

JOHN NORMAN



Chief Creative Officer
The Martin Agency

It's not every day that you're brought in take the creative reins of one of the most respected agencies in the US, reins that have been guided for many years by a living legend. So when former Wieden + Kennedy Amsterdam ECD John Norman had the opportunity to take on the role of Chief Creative Officer of *The Martin Agency* in February of last year, it wasn't one he could pass up.

A designer by trade and a self-described visual storyteller, John served as a graphic designer for Nike and design director for Benetton before crossing over to the advertising world. His efforts at W+K and Goodby Silverstein & Partners have brought him much acclaim, leaving a mark on such brands as Coca-Cola, Electronic Arts and Hewlett-Packard. John was brought into The Martin Agency to work alongside the legendary Mike Hughes for one year, after which he'd be the sole CCO.

It's been a year now, so let's see what John has taken to the challenge.



IHAVEANIDEA: Agencies as big as the Martin Agency are like massive ships. How responsive are the controls at the captain's helm? Does the steering wheel respond like you want it to?

(laughs) Well I can't speak about huge global agencies because I think that's pretty daunting, but what's pretty amazing is what's been allowed to happen in this last year here. We've changed the way we work, we've changed the way the work is done, we've changed people, and we've changed the process.

The inertia and tradition is the hardest thing to break. In any case, the person or people coming in to break things up, whether it's with a sledge hammer or the tiny little tack hammer are "Change agents".

You've just got to be sensitive of the tradition that already exists because changing it is the hardest thing. I believe I made it past the one year mark, and I didn't know if I would, because I initially thought "Ok, this is too much change." There's a little bit of "we can take time to do it" here at The Martin Agency.

But then I thought I'd better do it quickly or not at all, either I'd make changes now, or I've missed your chance to do it completely. So yes, there's a big steering wheel required to enact change, but there's also a little steering wheel inside the big steering wheel too. It has to be parallel steering, like a Swiss watch.

IHAVEANIDEA: Do you have to do these changes twice? Once internally, and then again with the clients, simultaneously?

John: Actually, the clients are easier and more adaptive to change sometimes. I'll put it this way: I've been in situations at The Martin Agency where clients have actually been the best asset to change our culture. This is what they either want or what we've sold them on, and I say "Ok, well, I respect that, but let's try to do this a different way." They've actually been the biggest advocates of changing the way we make the work.

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IHAVEANIDEA: So when you've said that you've changed the way that the work is made, what does that really mean?

John: I think it's more about getting into technology and the way it's absorbed and baked into a kind of creative product.

I've often made the analogy that it's like an assembly line in Detroit, where the brief would come in, the clients would go to the planners, the planners would look it over, then go to the creative directors, then the creative directors would do their thing, and somewhere down the line there would be digital, and so on and so on down the line. At that point, you're creating cars, you're making them quickly and in great numbers, but it's like you're creating Ford Tauruses.

The model we're looking at now is where the brand is in the middle of the room and we're surrounding it and going "Hey, what if we get Dolce & Gabbana to do our seats? What would that look like?" We're asking more questions and giving more expertise up front so the people think bigger earlier on before it gets funneled down. So it's surrounding the car like the German or the Japanese car model as opposed to the Detroit car makers... not to slag off Detroit, of course.

IHAVEANIDEA: What about creative teams, do you still employ that system in your new model?

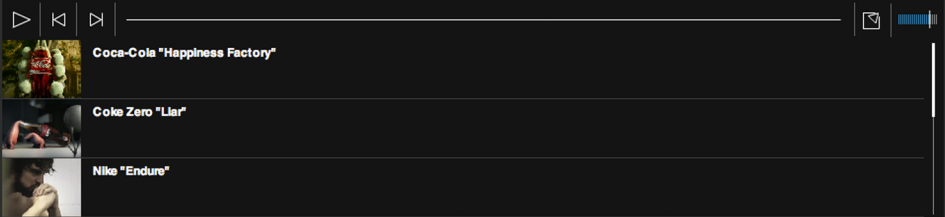
John: There are still art directors and copywriters., but we don't have teams that say "Well, this is my partner and I'll only be with them." We're breaking that up on purpose. We're pulling a lot of interactive designers with writers, we're pulling in social media people, even an interactive producer who is very creative might work with a writer, if we needed to. That changes every day, and it's getting better all the time. We're becoming a lot more agnostic about our approach, and it's getting to be a lot more fun.

IHAVEANIDEA: What do you think has changed in the past five years in how you, as a Creative Director, do your job well? What has changed as a job requirement?

John: Because I come from the design world: I don't feel like all the change that is happening is unorthodox for me. I like it. The reason that I went into design is that, I could always draw really well, I liked graphic design, I liked typography, I liked photography, I liked illustration, and I liked it all. I like where things are going right now because it revolves around social media and technology. The whole landscape has changed and there's a lot more room to play.

Yes, it's going to get fucked up, and it's going to get messy, and it's going to get crazy, but as long as everyone's positive, something amazing will come out of it.

I think creative directors need to be more accountable and own the creative product more. They can't get lost into a process or a system and they can't get lost into the way things were done before. They have to be just completely open and accountable. Yes, it's going to get fucked up, and it's going to get messy, and it's going to get crazy, but as long as everyone's positive, something amazing will come out of it. And nine times out of ten that is the case, if people have the energy and are open minded about it, something great will come out of it. Even if it's just one little thing, one little component of something, its worth all that crap, to go through all that pain for.



IHAVEANIDEA: What lessons did you learn as a Creative Director at Wieden + Kennedy that are still with you to this day, as if they were tattooed into the way you do things?

John: I think the biggest thing that I learned is that the respect for the work really comes first. With that respect at the center, you can get mad, you can get angry, you can get as happy about the work as you can, and as long as it's about the work, it's not personal. I think that 100% respect of the work is the biggest thing.

IHAVEANIDEA: The Martin Agency is located in Richmond, Virginia, which isn't exactly huge, cosmopolitan city. In what ways is the city an ally of the agency, and in what ways is it an enemy?

John: It's easy for me to draw upon my past to answer this one. I went to East Texas State University, which was a cow town, literally nothing there but cows. It allowed me to think because there were no distractions, just unadulterated, free-floating imagination and curiosity. All I could think is "there's something else out there" and something else is going on, and I could get enough reference through books and everything else.

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If you look at some of the great shops, Crispin, Wieden, Fallon, even the ones in Amsterdam, they all breathe independence. I think it makes you a bit more curious, and if the curiosity is fed by being from a small city or being the underdog there's something that breathes that in you. The only drawback to being in a place like Richmond is some of the logistical aspects. There isn't a big freelance market on hand.

One of my biggest challenges and goals is to make this a place where people want to come to do the work. We've had a few of those recently, we've had a few people come that I thought wouldn't come to a city like Richmond, and they came because they said that they wanted to become a part of what's going on here. (laughs) Now, once they have their book filled up with amazing work, we'll have to keep them here.

IHAVEANIDEA: Getting back to change, do you think the agency personality has changed in the last year or two?

John: I know that's true by just the way the whole second floor is arranged, the creative floor, where everyone is sitting around the work. There are media specialists, there are interactive designers, technologists, coders, even some account people, but it is like a hub.

I'm waiting for the day when somebody draws a penis on it, which would have shown up at Wieden rather quickly, for sure.

The walls are meant to be a living breathing organic art show. The work should be always going up. I want to take one wall and do a time-lapse over it, and see what it looks like at the end of the year. People draw all over it. I'm waiting for the day when somebody draws a penis on it, which would have shown up at Wieden rather quickly, for sure. All of this has changed the culture and personality.

For some people it hasn't been easy to adapt, but overall it has been professionally good for them. Being able to see how that's changing the personality of the place is going to be really cool. It's pretty remarkable how many people have been open to change. I mean really, really open to it and wanted it to happen.

IHAVEANIDEA: What part of The Martin Agency DNA will always be there, the part that won't, or can't be changed?

John: One thing that absolutely has to stay is that the people at The Martin Agency are nice people, and they're nice to people. I mean, they are really genuine and they believe and behave that way all the time and I think it's a good thing. I don't want to say it's Southern hospitality; I just think that they're nice people.

Of course being nice doesn't mean that we can't be completely brave about the work and have a lot of courage about what we believe in. I think over the years this has probably gone too far, the nice, nice, nice, nice, to a point where maybe it's affected how we make the work and what we believe about the work. We have to be a lot braver and have a lot more courage.

IHAVEANIDEA: When you're having that drink with your kids when they're older and you tell them a story about your years in advertising, what would your story be like? "In my days, when I was an advertising man..."

John: Man, that's a tricky one. It truly just feels like I've been playing all of this time, and that's a good feeling. One of the most memorable moments was meeting Stan Williams from HP. He helped invent nanotechnology, and he was up for the Nobel Prize. I knew that things were going to change so fast in our industry with what he had developed. His whole premise was that in a certain year, 2050, there was going to be no more room left on chips. So he said "Let's go the other way." And he invented nanowires, which would one day allow for all of the information in the Library of Congress, which is the world's biggest library, to live inside my watch some day. Meeting this guy just changed my entire view of technology and it has a much bigger role in what we're doing, bigger than I can fathom, and I see it now every day. I mean, just like that, I'll see something that I never thought of, didn't think could happen.

I know you wanted to hear a great big giant crazy story. I remember one time we flew a plane that...no, I won't say that...the pilot had to wear masks because there was so much weed in the plane, it was a charter jet. Fun times.

IHAVEANIDEA: If you were speaking to a group of juniors and telling them your story about breaking into the business, how would you advise them?

...you just have to stay curious the whole time. If you don't, then you're dead. If you ever think you have it figured out or if there's a formula to making a piece of communication, you're dead.

John: Oh, well, I hated advertising. I'm not all things advertising in this place, I was a designer, I am a designer, and I still look at the world like that. I always hated advertising. I remember when I used to work in Nike Designs and think "I hate how these advertisements work. I don't want to be in advertising. They're sellouts." And now, it's what I do. The hardest thing is that I think you just have to stay curious the whole time. If you don't, then you're dead. If you ever think you have it figured out or if there's a formula to making a piece of communication, you're dead. I also think you have to be confident. You have to believe in your ideas but have to be curious at the same time, so it's kind of a Jekyll and Hyde thing.

IHAVEANIDEA: What is the one big lesson you've learnt from Mike Hughes since you joined The Martin Agency? I can only imagine his are mighty big shoes to fill.

John: Yeah, very big shoes. I keep telling him "Why do you worry about that? Your name is on the building!" I think he has a resilient passion about trying to make work. I think one of the biggest things is that he respects people before anything else. I have it too, but he has it from a different way. It's definitely Mike's voice in the company, but he's a gentle giant. He never scares people. I think that sometimes I can scare people around the workplace, but he never scares people. He's a magnet to people.

Mike has been running this place for almost 30 years, and in that time they've had some of the best writers and storytellers, arguably one of the top three agencies in this category. That is still here, but for me, if I see uranium and plutonium, if we can make that work, it's an atom bomb. It's like the technology in the middle of all of that can make it all happen. It's a stupid analogy but it's a real simple one to get my head around. A lot of the people that I was able to recruit are from that world.

As a boss or as the head of creative, I've learned from Mike that it's always important to look at work and find something in there that you wish you would have done. Always do that, even if it's a student book or whatever, I just want one thing in there that I go "Man, I wish I would have done that."

IHAVEANIDEA: How about your creative process, do you have a specific method?

John: I wanted to do a few things so that I could lead by example. Mike was a big advocate of that; he said "Get some things in quickly." I did that and it was really successful. The creative process for me can come from anywhere and it should be very chaotic up front. I think it should be messy up front. We reserve the right to change the work at any stage to make it better. I think that's the biggest thing to get their head around, because they think "Well, they already bought it. They've already signed off on this." That's great, but you know in production or music, they can make it better at any stage. I'm used to pushing it until it goes to press, or until a site launches or the TV has to air.

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