

Culture of trust and niche tech focus sees DUO grow 30% year on year

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CEO Judith Middleton unpacks how PR and marketing have evolved and how DUO has created a culture of deep trust.



A culture of trust and innovation are behind DUO Marketing + Communications' superb 30% growth in 2022, despite an economy facing a host of different headwinds, says founder and CEO Judith Middleton, who acknowledges that DUO is also reaping the rewards of serving the technology and telecommunications industry exclusively.

"A culture of trust is an anomaly in our industry," says Middleton. "And so we have consciously nurtured this for a number of years and it is paying dividends now, not just in revenue growing solidly by 30% year on year, but also in the retention and attraction of talented staff."

She says the key to building this trust is by building an environment where each person works to their strengths, appreciating that inter-dependability, across levels of experience, is crucial to deliver excellent client service. "What you find is that over the years this dependency and investment in core

competencies has created an environment where everyone trusts the next person to a point where they are not afraid to be vulnerable. This means there's real collaboration and perseverance to find the best solutions for each challenge and this positively affects outcomes both for the client and the agency."

Middleton says that the bulk of the agency's growth has come from growing the existing client pool, as opposed to new client signings. "Times are tougher now, however there was a notable spike in requests for proposals towards the end of the year and we have subsequently signed two new retainer clients in January. However, what really excites me is the growth of our existing book – not because it demonstrates 'upselling' for upselling's sake, but it is a direct result of an important strategic digital shift we embarked on a few years ago," she explains.

Middleton says that in an environment where budgets are under review, clients want to see real, measurable value and return on investment. "We could see this shift happening long before the pandemic and so we invested heavily in our digital capabilities. To give you an idea of how long ago this started, we advertised for our first SEO specialist 11 years ago. This ongoing investment means we can execute, then measure and report on real, tangible value for clients. This combined with our industry knowledge has been a winning recipe."

DUO's niche focus on technology and innovation resonates with our clients, she says, and they are often taken aback by the agency's level of industry knowledge and understanding, which catapults DUO from being a provider to a strategic business partner. "We take on a larger brand role at companies, taking full accountability for measurable results. We have understood for many years that it's no longer just about PR or marketing but overall brand elevation and ultimately sales.

"The goal of PR is publicity and the goal of marketing is lead generation. Our job lies in marrying the two to become more effective in our mandate. When you're responsible for the full brand job, you can iterate the strategy depending on the real-time tempo of sales: do we need more leads or is it the right time to work on brand equity? We know which levers to push and pull to achieve those goals and then report on them effectively. It's all about unlocking commercial value for clients."

Middleton says that the current growth phase for the agency started during the pandemic. "Rather than being simply about

timing and a surging tech space, it's been a case of preparing for the opportunity. We have been preparing for many years to be ready when the opportunity comes, and here we are today in this very fortunate position."

When asked to look back over the past few years and choose what stands out the most in terms of the team, Middleton says without hesitation that it is the personal bond between employees, something she says can't be contrived. Employees, she said, need to feel like their employer really has their back and will protect them from abuse at all costs. We have a well trained tribe of committed individuals who raise their hands when individuals are under strain, taking unnecessary abuse from clients or even working long hours. We have a deep commitment to protecting our team from the systemic abuse in the industry where victims often become the perpetrators as they rise through the ranks. We have a zero tolerance policy against any form of abuse at DUO and we have strict policies and procedures in place to prevent this.

"We have regular get-togethers, sometimes they're productive work meetings and at other times they're fun. This, along with the inter-dependency in the agency, means people have become genuinely close despite geographic challenges. Besides loyalty to the business, it pushes creativity, collaboration and skills sharing up a few notches."

"One of the side-effects of growth is the need to hire new talent. As the world has evolved, the ideal employee must have deep commercial expertise and the willingness to become uncomfortable learning new skills. Salary expectations and real-world commercial nous are sometimes out of sync, but that being said, every now and then you stumble across a gem. We are blessed to have staff who choose us"

When pressed about the future of PR and marketing, Middleton made her point abundantly clear: "Stop thinking in self-contained silos. These functions married some time ago and agencies at the leading edge are already talking about the kids."

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