Easing the Growing Pains of a Growing Business

If you were to go to Amazon.com and search for “small business” in the Books section, you’d get served over 250,000 titles. This massive number makes sense – starting a business is filled with countless unknowns and every bit of advice helps. But what about after your company starts to grow? If you were to change your book search to “medium or mid-sized businesses,” would you find countless resources on how to retain talent, maintain productivity, and keep sight of why you helped build the whole thing in the first place?

Evidently, not.

Amazon.com search results would indicate that once you get your start-up “started up,” it’s smooth sailing from there. We all know that’s not the case. The cruel irony is that the very things you worked for in the infancy of your business – success and growth – are the things that risk derailing what made it move and shake in the first
place – your culture and people.


Your company can’t survive without them and none can exist without the other. So how does a medium-sized company get its small company groove back?

**Build the Best Family**

One of the trickiest things about growing a company is growing it with the right people. When you’re small, every single new person is heavily scrutinized because every single person has a massive impact which is felt throughout the entire agency. When the RFPs or projects become too much for your small, tight-knit crew, the excitement and urgency around growing a team sometimes results in a few misfits slipping through the cracks.

Companies are living, breathing organisms – every new person is a new cell and the rest of your body is going to react. Knowing that every employee will influence the culture of your agency, you should use the interview process to not only vet candidates against your company’s values, but also to determine whether they have the ability to actually carry those values forward on your behalf.

**Communal Interview Process**

Have candidates meet with folks from all walks of company life. They’ll get a taste for their potential coworkers and your current employees will help you spot the people who are most aligned with what matters.

**Take Employees to Task**

As employee and client rosters get longer, your leadership will be forced to prioritize new issues, often leaving you with an organizational structure so flat that it’s hard to manage.

It’s time to relinquish top-down learning and empower your managers. Shift toward an environment where curiosity and learning happen organically. Encourage peer-led workshops that will benefit multiple departments. Or start a casual practice of having staffers present on topics of their choice, including work-related subjects and/or topics that are simply passion points for team members. Keep a sense of connection despite your size. Your teams will learn more about the people they work with and the topics could inspire work-related thinking.

**Let Your Past Inspire Your Future**

Yes, a growing company and team need to protect the elements that made them who they are. But it’s equally important to balance out respect for the past with a culture that also embraces the future.

As important as it is to hold onto longtime traditions, don’t let them keep new talent from impacting current company culture. No one wants to sit next to the guy at the bar rambling on about his old war stories, and no one wants to join a team that seems to believe its best years are behind them. Instead, teach the meaning behind your old traditions and enlist your newcomers to identify new ones.
Growing pains are inevitable – but not insurmountable. Don’t try to fix it on your own. As your business gets bigger, share your leadership responsibilities. Ask tenured team members to keep an eye on how the staff is reacting to the growth – both in terms of their ability to accomplish everything on their plate and with respect to their skill at doing work that adheres to the same level of excellence that helped your agency grow in the first place. Together, find ways to embrace change and empower your employees to protect and nurture your culture. And when all is said and done, consider penning a few words on how you all did it. The Amazon.com marketplace is wide open for good advice.

About the author: Dan is president of New York-based digital agency Firstborn. Swiftly rising through the Firstborn ranks since joining in 2003, Dan has the hands-on experience of a former creative developer, sharp strategic instincts honed from leading long-term client relationships, and innate leadership abilities that drive Firstborn to be one of the most forward-thinking agencies in the world. Inside and outside the office, Dan can often be found shuffling a deck of cards—a nod to his expertise in the art of close-up magic.

Illustration by UK-based illustrator, Owen Gent

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