This Creative Production Company Launched Almost 25 Years Ago. Its Ability to Evolve With the Market Kept It in Business.

“Even during the good times, don’t take your foot off the gas pedal. Keep pushing. Keep driving.”

September 20, 2019 4 min read

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Tool of North America doesn’t beat around the bush when it comes to describing its business. The company aims to produce award-winning content with a purpose, helping brands and agencies with ideation, content and experience production that generate buzz.

Entrepreneur spoke with managing partner Dustin Califf about the company’s strategy for driving awareness for their clients.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What does your company do?

We call ourselves a creative production partner; and there’s a good reason for that. Almost 25 years ago, we were born as a production company, and we have evolved over the past 10 years to offer services beyond solely production, such as creative strategy and ideation.

The reason we call ourselves a creative production partner is to help our clients understand that, while we get involved in the creative ideation, we also are still the makers – and that's a very important piece of our DNA. And we don't use the term "agency" because we look at ourselves as an evolved and different model than what a typical agency might do.

How do you define success in your business?

For us, success is if we've generated talkability and garnered earned media. If we have achieved that and struck a cultural nerve in some way, then that's success for our clients.

How important is your company culture?

For us, it's remembering that advertising is and should be fun. Sometimes people take it so seriously. From tweaking design materials to trying 50 different fonts, you can lose sight of the idea that this is a fun industry. At the end of the day, we're creating things that human beings are connecting with. We also remember that we don't just want clients; instead, we want to have partners.

What's your advice for retaining customers or getting new business?

It really just comes down to the creative. If we're able to produce great creative that leads to earned media, then our clients will keep coming back.

As far as new business, representatives from a large tech brand came to us within the last week and, after I showed them our work, they said they were jealous of it. That professional jealousy was a good reminder that we seem to be doing something right.

Describe any problems or challenges that led to breakthrough moments.

We used to have a section of the company called the digital

group that focused on interactive, web-based experiences. Then, the industry started shifting away from that, meaning clients weren't willing to spend the money and put the resources into media for experiential web experiences. That was a major shift that happened around 2012.

Around the same time, we were fortunate enough to start offering our experiential offering, which was focused more on physical activations and events. That's been one of the biggest areas of growth for us as a business. We were fortunate enough to have the foresight to see that because things were changing, there was another area of business that we'd like to place a bet on.

What differentiates you from your competitors?

Talent is everything. When it comes to our directors, our technologists and our full-time team, if we don't have the best talent, we can't produce the amazing creative that our clients are looking for. What makes us unique is that we're not just a full-time, in-house talent pool but instead a hybrid model. That means we have an in-house team of creative directors, executive producers and technologists, but we also represent a highly curated roster of talent represented exclusively by Tool to work with brands and agencies. From film talent to people who specialize in creative technology to people specializing in experiential and user experience, it enables us to bring brands a unique experience.

What advice would you give an aspiring entrepreneur?

Put the time in. A lot of people have great ideas, but not a lot of people have the follow through and drive to actually make it happen. I think that anybody who's an entrepreneur has that drive and passion. Also, even during the good times, don't take your foot off the gas pedal. Keep pushing. Keep driving. If you're truly a great entrepreneur, you'll never need someone else to push you to make your dream come true.

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