Radical Independence: How Indies Are Ushering in the Next Era of Great Advertising

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Sitting here drinking an AriZona iced tea, I find myself contemplating the value of independence.

First, you should know, I am not usually found with an AriZona iced tea—at least not since the days of chugging them post-hangover in college. But recently, I saw a story on the Today Show where the founder, Don Vultaggio, explained why they were keeping the drink at 99 cents, despite inflation and being able to charge more. For him, it was simple: "We're successful, we're debt-free, we own everything … Why? Why have people who are having a hard time paying their rent pay more for their drink? Maybe it's my little way to give back."

If you couldn't feel it in that quote ("we're successful … we own everything"), you could hear it in his delivery—there was more than a bit of rebellion that comes from independent ownership, a pride in being able to choose for yourself how your business operates. And for Vultaggio, that means doing his audience right.

And there you have the gift of independence: The value to determine the pathway for your business. The bets you will make. The sacrifices you need to make in order to make the bets. Ultimately, how your company values play out in your

day-to-day. And how those values affect each one of your clients.



Importantly for many clients, since many indies are still founder-led, independence registers in a deep sense of partnership. We treat our client's success with the utmost care. For founder-led indies, client success is a personal matter. When they win, we win.

Surely this is a leading factor behind recent wins that have received headlines, exciting times in which indies competed against the big guys and won: nice&frank winning Häagen-Dazs; Miramar winning Rocket Mortgage; Bandits & Friends winning Liberty Mutual.

See, coming to an independent shop doesn't involve some kind of holdco "solution," in which a brand is a tasty pork chop to be devoured. (Is it any wonder that our industry is complaining of being treated like "vendors"? That's how this industry is acting.)

Instead, any indie that considers pitching or running your business is investing its most precious and limited resources

to do so—time, energy, focus, and heart.

I cannot overstate the importance of that. Hiring an independent agency means you will hire the people who directly control the decision to work with you. There's no corporate overlord poking with electric prods. Indies choose where we put energy, how to grow, what to spill blood, sweat, and tears on.

When a leader from an independent sits across the table from you, they are essentially telling you they believe in you. You, the brand. You, the person running the brand. And they believe enough to bet on you.

It's also bringing wild creativity and innovation because creative output isn't in some codified, calcified rule book. You will not get rinse-and-repeat, recycled work in an independent, but instead a new solution tailored for your business problem and audience. You get surprise. The audience gets it, too.

Each day is brimming with invention, because as we all know, necessity is its mother, and independents crack new ways to solve big problems on the regular. Which means the solutions that help independents compete are built from client needs, not corporate needs.

From developing new models, to experimenting with nontraditional creative playgrounds for deeper engagement, the future feels like it's for anyone to make.

We're seeing the fruits of this success. The larger indies dominated Cannes and are doing the same across other creative awards shows. And as I've mentioned above, independent shops are competing and winning against larger holding companies for AORs.



If you’re an advertising star—or even a rising star—and you look at this energy versus what’s happening with holdcos in the headlines, you feel the pull. Every day, we read about another ruthless mashing together of once-great agency brands. We hear about the selling off of key agency properties. It’s creating a cloudiness of vision and purpose. What do you put on a T-shirt when the agency name changes so much?

If you’re a brand wondering why your peers are investing so heavily in independents, here’s your answer: They want to get back to making advertising with partners who have the power to put them first. Like AriZona iced tea, but for big ideas.

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