

STRIKING OUT ON THEIR OWN

What makes a top creative leave the sanctuary of the multinational agency with its generous pay cheque, the perks, the huge support and the global account wins, to strike out on their own? Campaign Brief's Heather Jacobs asks a handful of players who broke away from the establishment to become the proud owners of an independent agency.

"BUSINESS CLASS FLIGHTS. Long lunches. Infinite cab charges. Network junkets in exotic locations. We couldn't stand it anymore," jokes Justin Drape when asked why and his business partners Scott Nowell and Tim Bullock resigned from Saatchi & Saatchi Sydney to set up *Three Drunk Monkeys* back in 2006. When Bullock left to become a commercials director (he continued to collaborate with the Monkeys on the television series, *30 Seconds*), Mark Green, a former suit at Saatchi's, stepped in as the third partner/managing director.

For *The Three Drunk Monkeys*, the chance to work on creative projects that would never have happened if they'd stayed with a mainstream agency was a big part of the appeal. Last year they had two television shows on air – *30 Seconds* on The Comedy Channel and *My Family Feast* on SBS and they are currently working on a third TV series.

"We all thought there was a better agency model so we left to build it," says Drape. "We all went from a cushy monthly salary and an office with spectacular harbour views to an office that could be mistaken for a crack-den and one Internet cable to share between the three of us. That's when it pays to have a sense of humour, and belief in what you're doing. Our current office is more comfortable and there are now 62 Drunk Monkeys so we're surrounded by a talented team – that makes life a lot easier."

Drape admits it's been a hard slog, saying the partners are all in their thirties, but look and feel more like they're in their fifties.

"Fortunately I've got two talented and determined partners in Scott and Mark so we always try to support each other. The occasional group hug, or just a gentle shoulder rub every now and then really helps," he says.

He thinks the rise of the independent has been helped along by the fact that a lot of large clients are now open to the idea of working with independent agencies. Some of *The Monkeys'* larger clients are Telstra, Foxtel, Austar and NAB's UBank.

"If you can create outstanding work that works then clients would be crazy not to consider independents. One of the benefits is independents are often more nimble and can provide client solutions without going through countless



The Three Drunk Monkeys – from left: Scott Nowell, Mark Green and Justin Drape – the chance to work on creative projects that would never have happened if they'd stayed with a mainstream agency was a big part of the appeal. Last year they had two television shows on air – *30 Seconds* on The Comedy Channel and *My Family Feast* on SBS and they are currently working on a third TV series.



Droga5 Sydney partners David Nobay, Sudeep Gohil and Marianne Bess: "When you work for yourself you want to work harder anyway because you are motivated in a different way. A different part of your brain lights up," says Gohil

levels for approval," says Drape.

Clients are increasingly acknowledging that what they need is the right minds on their business, not a large amount of minds, says Leo Premutico. Appointed ECD of Saatchi & Saatchi New York at aged 28, he was enjoying a golden run when he and fellow ECD Jan Jacobs left to open their own shop, **Johannes Leonardo**, in a Tribeca warehouse in 2007.

Opening a new agency in New York, without a CEO or a suit, must have taken a level of fearlessness, but for Premutico it was a business decision.

"We felt that more and more creativity was becoming the most important marketing tool, so it was important for us to have a creative company, not just a company with creative people," he says. "When there's a whole population out there who could be endorsing your brand with the right idea, why should the size of the agency matter?"

It certainly hasn't done their careers any harm – Jacobs and Premutico were included in the 2010 *Creativity 50*, an annual list of the most influential and inspiring creative personalities in the world of the last year, as voted by US online ad site *Creativity*.

Says Premutico: "I remember when I would walk to the office across West 4th Street there was a faded chalk scribble that would always catch me out. It simply said, 'where are you going?' Every time I read it, it made me think: where was I going? To another meeting? To a corner office? Over time, without me realising it, I think these four words embedded themselves into my subconscious. For me loving and, to an extent, being out of your depth are the most important ingredients to producing the work you're really capable of producing. So Jan and I began directing a couple of things and really enjoyed that as a distraction. But we knew there was a bigger issue on the table. We felt the world around us was changing quicker than the big agency model could."

He thinks we've only seen the beginning of the changes about to occur in how we will ultimately communicate with consumers. In terms of the thinking required, Premutico found the transition from multinational to start-up quite natural.

"Anyone who uses creativity as the best way to solve a strategic

issue will find it so. When that's the start point, not having a pre-conceived media plan gives you more freedom, and I believe a greater chance of achieving what you're actually out to achieve."

The biggest shift has been in terms to the process; Premutico says they are more exposed, more engaged, and more responsible for creating work to solve a particular business issue. He works harder as owner of an agency, but in a different way. Now more than ever before, those couple of hours a day where he gets to let his mind wander are sacred.

There are certain things he misses about working in a multinational – it's human nature not to appreciate what you have until you no longer have it.

"So I'd be lying if I said there weren't times when I wished we had that army of people we could call on," he says. "Looking back, the biggest disadvantages of working for a multinational is behaving like you're in one when you're in one. All clients, no matter how big they or their agency is, surely must have realised they need to be as progressive and responsive as the consumers around them."

Premutico doesn't think it's fair to say that ambitious creatives can't exceed in a multinational structure but he's interested to see when we come out of the recession (whenever that may be) how much things will have been reassessed.

"Both on a technological and economic front we've been forced to change the way we go about things. And sometimes the only way change happens is when there isn't any choice," he says.

Premutico suggests that for the multinationals to keep their most talented creatives they need to produce the industry's best work.

"At the end of the day, us creatives are quite simple folk – just give us the opportunity to make something we're proud of and, it doesn't really matter where that is," he says. "Now how they go about doing that is another question entirely, and a much lengthier one."

Sudeep Gohil concurs, saying that if you are genuinely motivated by doing great creative work the only thing you want to do is better work. In January 2008, the planning director joined David "Nobby" Nobay and Marianne Bess as the third partner in **Droga5 Sydney** having worked at BBH in Tokyo →