

Tony Pearman is the Chief Creative Officer and Senior Partner at Access Advertising and Public Relations. The company recently celebrated its 16th anniversary, boasting a long list of awards. Pearman himself has collected more than 400 advertising awards at the local, regional and national level. He has served two terms as the chair of the National ADDY Committee and is a member of the National American Advertising Federation Board of Directors. In addition to his work with the company, Pearman is known for his work in the community, especially as a volunteer with Children's Trust.

[Edited for content]

Tell me a little bit about the beginning of Access, 16 years ago. What kind of experience did you have before starting up the company with co-founder Todd Marcum?

Well, my business partner and I started the company 16 years ago. I've always jokingly said it was sort of when inspiration met desperation. We weren't happy with the jobs that we had at the time—we both worked for different agencies—and we had that youthful arrogance that just made us think we could do things better; which is of course how all business gets started I guess. So we took a very small amount of money, my business partner was rich by my standards at that time, he had 5,000 dollars cash—I got a credit card with 5,000 dollars credit line on it—and we used that 10,000 dollars to start our company with just the two of us purchasing two Macs and starting to make it happen. We had fairly modest aspirations, we really thought we would be a graphic design advertising shop and we began by doing a lot of freelance for other agencies. Since then, it's actually grown and we've diversified a lot in terms of the types of things that we do. Our expectations of what types of services and contents we can deliver for our clients and the types of clients we work with have changed in a lot of ways. Many of the clients that we had the first week we were in business are still with us, which is kind of amazing.

How has Access met your expectations since you started the company?

I was 29 when we started this company, so I had a lot of modest expectations about just trying to survive—the percentages of businesses that succeed past their first year are very small. At the same time, because I was young and sort of had this fire, there were some things I thought would come much easier. I thought we would be working with a lot more national clients at this point in time. We do have a lot of national clients and work with some really interesting clients—but Nike hasn't started calling yet. So you always wonder where your ceiling is. I still think we're maturing and growing everyday. We've added some new people in the last couple of years, which have really made us a deeper, more mature firm in terms of our product offering and our business approach to the creative aspect of what we do...so I think that's all very important.

How would you say Access has adapted to the social media revolution? Has it changed the way the business contacts clients?

It hasn't really changed the way that we have contacted our clients but it has certainly changed the way we do business for our clients. Ten years ago, the standard ways of getting the message to your audience were fairly straightforward. It was paid advertising or earned media through public relations, where (if you were lucky enough to have a story pitched at the right time) you might get some print or broadcast coverage. The dramatic change on both sides of that is that public relations has changed completely to be very responsive and integrated with social media because it has to be. I think the biggest change for clients and for us is the speed at which messages are transmitted and the speed at which damage control and message control needs to be done—which has gone from months to literally hours. That's really the biggest change: how quickly consumers can effect major change on business policy. That just didn't exist ten years ago.

What steps does Access take to build a campaign for a client?

It sounds cliché to say this but it's true: Every client is unique and every project is unique. We pride ourselves on not taking on a cookie cutter approach or being presumptive when we go into a situation. Sometimes it's also being nurturing with the client and understanding that what they want and what they need may be two different things. Our approach is always an interdisciplinary team approach. Whereas, 16 years ago when we started, we would approach everything as a "We're going to do whatever piece of print collateral you'll need or we'll help you build a website or we'll help you do your TV spot." Now, it's a process of going in and helping understand where the client's challenges are, understanding what they are trying to solve and then helping them come up with solutions that involves everything from social media and public relations to marketing, advertising and design. So it's a very integrated approach.

With such a variety of projects, how does the company manage to keep track of clients' expectations?

It's a challenge. Our Senior Account Manager yells at my business partner and I all the time because we will open up a new request for a job and she's like, "I thought we were going to stop doing this?" It's just so hard to say no to these good causes; we do try hard now in our sixteenth year to budget a certain amount of hours and projects that we'll take on each year and discuss at the end of each year who we are going to help so we have an automatic answer for a lot of organizations, which is: "We would like to help you, but we are already committed this year, we can put you in the queue for next year." So, it is a rotating schedule and we try to help as many organizations as we can without overextending ourselves. That's the reality of the situation—at times you just realize you can't do it all.

Earlier this year, you were chosen for the Guardian Angel Award for your volunteer work with Children's Trust. Tell me about your involvement with the community and how that relates to your work with the company.

As a young professional, it was extremely important for me to keep involved, which is especially incumbent on professionals in smaller markets—to stay as connected regionally and nationally as you can and to keep yourself well educated about what’s happening and what’s going on. I think it’s really important not to assess yourself by what your local peers are doing, but to try to assess yourself and gauge your strengths, weaknesses and your successes based on the national playing field. That is something I’ve always tried really hard to do.

At the same time, there is the whole other aspect about how challenged nonprofits are to get help. They are all starving to get funding, especially in this economy; state and government funding for cultural arts and nonprofits has been cut dramatically in the last decade. Those organizations are having a hard enough time raising enough funds to do the work they do and none of them have the money they would like to do marketing and advertising. In our profession we get hit up constantly for help and it’s a real challenge. One of the things we realized in our first five years is that if we help everyone, we are actually going to go out of business because the need is so great. We had to very carefully select whom we were going to help. Very early on, we were approached and began working with the child abuse folks in the area. We’ve worked with virtually every nonprofit in town at some time or another—Big Brothers Big Sisters, the VA Transportation Museum, the Jefferson Center—the list goes on and on. The requests keep coming in every day, whether it is the Grandin Theatre or Boys and Girls Club, the need continues to grow. So it’s a real challenge to keep up.

Access recently won two 2012 Communicator Awards for the “Love Your Carpet” and “Sunrise in Southwest Virginia” spots. What do you think stood out about these projects compared to others in the company?

That work for Carpet Factory Outlet also won a Cannonball from the Richmond show, and Richmond, Virginia is a very competitive market. It won an award there and it also won a Telly award. I give 100% of the credit to my business partner, who has just sort of nurtured that account. He likes the client and thinks they deserve the same caliber of work as our largest client and he gives that to them. That spot probably had a budget of less than 5,000 dollars, which is amazing, and it was just so well done. It had great writing, and I have to give a lot of credit to the guys at Abandon Films—that’s the production company that did it. We find relationships like that with vendors that agree to our budget even though it is far below what they know they need to do the job well. They put a lot of their own time and resources in just to make it something great for themselves. It’s amazing when you get to work with vendors like that who appreciate the opportunity and make the spot even better. I’m sure those guys lost a lot of money producing that spot but they won a lot of awards and did great work for us.

The work for HCA (the sunrise spot) was very different and very much what you would consider a traditional agency relationship with a large client. I mentioned some of our clients that have been with us our entire 16 years in business and the Lewis Gale folks are one of those. That was just a great opportunity of a client coming with us with a challenge and saying, “How do we achieve this goal?” We helped them with the overall

branding composition to brand everything as Lewis Gale. This TV spot that came out of it was just a great spot—simply written—and again we worked with another vendor, Motion Adrenaline, and they put their whole heart and soul into filming what is just a classically beautiful spot. It's not one of those spots that have clever writing like the CFO; we aren't trying to surprise anyone or get anyone to laugh, it's just sort of a heartfelt spot with beautiful cinematography and that's why it won.

It's great when you get that kind of diversity and you deliver well for both of those types of clients. It's so easy for a young creative to come in and gauge the caliber of how hard they work based on how much they like the client—when really you should be putting that kind of passion into your largest and your smallest clients; an unsexy client can be sexy if you give them the right attention. I think those case studies are interesting ones to compare and contrast that point to.

What project are you most proud of?

It's funny, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who is one of my heroes, when he was asked what his favorite project was he always answered it was the one on his drawing table at that time. I have always kind of admired that answer and I feel a little bit that way; quite honestly, there are three projects on my desk that I fully consider either will be or are some of the best I've ever done. I have a meeting with a client to finalize a campaign we've been working on for a year with Roanoke Regional Airport. So, I'm really excited about that. I've done some things that I'm really proud of—the sunrise spot was a personal project of mine and I'm proud of that spot. The first “best in show” award that I ever won at the local ADDY's was a TV spot we produced totally for free for child abuse prevention; it's still one of the best spots I've ever done (because of the production firm not because of me.) So I'm really proud of that as well. I'm proud of lots of different things for lots of different reasons.

Do you have any advice for graduates going into the field of public relations?

Yes, sure. First, get as involved as possible in professional organizations when you're in college. Whether that's an Ad club, an AAF chapter at your college or university, or working with the student newspaper—whatever it is, try to get as much experience in college as you can. Secondly, it's clichéd, but internships, internships, internships. Beg, borrow, steal, do whatever you have to do to get an internship. Don't expect them to pay you; you should be paying them. And, you know, broaden your perspectives. I tell people all the time: It doesn't really matter what process you go through as long as you expose yourself to the right type of things and you stay committed to this as an industry. Finally, just research the college that you go to and making sure they give you the right type of base. The worst thing in the world to tell someone who has gone through four years of college is that they don't have enough experience to get a job.