

Global network vs independence - does size really matter?

 By [Kevin Welman](#)

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I worked for a corporate network agency for over 20 years, and now for a small independent agency for precisely two days - so I am clearly an expert on these matters.



Kevin Welman

Nonetheless, I've been thinking about large multinational agencies versus small, more intimate, independent agencies. But for the first time I'm thinking about the advantages of both from a client's point of view (not mine).

While I was at FleishmanHillard I wanted to lead a large agency, and we grew into a large agency (around 80 people). I wanted to work for the best agency in the country and I believe FH is the best agency in SA, if not the continent.

But there was always one aspect that intrigued me... when we won a pitch or were awarded new business, the client ALWAYS said they want to work with the team they've met because "we buy into those guys".

So despite FH being global and diversified, we won business because of the group of people in the room. Maybe reputation gets you into the room but the depth of talent in the room gets the client's cheque book out.

That said, there are definitely advantages to working with both network and independent agencies.

The obvious first thought is the global depth of talent in a multi-national agency. There is certainly best practice, learning, depth of client base, global industry experts, and so on. But (post-pitch) does the client actually see this? Is the global expert on consumer behaviour really going to 'dial into a call every two weeks'?

Some get it right but it's really difficult, particularly when you are operating off a weaker currency.

On the other hand, top people at small agencies are as connected – they have to be. Most have cultivated global networks of industry thought leaders over the years, and they interact with these experts regularly in the course of their work.

A multi-national agency often attracts talent as it is able to offer security and benefits. A big agency will also attract the best interns. I remember hundreds of CVs arriving when FH advertised its internship programme. Independent agencies don't have internship programmes. They just have work that needs to get done.

On the flip-side, here are a few advantages that clients working with small agencies can count on:

1. A small agency is independent – clients get what they pay for. There is no big 'engine' with offices in London, Hong Kong and New York that needs to be paid for. So the client only pays for the resources that are drawn on locally, and the local 'rent'.
2. Your work comes first – when a small agency has won a client's work, it is proud to have won that work – and can focus exclusively on it. No global work or multi-office project is likely to push that work out.
3. A small agency is owner-operated – I believe clients want to be challengers; they want brave consultants who will put their ... on the block. Someone who is brave enough to start a business is more likely to have this edge.

After two days these are my thoughts ...

We don't yet enjoy a big client base. I haven't yet enjoyed great victories or suffered great set-backs as an entrepreneur, so this might all be premature. But it gets me out of bed in the morning.

As an 'expert', my conclusion is that it first comes down to the chemistry and magic between the people in the room. And then to the knowledge, skills and dedication that ensure the delivery of the promised product.

ABOUT KEVIN WELMAN

Kevin is a co-founder and director of ByDesign Communications, with over twenty years' experience in corporate communication strategy, media strategy, social media strategy and crisis counselling...

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