

MediaCom develops its content arm under Morris

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MediaCom's James Morris talks to Campaign Magazine about the agency's expanding content creation division

Paul Weller, The Maccabees and The Vaccines were among artists who played at the iconic Abbey Road Studios, thanks to MediaCom, as part of an eight-part TV series created for Volkswagen. That this was devised by a media agency is a curious sign of the times.

MediaCom's content arm, MediaCom Beyond Advertising, handled the project in 2012, helping to shift 2,000 Beetles and reposition the car as the "fifth Beatle" through the TV series, YouTube content, events and a partnership with Spotify.

James Morris, the newly promoted global head of MediaCom Beyond

Advertising, says the Abbey Road initiative "did exactly what content marketing should do".

"It was a very integrated idea, and that's really the future," he says. "I think we submitted 50 concepts for how to make the Beetle cool and masculine again. One of these was the association between the Beetle and music - a Beetle appears on the cover of The Beatles' Abbey Road."

Morris stepped up at the end of last year to lead MBA after joining as its head of EMEA in 2011. The shop covers branded content, events, partnerships, sport, social and owned content, and was responsible for the social side of the T-Mobile "life's for sharing" flashmob dance in London's Liverpool Street station.

Since Morris joined, MBA has exploded from 35 people in the UK office to 435 staff working across 42 countries. Content is said to have accounted for 5 per cent of MediaCom's revenue last year, and the network's worldwide chairman and chief executive, Stephen Allan, expects this to double every two years until at least 2018.

Many agencies have dipped their toes into the content space, but few have got it right, Morris believes: "The thing most agencies have struggled with in setting up these units is strategic integration of content into their plans. Typically, the planning process takes place; there's some budget left at the end and it's seen as a bolt-on."

MBA has staff dedicated to integrating its work with the wider network, while others work only on production. It's a separation that Morris considers essential: "A lot of units have the same people producing and doing the stuff as the people that sell it. You're then in a very cyclical situation."

Described by those around him as affable and laid-back, Morris' expertise is in the big vision rather than the details. He previously led the digital arm of TwoFour, working on campaign films for DuPont and Ogilvy & Mather and developing an automated streaming system for radio on the BBC iPlayer.

"I grew up in quite a socialist environment, so it's quite perverse to end up in advertising," Morris says of his upbringing in the Midlands. He has high regard for the apprentice scheme at Media-Com and will soon be a speaker for Robert Peston's charity Speakers for Schools.

Morris sees his job as "trying to constantly look into the future" and defining the role content can play in the marketing mix, rather than simply doing it. He tries to hire people from different industries to encourage collaboration: "That's important because getting SEO and bloggers to work with TV people is tricky; they have to be the collaborative types."

Allan says: "James is a pioneer. He doesn't accept the status quo and has a 'nose' to seek out the people with the skills and backgrounds required to take advantage of the fast-changing landscape. I'm not sure about his trademark buttoned-up collar look but I guess, in this day and age, that's considered cool!"

MBA works with around 30 per cent of MediaCom's clients, and Morris relishes the access to brands such as Sony and Coca-Cola - both new clients last year. "People who have grown up in media agencies don't realise quite how lucky they are with the long-term clients that they have," he says. "I saw MediaCom as a bit of a sweets shop when I arrived." Meanwhile, a handful of smaller clients only work with MBA, such as Dassault Systèmes and Australian Wool Innovation.

Clients are evolving their mindsets and budgets to think of content as integral, Morris points out. As MBA continues to grow - its Latin American operation is expanding in particular, with teams being set up in Chile and Columbia - the shape of the agency could shift with it. "I guess there's an argument to say that we're moving to a full-service model," Morris says.

Of course, he admits, MBA has clashed with creative and PR agencies when their areas of expertise overlap.

"I'm not going to lie to you that there haven't been some areas where we've come up against each other, both within WPP and outside it," he says. "But the big fight is around guiding our clients strategically on how to succeed in this space; we can be fairly grown up about whoever creates the content.

"My view on this is that the people who do it best are the people who succeed."

This article was first published by Louise Ridley on [campaignlive.co.uk](https://www.campaignlive.co.uk)

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