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A Year of AUNZ Leading the “Independent Revolution”

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Esther Clerehan, Tim Harvey, and Darren Woolley tell LBB's Tom Loudon why the landscape has shifted expectations of scale and specialism, plus weigh in on 2025's most impressive shops



The indie agency landscape in Australia and New Zealand is teeming, with small studios attracting big clients, and plenty of high-powered, highly-respected execs setting up their own shops.

Industry leaders say the structural advantages of the independent model allow agencies to deliver better work for brands, contributing to indies' momentum and giving them an edge against the networks.

Creative recruiter and founder of CLEREHAN and The Aunties, Esther Clerehan, says indies are unencumbered by inherited billing structures or the requirement to deliver margins to global HQ.

Esther told LBB of indies, “They are agile and able to adapt quickly to the changing landscape. I expect more will open.

“There are more notable clients partnering with independents, or putting indies in the mix with a holding co relationship.”

This year, new indie entrants include Kerfuffle, Princess, Hellions, and Tightknit.

Major brands, including Telstra, Dan Murphy's, Allianz, BYD, Uber, and Didi have chosen indies to lead their creative across Australia and New Zealand.

In 2025, this number grew, with Snackbrands— a portfolio including Kettle and Cheezels — going to Cummins&Partners. Think HQ winning the Lipton Tea pitch. Anytime Fitness opting for Akcelo, and Optus appointing Apparent and BRX as part of its village led by Droga5.

This year also saw Sydney indie Howatson+Company win Myer,

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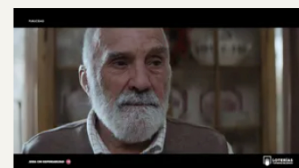
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Founder of un:held, a consultancy for indies, Tim Harvey added the indie landscape has been “vibrantly maturing”, indicating a shift in scale and specialism.

“Every year we see growth [for indies], and every year we see resistance in them falling back into the holding-co fold,” Tim, a former chief growth officer at BBH, said.

“Having the privilege of a global purview, I do think AUNZ has long been at the top of the independent revolution, and it matures every year in influence and impact. It’s also one of the few markets where we rarely muddle ‘small’ and ‘indie’, simply because here, indies aren’t a size alternative — they are a seismic alternative, still competing with the biggest players on multiple fronts.

“The most significant shift has been in scale and specialism. Once upon a time, we were comparing indies against parts of the holdco on an agency versus agency basis.

“Now, we’re seeing them as the full antidote, with an ability to do much more. We’re still seeing best-in-class creative purists, but we’re also seeing independent agencies disrupt the whole marketing ecosystem.

“Furthermore, we’re seeing holdco-esque chess moves on an independent board. Over the last year and a bit, we’ve seen Thinkerbell, Howatson, and Akcelo all not just avoid acquisitions, but make them. A real flipping of the script.”

In late 2024, Thinkerbell completed its acquisition of CX company Hardhat, which followed Howatson+Co’s similar acquisition of Melbourne creative agency Akkomplise.

In September, brand experience and innovation agency Akcelo announced the acquisition of mobile-first agency POPULA, adding depth to its specialist mobile-first expertise.

Esther noted accounts are now spread across more agency partners or are project-based.

“Start-up costs of an agency are not as steep; all you need is a smartphone and a client,” she said.

TrinityP3 director Darren Woolley told LBB the indie opportunity is being seized by media agencies too, driven by continued rationalisation and contraction in larger agencies. Former Omnicom Media Group CEO Peter Horgan, for instance, chose full service indie JOY as his next move.

“Larger agencies [are] releasing highly experienced and talented personnel into the category,” Darren says.

“However, a combination of increasing numbers and a continuing economic slowdown in the sector means that some are struggling to establish a firm foothold in the market.”

While marketers’ interest in indie agency solutions seems greater than ever, the increased number of indie offerings has also heightened competition.

“The growth of the indie category and the choices it provides marketers is leading to potentially increased commoditisation within the category,” Darren explained from a pitch consultant’s perspective.

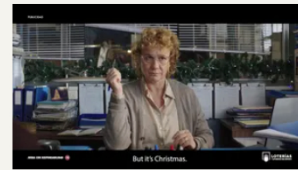
“This poses a challenge and a danger for indie developers, and they need to address it.”

He added there are currently independent agencies larger than many of their network counterparts’ local offices in terms of both staff and revenue, challenging the traditionally “lazy” thinking that indies are “small or boutique” compared to networks.

“The strongest independent agencies have established strong foundational clients and are actively competing against network agency brands for clients. Interestingly, they are also the ones that are prominent in trade media coverage, such as Howatson+Co, Thinkerbell, and Special Group,” he explained.

“Others are strong, with a perception that they are growing substantially due to a succession of new business wins and appointments, particularly in the media agency sector, such as Sparro, Kaimera, and This is Flow. Others are also well-positioned because they offer focused, well-developed services in particular areas. such as BRX in production. PMG in media. Supermassive in

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brand events and PR.

"Success is becoming even harder won, and the biggest challenge is being differentiated and distinctive from the growing competition. And isn't that the challenge for all brands?"

For Tim, [Bear Meets Eagle on Fire](#) is the strongest example of an independent creative shop in Australia currently, crediting founder and CCO [Micah Walker](#) with "building through craft, discipline and anti-greed".

"[The agency] has not just raised the bar for indies, it's raised and waved the flag on the global stage for AUNZ," Tim says, who also nodded to Australian indies Akcelo, [ABEL](#), and Thinkerbell, and New Zealand agency [Motion Sickness](#) as market leaders.

[Bear Meets Eagle on Fire](#) and [Motion Sickness](#) both picked up Grands Prix at Cannes this year, and have performed strongly at local and global awards circuits.

Esther added Special Group is still "head and shoulders" above the field. This year, Special's work has included the ongoing 'Get Almost, Almost Anything' brand platform for Uber Eats, Kitchen Warehouse's 'Mum-nipulate the Algorithm', and Bonds' 'Made for Down Under' spot, featuring [Robert Irwin](#).

"Their push into global markets is unprecedented," she says. "They continue to grow, they consistently do great work, they have stable leadership.

"A few newbies that have impressed me [are] BRX, Hellions, Kerfuffle, [Bureau of Everything](#), [The Many](#), and [Princess](#)."

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