are three areas I truly believe were vital in turning things around:

1. **We put our people first** – retention never falls off our boardroom agenda. If my 30+ years in business have taught me anything, it is that fair pay is just one part of the reason employees stay with an agency – people genuinely need to enjoy what they do, feel supported in their endeavours and know they have real career opportunities available to them.

For us, this wasn't just about making sure the teams working on VW were safe financially, it was about making sure they felt engaged and motivated and didn't leave. Working with any major client or customer, you're involved in some of the most creative and high-profile

work. If that is taken away, we need to make sure that passion stays within the team.

So we acted – firstly we provided new roles in different teams for those high performers who had been working on VW, some of those new opportunities took our people to new markets to live and work. Next, we invested in a host of development opportunities for all levels of experience to ensure the people we moved had access to technical skill and management training programs. We also established more support networks focussing on improving diversity, inclusion and mindfulness. The goal was to ensure that whatever business challenges had happened, or lay ahead, employees felt MediaCom was a place they could continue to grow and have fun at the same time.

2. We didn't cut back, but invested in staying ahead of our clients' needs – when you have a bad year, it is tempting to retrench, cut back and ride out a difficult year. It's a natural, human reaction – protect what you have.

But the media is not an industry where you can rest. Digital continues to have a huge impact on the way content is created, targeted, accessed, shared and engaged with. The agency model is evolving with our competitor landscape shifting to include the likes of Accenture and other business consultancies.

In short, while the human instinct may have been to retrench, the reality was that we couldn't. And ultimately, we didn't want to.

Instead, we invested in new services, divisions and teams to stay relevant to brands' ever-changing needs. These included launching Theobalds Road Consulting which offers business consultancy services to clients across the globe, and BLINK Innovation, an internal division to help brands work with start-ups.

These new services and divisions are designed to meet the needs of the modern market now and in the future. And they're already having an impact – we've brought more brilliant people on board and they are making a difference to our clients and our business.

3. We kept faith in the strategy – when we re-pitched to VW, we used a strategy called

Systems Planning. This takes a holistic view of a brand's entire communications system – every possible touchpoint with the consumer, rather than optimising each individual channel. We built our pitch around it, but ultimately the model didn't land with VW.

We had invested a lot of time, money and talent developing this new way of working, and it had failed the big test. There was a lot of soul-searching. Were we wrong? Did we need to dump Systems Planning and look for a new approach?

It was at this point that we had to be brave and stand behind our own knowledge and methods. We know it's the right model for the right brands and if they believed in it, it would pay dividends for them. So we stuck to our guns and kept the faith.

We've since gone on to win several major new clients based on Systems Planning. It's a testament to the original concept, the team and our belief in it. It's also a major reason why 2017 was our best year as a business.

As we move further into 2018, the mood is very different. But it's come after a lot of hard work and some brave decision-making from our global and local teams.

The point is that business is full of ups and downs. But to any company in any sector going through what we have been through, my advice is to focus on your people, believe that you know what you are doing and understand that if you focus on the right things, your fortunes will absolutely turn around.

[See the original blog post on LinkedIn Pulse, published on 7 March 2018.](#)

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