

Tips on starting a creative agency from one of the UK's fastest growing video production companies

This is not some easy to follow cheat code of how to set up a successful creative agency. There are no hacks, no viral engines and certainly no “Ten Rules for Success”. If you want these, head to reddit or the business pages of the Daily Mail, I've heard they have plenty to say. Instead, this is a collection of our key moments and learnings from the last four years as we've set up one of the fastest growing video production companies in London.

I want to share stories from both sides of the agency coin. On one side you have business development, strategy and delivery and on the other side you have the creative. In this blog you will hear from both of us to see the line that must be tread to grow quickly whilst delivering to a creative standard that doesn't falter.

1. This is going to be really hard!! In our studio emblazoned on the wall is the following quote “without hassle, there is no joy”. This may sound weird but what it's trying to say is that without the hard bits, there is no

success and certainly no journey. This is something we've found as we've muddled through the creative journeys from our amoebic creative beginnings to... well, what I'd describe as an early stage creative agency dragging itself out of the primordial soup and on to the crowded shores or 'the market'. Anyway, here we are, and boy does the air smell good. As you look forward at your own journey ahead you should look at the hard bits not as barriers but as the bits that are stopping everyone else from getting somewhere. Whether it's finance, organisation, creative ability, networking, digital and social or growth, if you can see these things as core pillars to learn, then with time, you will get there.

2. What's all the fuss about? The part of going from nothing to something is hard. What I mean by this is the leap of going from nothing, to a company that can support the personnel capable of actually delivering the thing you do. This may sound like a low bar but let's do some quick math. If you need to at least a producer (someone to do all the business and organisation) and a creative (someone to film, edit and deliver) then you are going to need - even just paying the London living wage - to pay at least £3,500 a month to be able to keep two humans alive and pay the basic costs of running the business. This doesn't take into account the equipment purchase or investment in yourselves to learn and develop a portfolio. The average price of a low end cheap film is around about £3,500. But to deliver and get this work you are going to have to spend money and time. So, for argument's sake let's say you need to be earning around one and a half of these jobs, every month, before you take the leap to full time. Now... how the fuck do you do that?
3. Beg borrow and steel. There is an immediate and very high bar in setting up a video production company. You need a camera and a laptop before the game has even started. Today you could actually get away with the new iPhone (I mean seriously that thing is a beast) but back 4 years ago you needed something that had a bit of weight to it. If you were lowballing I think you could probably get away with a £1,000 camera and a laptop with a similar price but really you are going to need a bit more and do your research on what camera is right for you. We took out a loan from a family member to be able to afford the camera. I also sold my photography camera to put money towards a laptop. If it wasn't for that, we'd have had to save for about 6 months before pushing forward.
4. The joys of free work. So you have a camera, the next step in the journey is to build a portfolio. This is key. Don't expect people to pay you for stuff when you have nothing to show. They feel they will be a) wasting their money and even worse b) wasting their time. For the first 2 years of the company we were working other jobs. We'd work on the weekends and evenings at the company and slowly build from there. We filmed a lot. We filmed our friends at the beach. We filmed events for free. We filmed a wedding (Jeez... never again) and we filmed projects that we cared about. The thing about free work is it has this triple multiplier effect; it build your

portfolio, it builds reputation, and can lead to more work through referral. We still today do as much free work as we can. If there is space in our diary we gift it to a charity or project we believe in to make something cool.

5. How to get free work! Ok so this was weird. When we first set out we'd offer people free work and we'd often get turned down. I mean really, how demoralising can things get. The psychology that we only learnt later is as follows. If something is being offered for free you immediately feel like you are the one offering the value. Therefore you see the thing being offered as valueless or worse, an inconvenience. We discovered a secret cure. Instead of offering free work, approach people to be a part of a project instead. Let's create an example of a sustainable coffee company in Bristol, instead of offering free work, try this: "hey, we're creating a series on Bristol's most sustainable SME's and wanted to see if you'd be interested in being a part of it?" this immediately gives them a sense that the offer has a deadline and that the space will be taken and thus has value.
6. Pick a vertical. A what? Yes you heard me, a vertical. Now this is a phrase you don't often hear in the creative world as it's much more of a tech start up approach. A vertical is effectively a niche, or a sector of your industry. For example, one vertical could be wildlife documentaries, or another could be corporate talking heads. They are both films but they are specific and one can become a master independently in each of them without being a master in the other. One of the things that is important to remember is your clients will always shop around and there will always be a bigger, cheaper, more flashy, more convenient option just around the corner. BUT, if you are THE people in your area that deliver a certain type of thing, then you are far more likely to be picked for that thing. We decided that we wanted to bring the style and feel of documentaries to the world of ads and corporate. We coined the term 'Documercial'. This cinematic and filmic feel is something we love to do. As an example, only three years into our journey AirBnB came to Cornwall to explore making a series of short documentaries/ads about people who use their service. They shopped around and we were the only company really focusing on that. So... they picked us and we've now been able to leapfrog to being a company that's worked with AirBnB". Now, if we had a mix of talking heads, event films and a single doc... do you think they would have picked us or would they have gone with the people they first clicked on? Anyway, feel free to make as much content as you please in all different directions but if you stick to a vertical you will climb the ladder much quicker. And then once you are at the top, you can umbrella yourself out. This is exactly what we've done. We were a documentary/documercial studio, we now do a bit of everything.
7. Screw the brief, I'm throwing the kitchen sink at this! Yep you heard me... screw the client, we're making a movie. I'm kidding obviously but there is

a serious angle to this. If you always deliver exactly what the client wants and do it in the cheapest, most straightforward way then you will never ever build a brand that punches above its weight. Think about it. If someone pays you £4,000 to make a film, and you make a film that looks like the client paid £4,000 for... the client will be ever so happy. But how on earth will you get paid £5,000 or even £10,000 or even £100,000 (Ok i'll calm down... but those jobs are out there). EVERY project is your next big portfolio piece. This is a thing we live by and I'd say it's one of the most important things you can do. If it's a talking head, short event film, promo, crowdfunder film, or anything, focus less on the profit and more on the final asset. After all if they are spending £4,000 on a film, they are in essence also paying that much money to give you an asset that you can flaunt and own. Double down where you can and make things that you are proud of.

8. If you build it... they won't come. Just because you've made great films it doesn't mean you will be a successful filmmaker. I'll break some bad news to you. There are plenty of filmmakers out there and a lot of them are much better than we are and then you are. Most people won't search for hours to find the person or company they are going to work with. You need a way of finding them first or being so visible that you are the only option. You need a delivery channel. How are you going to market yourself? Now, the common mistake here is that people segregate equally across all channels, for example they will spend 25% of their time doing the website, 25% of the time outreaching on social media, 25% of their time doing SEO, and 25% of their time networking. Here's the thing... if I'm spending 50% of my time on something your's spending 25% of your time on i'm immediately doubling down on you, so why work so hard to be third or second best just so you can feel safe that you've ticked the boxes? I'd recommend picking one, maybe two angles, and really nailing it. We did it with search and we've become the most visible video production company in the UK (on google that is). It's something I spend half of EVERY day on and it's a real ball ache. But here's the thing, it works and it works well. As another example our main competition in The South West of the UK almost exclusively gets work through going to every single networking event that they can, from local chamber events to bespoke events with charities, you name it, they do it. If you become the leader in a space, whether it's social, paid ads, networking events, you name it, you will much sooner test whether that angle is worth pursuing or better, you will quicker own the space.
9. Ubuntu. They say your first hire is the single most important decision you can make in a startup. If it's bad, it could derail the entire company. If it's great, you take the company to a completely new height. Now, we've taken the long road on this. Instead of hiring early and making money from paying employees a constant lower wage, we instead pay freelancers, higher rates, to come in and cover work for us. Why? Well,

- firstly it keeps us agile when times are lean. But more importantly, these people would do anything for us and we would for them. There's a real sense of comradeship in the creative world and independence is the most important asset you can trade. If you are paying someone well and giving them independence and the ability to flourish they will without fail do everything they can to do a good job. We are transparent about budgets and we speak openly about what we can afford to pay and what we can't. We've had creatives cover work for free at points when our backs have been against the wall. This is obviously paid forward when the next big job comes in. Anyway, we have a clear income stream and we know exactly what we pay to our creatives which means, if we wanted, we can now justify hiring with the peace of mind that our cashflow can cover it.
10. Don't work from home. This took us three years to realise. Working from home sucks. 'But what about the expensive fees for a space?' I hear you cry! Well what if the space itself was one of your biggest opportunities to get new work. Hear me out. If you can pick a good office space with some lovely companies in it, you have such a high chance of working with those companies. A traditional work space costs around £250 a month for a desk. That's £3,000 a year. Remember what I said earlier about a low paying job being in the £3,000 mark. All you need is to get one job from being in a work space to make all of it worth it. This is exactly what we did. We researched the best work space with the best companies in it... we didn't go to where the other creatives were. Within a month we'd already landed a job. Within two months we'd landed three jobs... one of them with Dominos pizza... go figure.
 11. Focus on milestones to find True North. Ok, so you've got yourself going, the work is flowing, you have great distribution and things are going well? Now what? How are you keeping the next company from snapping at your heels (spoiler... this will happen faster than you think). We are always trying to foster a project culture. There is no end point, but instead we create a number of bite sized projects that are working towards a greater goal. For us, that's using film to help change the world for the better by supporting and promoting people, projects and companies that are making the world a better place. But this is huge and is always just over the hill. So, we break stuff down... for example a project may be 'we want to deliver an ad about this to the standard of this', or it could be 'we want to have a page that's ranking for this at number one'. These micro projects are key and once they've been decided all focus must be on them. Just like picking a marketing channel. Pick a project and run with it to completion, you'll thank me later when you see just how powerful that is.

The most important advice

This is not a casual pass time... it's a labour of love. You have to love it if you want to tread this path. The creative world is not a sure run thing. If you want stability, become a banker. But if you want a life less traveled and one that has the potential to take you to the furthest corners of the earth, then this is the place for you. It's not all fun and games, in fact most of the work is at a desk, on a phone and planning. But when the time comes, you get to do things that nobody else can and can create things that can change the fortune of an entire movement, project and cause. Filmmaking is fun. Filmmaking is meaningful. I can't imagine doing anything else. I still get a huge buzz every time I watch a film we've made for the first time. This is one of the reasons I offer my email out to anyone looking for advice. If you want to get in touch visit our [homepage](#) and find our contact details beneath. I'm not always at my desk but when I am, I try to answer all emails.

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