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A view from Darren Woolley

How the holding companies built their own worst rivals

Networks continue to provide the plumbing, but the talent they trained runs the independent agencies that marketers now contact for creative magic.



Darren Woolley
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How long?
2-3 minutes

Marketers stand at the precipice of a paradox. While the giants of adland, the great holding company behemoths WPP, Dentsu, Omnicom, and Publicis, are busier than ever building “solution platforms” and integrated AI agents and tech stacks, the horizon is crowded with a new breed of predator: the independent agency.

These agile, hungry shops are becoming increasingly numerous and popular with advertisers, but here is the twist: they didn’t just appear out of thin air. They were fostered, fuelled and, in many ways, indirectly financed by the very holding companies they are now disrupting. In trying to maintain a business model that suits their rigid structures, the holding companies have effectively ceded the high ground. They provided the training ground for a generation of leaders who, tired of being “data janitors”, have left to become “architects of wonder” on their own terms.

For too long, the process part of marketing within the network agencies has been a grind of formatting slides, chasing purchase orders, and navigating internal bureaucracy. They created workplaces that treat creative and strategic talent as interchangeable parts in a massive machine rather than the emotional heart of the story.

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As these global networks undergo massive transformations and consolidations, they are shedding large numbers of highly qualified and experienced staff. When the “premium on extraordinary” has never been higher, the holding companies have often settled for making “average” instant and repeatable.

The result? Many of the industry’s sharpest minds – the ones who value messy, brilliant human insight – are walking out the door. They are leaving to set up independent shops where they have more agency, more autonomy and more joy than they ever experienced under the shadow of a global P&L.

While the new independents work tirelessly to make their brands distinctive – investing in names, corporate designs and brand behaviours that capture an advertiser’s attention – the holding companies have headed in the opposite direction. In a drive for efficiency, they have consolidated, merged and closed legendary network brands, making their offering less distinctive and more generic.

This shift toward a solutions platform is designed to service the needs of major global advertisers, but it leaves a vacuum. By chasing the dream of “hyper-personalisation at all costs” and scale, they have lost the “brand magic” that once defined the industry.

The irony is that even the global giants are starting to notice the growing gap. There is mounting evidence that while holding companies provide the plumbing, marketers are increasingly turning to independents for out-of-the-box strategic and creative thinking.

The holding company model is increasingly seen by some marketers as bloated with management and administration, creating a system that incentivises volume over quality. In

contrast, the independents are building meaningful, two-way relationships founded on respect and genuine value. Far from remaining small boutiques, many of these independent agencies are now growing globally or forming their own alternative networks, presenting a legitimate, agile alternative for multinational corporations tired of digital stalking and vanity metrics.



The holding companies have inadvertently become the world's most expensive finishing school for independent leaders. They have taught these entrepreneurs how to navigate complex global requirements while avoiding systemic disincentives. They've taught them to identify when a tech stack is becoming a costly, inefficient form of digital stalking, rather than a tool for delight. Perhaps most importantly, they've taught them to recognise the illusion of a single customer view and the traps of algorithmic bias.

Armed with this knowledge, these augmented marketers are taking the challenge back to their old bosses – and they are winning. They are using AI not as a rival, but as a power tool to remove the mundane, giving them the mental space to dream up world-changing ideas that the holding companies are too bogged down to conceptualise.

The choice facing the giants of adland is simple: continue to treat the rise of the independents as a mere nuisance, or acknowledge that the mirage of efficiency has come at the cost of human-centric creativity. Until the holding companies learn to value the "extraordinary" as much as the "integrated", the exodus will continue.

Future success requires viewing data not just as a source of truth, but as a reflection of a world that requires careful, conscious and critical interpretation. The independents have already unwrapped the gift of magic. It's time for the rest of adland to decide if they want to join the celebration or stay stuck in a quagmire of their own making.

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