

In Praise of Virtual Partnerships

By banding together in loose federations, creative professionals can tackle bigger jobs, compete with the Big Boys, and market more effectively.

Written by Eric J. Adams on January 4, 2001

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Bend, Oregon, will never make the *Top 10* list of most prestigious media and communication cities in the country. It probably will never make the *Top 100* list for that matter. But that hasn't stopped Harold Olaf Cecil from creating a thriving copywriting and media-relations firm -- AdHOC -- from his home office in this small city 160 miles southeast of Portland.

One of Cecil's secret weapons is his electronic Rolodex filled with the names and numbers of graphic designers, photographers, Web developers, video producers, and other creative professionals like himself who operate one-person companies free from the confines of a traditional workplace. Cecil is one of a growing number of creative professionals who are thriving in part by leaning on other self-employed professionals with different, complementary skills.

"I'm basically a writer with lots of connections," said Cecil. "Essentially, as soon as I get a job, I enlist the aid of a graphic designer or other professional and we pool our services."

Strength in Numbers

The informal arrangement has a number of benefits for Cecil and the other professionals in his network. AdHOC competes with ad agencies and public relations firms touting complete marketing, sales, and creative forces, and his virtual network empowers him to consider a wide and diverse range of projects.

"Networking allows me to tackle larger jobs than I could have had on my own." said Cecil. "And we're able to provide the same -- I think even better -- levels of service than traditional agencies at a lower cost," said Cecil.

To keep the bookkeeping headaches at a minimum, Cecil and his virtual partners usually bill separately, unless the client insists otherwise. "The idea is to keep things as uncomplicated as possible. I'm a one-person operation and I don't want to be on the hook financially for a big piece of the job. Neither do the people I work with."

Spreading the World

Cecil's virtual federation also ends up acting as a cooperative marketing system.

"I have graphic-designer and Web-developer friends who get jobs that need content creation, and they call me. We don't pay each other finders fees, but it's like having a sales force out there working for you all the time," said Cecil, who like many creative professionals is in the business of marketing but hates to spend time marketing for himself.

"It's self replicating in many ways. Recently I got a job from a Web developer to write some copy and the client hired me to be [its] advertising agency, which allowed me to hire a graphic designer."

Additionally, Cecil is never stuck working with the same creative team if they find they don't share a vision. And he is free to choose his co-conspirators based on the needs of the job.

"A lot of this work boils down to personalities. I had one job in which the client and the graphic designer just didn't

communicate very well. This put me in the unfavorable position of having to tell the designer to leave the job. But I was able to keep the client and work with the designer again elsewhere," said Cecil.

Two Way Street

Virtual partnerships have benefits for clients, too, a point that freelance creative professionals often fail to articulate when bidding for jobs, according to Cecil.

"Traditional agencies have all sorts of layers that drive up the cost of doing business. Independent professionals can offer the same level of expertise without having to bill for all the overhead," said Cecil.

Clients also have greater access to the people doing the work when they hire virtual teams. "In traditional advertising, the account manager becomes sort of a barrier between the client and the creative team on the job. It's an arrangement that works on some levels, but I think it creates a filter between client and the creative team, and ideas and thoughts get lost in the translation."

Keeping in Touch

But for Cecil, the greatest benefit of virtual partnerships comes from the simple opportunity of collaborating with others creatively.

"The Internet is a great way to create new business opportunities outside of your region, but sometimes you start thinking that you're the only person working alone, and that can get tiresome. The act of collaboration forces me to stretch in different directions."

That's why Cecil is a big proponent of virtual teams and urges other creative types to follow suit. He suggests that solo practitioners get involved with local ad clubs, pay attention to what is going on in the local business community, and use the Internet to contact compatriots in the creative game.

"Those of us on the creative side are on the same side, and it's in our best interest to keep each other's interest in mind," Cecil reminds us.

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