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THINKING · TRANSFORMATION

816 Days — A Roadmap of Change

Taking over a 120-person agency in decline. The first-100-days turnaround playbook I've used ever since.

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In 2009 and 2010, I had a hand in developing a narrative and helping with the M&A activity that led to the creation of Mediative. This became the national agency of Yellow Pages Canada — a company put together through a number of acquisitions that, at the time, allowed us to scale a national ad network business, a shopper marketing business and enterprise services businesses.

On January 6, 2014 I took over the role as President of Mediative.

This post is not about Mediative, but rather the story of my journey with the business and the lessons that I learned along the way.

In 2013, Mediative was facing some big challenges. Many of the original founders of the acquired companies had left, many of the senior leadership had moved on, the AutoTrader property was no longer part of the portfolio (which eliminated high-valued display inventory) and the rest of the agency world had caught up when it came to data, programmatic and local based advertising. In addition, Yellow Pages Canada had just announced a new CEO, which meant there was a new corporate strategy to consider.

Despite all these challenges, the opportunity to lead the company through this transition came with a pretty impressive foundation to build from that included:

- a 120+ person agency in 4 offices,

- leading some of the most unique shopper marketing programs in Canada for the largest retailers,
- still considered a leader in intent data for the purposes of programmatic advertising,
- having one of the best enterprise SEM/SEO teams in Canada that serviced customers globally, and
- having one of the best usability labs in the country.

By April 2016, I had moved back to Yellow Pages core. By then I had successfully transformed Mediative into a different company. The Mediative team had accomplished our goals of growing digital revenue, generating profit, becoming masters at forecasting, changing the corporate culture and giving a new generation of leaders a chance to make their impact.

It was an incredible journey.

When sharing my experiences at Mediative with other agency Presidents in Canada, the US and internationally, some key elements always seemed to resonate with people. I have summarized these below.

My time with Mediative consisted of a total of 816 days. I have divided this time into 4 distinct segments.

My first 100 days

In politics when a new President is elected, we always hear about the first 100 days of any new Presidency. Well, there is a reason for that. Whether you are President of a country, or President of a company, those first 100 days are critical.

This is what my first 100 days looked like.

1. Alignment of financial and strategic objectives with the new CEO of the parent company.

2. Deep-dive on the business — asking: what problem are we solving, what do we sell, why do we think we are good, what are the economics, who are the key people and how do they see the business.

3. Sharing my guiding principles with the team.

Business principles

- accountability — do what you say you will do;
- knowledge collaboration — using information to empower all stakeholders;
- data-driven thinking — use the right data to make decisions without getting lost in data for the data's sake;
- forward failing — and experiment for the right reasons.

Personal principles

- continually be learning;
- be bold and humble at the same time;
- have fun and enjoy life (it's too short not to).

4. Meet with top customers, publishers and partners.

5. Strategically finding a place to live in Toronto. Having relocated to Toronto before, I knew the impact of commuting. After living both lifestyles (suburb commute and downtown walk to work) I place a very high value on this decision (enough to include it in this list!). My parameter for the house hunt was that it had to be within a 15-minute walk to work—no compromise.

My next 100 days

1. Articulate the challenge and the opportunity to the team: what changes will be coming and why; what the measure of success looks like.

2. Stop doing the things that don't align to the measure of success, immediately.

3. Identify talent gaps and start the process of filling those gaps.

4. Get the organization using a shared collaboration tool. This was a big one. The organization was using over 100 different tools, which made collaboration and data transparency between groups and individuals nearly impossible. My mandate was that the

employees as a group could choose their top 25 tools and that everyone had to use one single file platform for data and collaboration.

It is always a challenge to get people to change the way they do things, and/or introduce new processes and technology, but it was not negotiable. This concept ties directly into my philosophy that data knowledge is essential. Nothing irks me more than when people want to have a conversation with me, but they don't even know the basic data points of whatever topic they are wanting to discuss.

Know your data, know your data, know your data!

When everyone is using the same platform, and has access to all available company data, it is a game changer in terms of communication, collaboration, cohesiveness and efficiency.

My third 100 days

- 1. Continue to articulate the plan every moment you get.**
- 2. Complete hiring critical functions and redefining roles.** I hired a new VP of Finance, IT, Marketing and HR. I redefined the role of executive assistant by expanding these roles into Business Managers and hiring accordingly.
- 3. With a new executive team in place, initiate the new data-driven approach to making decisions.**
- 4. Start the reorganization plan required for digital revenue growth.**

Some highlights of the remaining 516 days

Rebrand the corporate identity. This included a reset of our guiding principles for which we operate, our purpose of being and our corporate mission. I specifically had to reframe perceptions about revenue growth and EBITDA contributions as corporate missions. These two elements are not missions, they are results of a strong mission.

Reengineered our products. Focused on the value they created by leaning in on a product construct mentality (such as ad networks) and leaning in on a service delivery construct (such as enterprise services).

Implemented a new hiring process. All new hires met with people in their potential group, outside of their group and met with me. This ensured both technical and cultural fit.

Implemented accountability grids. Every person in the organization needed to identify what areas they impacted, why and how they measure their contribution. These accountability grids were public to everyone in the company and created a sense of contribution for every person in the organization. It helped to create a common objective and eliminate silos.

Data transparency. Everything was transparent — from personal objectives, to customer results, to financials (when applicable and what we could share; remember we were still part of a public company). This ensured everybody was aware of how activity translated into numbers.

Identify talent, invest in them and push their limits. I get great satisfaction seeing young talent grow and flourish. I looked for people with the winning attitude, the baseline of smarts, the boldness of ideas, the ability to measure and more importantly the humbleness to fail. We pushed them to take on more responsibility. Most of them did phenomenal jobs.

Let people go. Probably one of the most difficult processes is assessing which existing staff have the required skill sets and will flourish under the new structure, and which people need to be let go. However, as finances, company roles and company culture change, some people will inevitably be displaced. Lesson learned: address staffing issues head on and early in the process. Once it becomes clear that there is no longer a suitable role within the company for a particular employee, let them go.

Listen to the team. I did this in many ways — email communication, town halls, open door policy, coaching, etc. Listening to the team and providing guidance was a critical piece of the equation.

Meet with customers, publishers, partners and vendors. I spent a lot of time with the people who gave us money and/or enabled us to make money. I needed to understand their roadmaps as they related to our roadmaps to ensure relevancy and alignment.

Make unprofitable customers profitable — or fire them. I needed us to be profitable, so that we could deliver the results our clients needed. I needed our customers and publishers to be profitable in doing business with us, so they could grow. I needed vendors to be profitable,

so they could continue to provide us with services we needed. I believed that the entire ecosystem needs to be profitable in order to grow and be successful.

Celebrate failures. It is easy to celebrate the successes — we did a lot of that in 2015/2016. However, just as important was to celebrate failures. Not everything we did worked. Collectively as a team we understood why. Sometimes we made individual mistakes. But for the most part we admitted it and moved on. I would like to say that we had created a culture of "calculated risk taking".

Lastly ... have fun. We had lots of fun at Mediative. We worked hard, and we played hard. Our social committees did great work — pancake days, BBQs, breakfasts, attending professional sports games, etc.

In conclusion

It was an honor to be the President of Mediative. I learned a lot. I accomplished many goals including contributing positively to the collective organization. I made a lot of mistakes that will help me in the future. I impacted people's lives positively. I get the privilege now of watching some of the best talent I worked with continue to create huge impact at Mediative as well as the other companies some of them have moved on to.

I hope some of the information above helps you in your career pursuits.

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