



Finding Your Way: John Deveney, ABC, discusses his views on consulting

Q&A with CW Editor, Natasha Spring, and John Deveney, ABC

CW's Editor, Natasha Spring, talks with John Deveney about the success of his consulting firm, client relationships, technology and the challenges he has faced.

When was Deveney Communication established? What is the focus of your work? How many staff do you have?

I founded the firm in 1996. Today, our team is nine people strong. Five members of the firm are on the senior team, which is responsible for strategy and direction of the firm and its clients. Four of those team members are senior public relations counselors. The fifth member focuses on technology, helping both clients and staff leverage technology in order to improve processes and outcomes. In addition, four associates augment the senior team.

Who are your clients?

Our client roster is diverse in terms of industry, size and geographic location. From the world's largest and most powerful trade association headquartered in Washington, D.C., to a small entrepreneurial company in New York, we have the opportunity to learn about the unique issues and challenges faced by a variety of clients. Recently, we added some exciting organizations to our client roster, including Cox Communication and the world's greatest steak restaurant, Ruth's Chris Steak House, which was recently distinguished as the best chain restaurant in the country.

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Maintaining long-term client relationships is a significant indication of outstanding work and superior customer service. Our approach to client service involves all of the firm's communication strategists working with each account to ensure that the ideas and strategies are never stale. Our team meets twice each week to discuss client campaign status, evaluate results and brainstorm new ideas and opportunities for achieving specific client goals.

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When it comes to marketing, the biggest mistake a new consultant can make is not targeting a specific business niche.

What was the impetus for starting your own business? Was there one particular event that drove you to make this decision?

I love consulting. The variety of the projects, the aggressive pace, and especially the respect and support given to public relations practitioners that are brought in as outside counsel are just a few of the reasons I wanted to start my own firm. My first consulting project was in 1988, and I continued with small projects on the side for various organizations until joining a PR firm as Senior Counsel.

I loved the work, especially the focus on results and building solid client relationships. But there were things that I thought I would handle differently, so I decided to launch my own firm, creating it from the ground up with what I felt were best practices and better approaches than the industry norm. A friend who I turned to a great deal while deciding to strike out on my own (H.K. Stewart, who served with me on the U.S. District 2 board) commented that you could spot those who should take the entrepreneurial plunge because they had a "fire in their belly" that drives them to go out on their own.

Ironically, I presented at an IABC conference in Memphis just about three months after hanging out my shingle. In my presentation, I summarized research about the high mortality rate of start-up companies in

our industry and provided a thorough checklist of everything, from financing and market research, to personality profiling, that one should do before making the leap to self-employment. It was the least enjoyable presentation I have ever given because I was dissecting all the threats and dangers that are ahead of me, and I was outlining all the preparatory steps that I hadn't done before making that leap myself. I think I got a couple grey hairs from that conference.

Did you begin with a particular specialty, or did you find that circumstances directed you to find a niche?

From the first day in 1996 to this year's annual planning retreat, our focus has been strategic communication counsel. As a full-service firm, we offer that counsel across a spectrum of services. But the key to our success is our approach. That approach is a commitment to recognizing that the end result is directly proportionate to the research, analysis and planning that precedes and is done in concert with every element of a campaign. In order to fully leverage and maximize a specific strategy, the work must be integrated with other communication and business initiatives.

While we've established a strong track record with our core services, we continually considers how the firm can expand its current offerings to further our industry knowledge and respond to the changing needs of clients.

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For example, at the firm's annual offsite strategic planning retreat, we identified that we want to enhance our strength in the consumer packaged goods segment. When the opportunity arose later in the year to bring a new senior team member on board, we specifically sought candidates with strong backgrounds in consumer-packaged goods and ultimately hired Kara Kortman, a leader from the region's largest advertising and public relations agency.

What are your top three challenges as an independent business owner?

1. Hiring, developing and motivating a talented team of professionals
2. Balancing work and life
3. Weathering economic downturns

What are your top three challenges as a communication professional?

The lack of understanding of our industry, its role in shaping the success of organizations and its potential in helping companies achieve their business and organizational objectives.

Please name the three things that you love most about being a communication professional?

We solve problems, make a difference and contribute significantly to the causes, organizations and communities with which we are associated.

If you were to offer five nuggets of advice for an aspiring communication entrepreneur, what would they be?

1. Never compromise on ethics.
2. Determine what you love to do.
3. Choose bosses, jobs and clients based on how they will nurture you and help you develop.
4. Get involved in the profession.
5. Show initiative and follow-through.

If you had the opportunity to go back in time and change something about the way you've handled your business, what would it be?

Learning from your mistakes and your successes is the most important habit to master, so going back in time and taking with me the lessons I've learned so far would be a dream come true. Given that chance, I would be more selective and critical regarding potential relationships. Good clients are invigorating,

appreciative and will be the best asset in consistently advancing your practice to the next level. Good employees even more so.

John Deveney, ABC, is Senior Counsel at Deveney Communication, a full-service public relations firm.