The Martin Agency Is Adweek’s 2020 U.S. Agency of the Year

Like many of us, The Martin Agency began 2020 with an optimistic outlook, blissfully unaware of the chaos to come. In fact, the agency kicked off the year with a hard-fought client win: Old Navy. After a lengthy pitch process, the relationship became official in February.

Weeks later, Covid-19 would force Old Navy to temporarily close its stores, and the campaign idea that won the pitch for Martin was shelved.

But it wasn’t long before the Richmond, Va.-based agency was making lemonade out of lemons. After learning that the retailer would be donating $30 million worth of clothing to families in need, Martin pitched another idea: To promote the charitable effort, what if the agency hired a local artist to create a massive installation made entirely of Old Navy clothes?

The concept was approved, turned into a time-lapse video and became one of the brand’s best-performing ads to date, according to Jamie Gersch, Old Navy’s chief marketing officer. To pull off the ad, the agency hired Richmond-based artist Noah Scalin, who used 1,000 pieces of clothing to create a large portrait of an American family. A two-person team filmed

the process in five days using five cameras.

“They came to us with this idea and produced it in six weeks,” Gersch says. “They have just been incredible partners in making sure that we’re able to produce the best work despite the situation.”

In a year rife with crisis and uncertainty, Martin has managed to help clients grow and achieve milestones, all while winning new brands, including Axe. Despite daunting challenges that left most agencies in the red, Martin posted 30% net growth in new and organic revenue, securing its selection as Adweek’s 2020 U.S. Agency of the Year. The IPG-owned agency has only won the honor once before, in 2009. It stood out as the only 2020 U.S. Agency of the Year finalist to report double-digit growth to Adweek.

Kristen Cavallo, CEO of The Martin Agency, says no one thing can explain the agency’s success in 2020. “Strategy and hard

work would be my honest answer," she says, though she also takes pride in the fact that half of Martin's eight-person leadership team are women, and a quarter are people of color.

"We are a living, breathing case study of what happens when you change the ratio of leadership at the top," Cavallo says.

Building blocks

Martin was in a much different place a few years ago. Rocked by a sexual harassment scandal, the agency went through a leadership shake-up. Cavallo, who had worked at Martin earlier in her career, departed MullenLowe in 2017 to shepherd Martin as CEO.

"Circumstances landed me in this job," Cavallo says, "but we have changed fundamentally."

Even so, she says, many of the changes she's implemented have "nothing to do" with what happened in 2017. A strategist at heart, Cavallo says much of her work as CEO has involved finding and honing the agency's positioning and differentiation.

Cavallo points out that 84% of ads go unnoticed, at least according to a study from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science, and under her leadership, the agency has embraced that insight via its de facto tagline, "Fight invisibility," a mantra that guides Martin's approach to client work.

"Committing to being part of that 16% gave us a bar, creatively, that we had to meet," she says. In other words, she wants Martin to attract clients that consider themselves brave and aren't afraid to wade into cultural conversations—even if it results in backlash, which, she believes, is better than no response at all.

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