

FEATURES

'I made mistakes': Red Agency's James Wright on how to run an award-winning agency

After winning Mumbrella's PR Agency of the Year award two years running, Red Agency's CEO James Wright speaks out about the evolution of the agency, growing pains, pitching secrets and how to fight the mould of traditional PR.

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by **ABIGAIL DAWSON**

Having a successful PR agency in today's media and advertising landscape means learning from your mistakes, hiring the right people and not trying to please everyone, Red Agency's CEO James Wright says.

For Wright, winning Mumbrella's PR Agency of the Year for the second consecutive year and building the foundations for an award-winning agency all started with "hiring and retaining the right people".

"You can't do it on your own... it's about finding the right people, with the right skill set, with most importantly the right attitude that can really deliver on the strategy you develop."

"You can have the best strategy in the world, but if you don't have the right people around you to deliver it, it's going to be pointless," Red Agency's CEO of seven years says.

In an era where PR includes social, creative, influencers, media relations, publicity and more, Wright says he learnt a great deal from being a young managing director at Grayling in London.

"I made mistakes, the key is you learn from it and want to create an agency where things happen that people don't get upset about.

"It is almost like you learn how not to do things, and if you've got the smarts and the common sense you learn how to do it."

"There's a real strength in telling people and talking to people about areas of weakness and delivering it as criticism rather than feedback, because if you've got the right attitude you will take criticism in the right way and you will turn that into a strength."

Wright tells Mumbrella there have definitely been learning curves throughout the hiring process because, with such a large agency, things are never going to be perfect.

"You back your experience and instinct on people, and it's largely worked out very well for us."



Wright joined Red Agency in 2011

Red Agency's winning award entry for PR Agency of the Year



Red Agency at Mumbrella Awards earlier in the year

Despite this being the first step to building a multi-award winning agency, Wright says the industry is suffering from “an acutely huge talent shortage”.

“This is what makes keeping staff really important”, the CEO of Red Agency adds.

“We are an integrated, earned, experience and social agency, it’s about hiring people from non-traditional PR backgrounds, who are perhaps coming at things from a complete different point of view, it’s a challenge.”

Wright, who was previously the group chief operating officer at Havas, said if agencies are going to make mistakes with hiring, “fail fast”.

“Arrive at that conclusion quickly because we can’t carry passengers in this game,” the agency boss says in regards to hiring talent who may not be the right fit for an agency.

The pitching cycle is another hurdle the PR industry is currently facing, but is nevertheless a critical part of maintaining a thriving, healthy agency and attracting desirable talent.

Over the Mumbrella Awards judging period, Red Agency managed to secure new clients including Toyota, Vivid, Neoen, Bio-Oil, and Booking.com.

The PR firm also launched a new experiential agency, Village Blvd, during the 12 month judging period.

Since then, the agency has gone on to win Avis Budget Group, South Australian Tourism Commission, TrustedHousesitters.com, Chemist King, Pharmasave, Cordon Bleu and Taxi Council Queensland.

Recently promoted as the global chairman of Havas PR Collective and the CEO of Havas PR for North America, Wright says deciding on what business the agency pitches for comes down to “fun, fame or fortune”.

Wright says the business needs to be at least two out of the three to maintain a strong agency culture and make pitching for the account worthwhile.

“Is it going to be a really fun account work on, is it an account that’s potentially going to make you famous and do work that people are really going to be jealous of? Or is it a fortune account, an account that’s worth a lot of money and you’re actually going to pay the bills and pay the salaries?”

Wright says Red Agency – whose clients include Toyota, Avis Budget Group, Coca-Cola and Qatar – makes pitch decisions based on experience, capability and whether or not the brand is the right fit for the agency. Sometimes, however, you have to take a punt, says the agency boss.

“We have gone after work as a bit of a dark horse before, where we didn’t think we actually had the experience and credentials to do it, but actually, we felt like the client had come to us because they wanted a different refreshing kind of approach to their work.”



Red Agency winning PR agency of the year at Mumbrella’s CommsCon in 2017

Wright did warn that in the industry the word does get out on who the more difficult clients are, which helps the agency make decisions on what business it pitches for.

“It’s a small market and word gets around on clients that can be... not necessarily difficult, but bureaucratic and very frustrating. That’s where we have to take a view on what’s the value of this business and will it be worthwhile versus the potential frustration that will come with the team working on this business.”

Wright says the agency has managed to hold a strong client portfolio over the seven years and avoid falling victim to the vicious pitch cycle in PR because of the different Red Agency teams across Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

“We have a diverse client portfolio across three different quite distinct markets,” the agency boss says. “The different teams will play to their own strengths.”

Reflecting on how the agency managed to win Mumbrella’s CommsCon Large PR Agency of the Year three years in a row as well as continuing to add new clients to its roster, Wright notes: “We’ve not come and gone, we’ve stayed there”.

Being a constantly high performing agency isn’t always easy, the CEO says, noting agencies really need the “appetite” to work hard.

“You’ve got to want to have the appetite to come in every day and be a better version of the agency you were the day before, and it’s a constant cycle of improvement.”

Being a well-known agency is an inevitable precursor to scrutiny, however Wright argues it is better people have an opinion about the agency than no opinion at all.

“I’d rather people at least felt that we stand for something when we’re not an agency for every person and not for every business, nor would we want to be, because if you want to be all things to all people you’re never going to be a success.”

Concluding on the agency’s journey to success, the CEO says: “I don’t think there is any silver bullet to any of this. It’s really just trying to do things the right way. Trying to be a better version of the agency each and every day.”

Abigail Dawson

Abigail Dawson is a reporter at Mumbrella mainly covering the creative and PR space. Abigail graduated from RMIT University where she completed a Bachelor of Communications (Journalism) majoring in politics, economics and businesses. She has interned at Mamamia and completed work experience at 3AW and Channel 10.
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