



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 64: MATT WILLIAMS – LEADING A GOOD AND TOUGH CULTURE

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Some of the best organizations in the world have some of the best cultures, and organizational culture so effective that it attracts the very best professionals who generate world-class results. Well, one such organization is the Martin Agency, an advertising agency headquartered in Richmond, Virginia. It's one of the top full-service agencies in the world. The Martin Agency's responsible for the popular ad campaigns for Geico, UPS, Oreo, Chevy, Hanes, Benjamin Moore, and countless others. The Martin Agency's success is due in part to its good and tough culture where employees are good to each other and tough on the work. Matt Williams is CEO of the Martin Agency. He joins us on the podcast today to discuss advertising, leading creative professionals, and the agency's good and tough culture. Here's our conversation with Matt Williams, CEO of the Martin Agency.

Ken White

Matt, thanks for taking the time to join us today. Take time out of your busy schedule. We appreciate it. Thank you.

Matt Williams

It's great to be here, thanks.

Ken White

This is such a cool environment. The Martin Agency, how do you describe the is it a campus, a building, what do you call it?

Matt Williams

It's just a building, but it's one that we were lucky enough to be able to design from the ground up about 18 years ago, which is when we moved in to be an advertising agency, so we didn't have to retrofit an existing office building. We built it directly on top of an

existing parking structure, so you didn't have to dig a foundation which was great. And you had built-in parking. And more importantly, you could design it to be a collaborative creative work environment. So we did that.

Ken White

Which collaboration is so incredibly key in what you do. For those in the audience and don't understand what a full-service agency does. How do you define that?

Matt Williams

We do brand strategy, creative development, media planning, and production for any number of national and international clients. So any kind of advertising or marketing communications you might need we can do. So whether it's mass media, television, radio, print things like that, or digital, which is becoming obviously an increasingly part of our business. We can design websites. We can manage communities and social media. Kind of soup to nuts.

Ken White

And I would think that the public probably knows you more for the mass media campaigns.

Matt Williams

Yeah, that's right. I think that's right.

Ken White

What are some of those that people might recognize that the Martin Agency's done?

Matt Williams

The most present out there is Geico. So we've been Geico's advertising agency for twenty-three years. So we invented the gecko, and we invented the cavemen, and you know, all the Geico television that people see came from here.

Ken White

Pretty fun.

Matt Williams

A lot of fun, an amazing client. Fascinating company and an amazing client.

Ken White

Why do companies come to you? What is it about the agency that they like? What is it they're looking for?

Matt Williams

We are consistently rated among the ten highest agencies in the country or the world in terms of creativity. So when somebody wants our ideal client is a chief marketing officer who's got a brand that has kind of lost its momentum that people know, but they've fallen out of love with, and they need new energy injected into that brand through new strategic thinking and new creative thinking. We're really, really good at that. It's what we did for Geico twenty-three years ago. It's what we did for UPS with what can brown do for you about ten years ago.

Ken White

Sure.

Matt Williams

It's what we're doing every day for Mondelez and Oreo. So the wonderfilled campaign for Oreo came from here. When we have a brand that people know and a CMO with an ambition to reenergize that brand with new thinking and new ideas, were tailor-made for that.

Ken White

How do you manage and lead so many creative people? This isn't necessarily accounting or finance. This is very different.

Matt Williams

Yeah, there's an inherent chaos to this business which is part of what makes it attractive and makes it interesting. You want your company to be populated by people who think differently about solving problems. So you're constantly surprised about the, you know, the angles into problems that they take, and that's what you want from them. That's what makes them creative. So that's part of the energy and the fun of this business. So you're always looking for people who think differently about solving problems. You're looking for people with different backgrounds, different interests. You want all those things to rub up against each other in surprising ways. So you have to create a physical environment that allows for that to happen. So lots of open space, lots of collaboration space, lots of stimulation around the building. But you also have to create a culture that allows it to happen.

Ken White

Right, right.

Matt Williams

So we describe our culture as good and tough. We are good to each other and tough on the work. So the best days are the days when I can walk through the agency and hear people arguing about ideas. Really really fighting it out about ideas but then go across the street to the watering hole that we tend to frequent and see those same people laughing over a beer.

Ken White

Right.

Matt Williams

I want people to feel like this is an environment where they can passionately argue about ideas but where they feel there's an underpinning of support and caring. I want people to know that this place cares about them.

Ken White

Can you coach people to become like that? Or is it setting up the environment and bringing the right people in?

Matt Williams

It's a little bit of both. It definitely begins with bringing the right people in. What we found is that in a good and tough culture, you can bring the most talented person in the world in here, but if he or she is not a good cultural fit for the agency, it just isn't going to work. And we found ourselves in the past making the mistake of being overly enamored of massive talent. When you kind of know going in this person is not a good cultural fit, but you take a deep breath, and you do it anyway, and it never works. So I want to assess talent, but after I assess talent, I want to be able to assess cultural fit, and if both those things aren't there, we're not going to make the hire. So you have to bring the right people in, and then you have to create an environment where those people feel safe. Business has done a really good job over the last centuries of creating an environment where they use fear as a motivator, and in a creative environment, that is exactly the wrong thing to do because creative people wake up terrified every day, and the last thing you need to do is scare them. You need to make them feel like they're safe. And when they feel like they're safe, they'll amaze you with new ways of thinking about things. If you try to motivate them with fear, you'll turn creative people into exactly the kind of people you don't want them to be. Which is the people who look at you and think I wonder what he wants. I'm going to give him what he wants, and that's not what you want from them. You hire them because they think differently from you, and if you put them in a place where they feel like out of fear, they have to give you what you want. You're not getting value from them. You're not getting the value they're able to provide. So we try to create an

environment where we're good to each other. We're supportive of each other. We're respectful to each other. We care about each other, but we push the ideas really hard.

Ken White

The space has changed so dramatically. Social media, television's changing, print is everything's changing. How do you keep up and lead? How do you embrace that?

Matt Williams

We try to do two things. One is you have to stay facile in the technology. If you're not, you're gonna get left behind before you know. Before the starting gun sounds, you're going to be behind. So we encourage people to engage with social media, engage in new media we hire people who are experts in it. We create new disciplines like community management that we didn't have ten years ago five years ago. So you have to stay organizationally nimble that way. But you also have to stay true to the thing that made you the kind of company that you are, and I don't ever want to put form at the center of the definition of our company. I don't want to be a TV agency or even a digital agency. I want to be an idea agency. I want to put the idea at the center and surround that idea with whatever resources are required to bring it to life in whatever way it needs to be brought to life. I know that's going to be digital a lot of times because people are consuming more digital media than they ever have. So I need to have digital experts in the building, but I don't want to make the strategic mistake of defining this as a quote-unquote digital agency. You hear a lot of people talk about digital at the center. That is a strategic mistake to me because it falls into the category of defining your company or your marketing effort by the form your efforts take. I think that's the wrong thing to do. I want killer ideas. I want world-class ideas to come out of this agency all the time because they have for 50 years, and I want the form to change all the time because those forms are changing before our eyes, and we have to be nimble enough to do that. But if you fall victim to defining your company by the form your ideas take, you will become obsolete. It's just a question of when.

Ken White

Right.

Matt Williams

And it's gonna be faster than it's ever been because the forms become obsolete.

Ken White

But the forms have always changed, actually just a little faster now.

Matt Williams

Yeah.

Ken White

Then we've seen in the past.

Matt Williams

Think back 50 years ago. Everybody thought that television was going to put movies out of business. It was going to put radio out of business. Then the Internet was the death nail of television.

Ken White

Right.

Matt Williams

That doesn't happen. These media complement each other, and they fill people's lives in ways that are increasingly discerning because there's a finite amount of time. But as these different media come in and different ways to interact with brands come in. People start to find places in their lives for those things. And we have to know what those places are. And we have to use those media in a way that makes the most of the places people have put them in their lives.

Ken White

By putting the media first, is the tail wagging the dog.

Matt Williams

Exactly.

Ken White

In this world.

Matt Williams

Why wouldn't I put the idea first? Give you a killer media-neutral idea that I know will build a brand and a business and then make me nimble enough and capable enough to bring that idea to life in whatever way it needs. Maybe it's television. Maybe it's social. Maybe it's websites. Maybe it's PR. Maybe it's an event. Who knows, maybe it's all those things.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Matt Williams, CEO of the Martin Agency, in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the

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Ken White

Is it more fun today having all of those media at your disposal versus, say, the old days where it was pretty much print, radio, TV?

Matt Williams

It sure was easier then.

Ken White

Right.

Matt Williams

Is it more fun? It is more fun. You have to constantly get over the fear of I don't know what the hell's going on here because the media changes so much, consumers change so much, the way they interact with brands change so much. You have to be in a constant mode of learning, and if you can't change your mindset and it's hard to do. If you can't change your mindset from one of executing that which you know to one of constantly wondering what it is about the world you don't know and then executing around what you're learning. If you can't make that switch, you're gonna be in trouble. And that's a hard switch to make. And the other politic answer your question is, oh yes, so much more fun, so many more options. That's true, but it is a little terrifying because you're constantly learning.

Ken White

I just read on a social media blog the other day, and I think it was HubSpot. Someone wrote there's no such thing as a social media expert. It's moving too quickly. You can't be an expert.

Matt Williams

I think it's true.

Ken White

Yeah.

Matt Williams

It's part of the problem of defining your company by form because you're always going to be chasing it, you know.

Ken White

Right.

Matt Williams

Yeah. Social media experts. The minute they create the PowerPoint that tells you the secrets of social media, the social media is changed.

Ken White

It's gone.

Matt Williams

You got to constantly be running after it and learning as much as you can and trying things and experimenting. You have to create in an agency, and frankly, in any company, I think. You have to create a more experimental culture. You have to use the creativity that's resident in your company to be constantly experimented. And that's true of every company, not just quote-unquote creative companies like ad agencies.

Ken White

What do you like best about being CEO?

Matt Williams

I like watching over the culture of this community. So it rankles me sometimes when people call their companies their family. Oh, thank you. Welcome to the x y z family.

Ken White

Yeah.

Matt Williams

My family is at home. This is a community of people. This company, this agency, is a community of people who think the same things about what we do. We think that ideas are powerful things. We think that a great idea can enrich the life of everyone it touches. We think it can enrich our clients by building their business. We think it can enrich the culture it operates in by elevating that culture and not polluting it. Too much advertising's pollution. We don't want to make it right. We want to elevate the culture. We want to reward consumers for the time we asked them to spend with our ideas and have them interact with those ideas in new ways and bring a smile on their face. Bring a tear to their

eye. Have them connect with each other in different ways. Ideas are powerful things, and we all believe that. If I can combine that shared belief with the equally strong belief that a community of people who are good and tough can actually make their lives better. Work can be a positive force in people's lives. That's a big privilege for me.

Ken White

Yeah.

Matt Williams

And that's what this company represented to me for 23 years before I took this job. And it's what I hope that can continue to represent the people to the people who work here. That's what I love about this job.

Ken White

It's interesting we've had a number of CEOs on the podcast throughout the year and plus that we've been doing it. Culture seems to keep coming up. We just interviewed Mike Petters, the CEO of Huntington Ingalls. First thing he talked about culture, culture, culture, not family, culture, culture, and how when it works, look out.

Matt Williams

It's all you've got, really. I think culture is the new competitive advantage. It's not access to capital. It's not because capital can be accessed all over the place now. It's not physical assets because you look what people can create out of the ether using the Internet. I think competitive advantage is no longer whether you can get access to things no one else has access to or precious few have access to. And it's now a question of what you can do with those things to which everyone has access. You have to create a culture that can unleash the creativity of your people so that we can do new and never before seen things with the assets at our disposal with the information, with the capital, with the assets at our disposal. And you can't do that without a great culture.

Ken White

You can't hire perfectly 100 percent of the time.

Matt Williams

You won't.

Ken White

You're right.

Matt Williams

I wish you could.

Ken White

There will be those who aren't buying in who aren't on board. How do you handle that?

Matt Williams

You have a frank conversation with them, and I'll tell you this good and tough culture. We are good, and we want our people to succeed. I was lucky enough to go to the Berkshire Hathaway annual meeting, and somebody asked Warren Buffett what the biggest weakness in his company was. And he said we're too slow to make changes at the senior management level, and that's not going to change because I like my people, and I want them to succeed. And I think we're a little bit the same way, modestly if I could say that.

Ken White

Yeah.

Matt Williams

But the way you deal with it is you have a frank conversation with the person who's somehow not fitting in or not meshing the way you want them to mesh because they're feeling it. They felt it before you felt it. They felt it before you knew it. And it's awful for them, and it's awful for you. And the sooner you address it the better it is for everybody. It's painful. It's hard. You asked me what I love about this job. What I hate about this job is having to make decisions that I know will screw people's lives up. That's really hard to do.

Ken White

Sure.

Matt Williams

But if you address those situations, you know that person is feeling it, you know you're feeling it, and it's best for both of you to put it on the table and talk about it. Sometimes you can fix it. Sometimes you can't. But if you don't deal with it, it just gets progressively worse for the company and for the person, and that's no good for anybody.

Ken White

How do you spend your time? What's your day like?

Matt Williams

A lot of client work. I stay in constant touch with my clients. So conversations about campaigns that are in development or business challenges they might have or anything we

can be doing that we're not doing or ideas that we can have that we can bring proactively, so a lot of client contact. A lot of internal conversations about how do we staff this team. How do we make sure this work is as good as it needs to be? How do we present this work in a way that brings out the power of this idea? So reviewing creative work, reviewing strategic work talking about how we can bring it to life the right way. Some conversations with our leadership group. I'm very close to my fellow managing partners. There are three of us. It's me, Joe Alexander, who's the chief creative officer here, and Beth Kelley, who's our president and COO. The three of us are very tight. We've got a tight executive management group that we stay pretty close with. So a lot of conversations about that. It can be unpredictable. You know you're one phone call away from a fire drill, as we all know. But as long as I'm focusing on the people of the agency and the quality of the work, I'm paying attention to the right things. A lot of business development, so I'll talk to prospective clients a lot, but people at the agency and the quality of the work are the things I need to focus on.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Matt Williams, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Also, we'd love to hear from you regarding our podcast. Please share your comments, thoughts, or suggestions with us via email at podcast@wm.edu. That's podcast@wm.edu. Thanks to our guest this week Matt Williams CEO of the Martin Agency, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.