

MediaCom's Worldwide CEO profiled in Financial Times

[MEDIA](#)

28 MAR 2013 7 min read

Stephen Allan explains how networking led to first foot on the ladder Original article by Natasha Stidder

For someone who has arrived at the office just 15 minutes earlier, after a day of travelling by air, rail and road from a client in Germany, Stephen Allan seems remarkably composed. But heading up a busy media agency in today's fast-changing digital environment means having to roll with the punches.

"Early in my career it was simple - newspapers or TV - and if you were feeling really adventurous you'd throw in a bit of radio or outdoor advertising. But today, the decisions are so much more complex, the choices vast, and for

a lot of clients it's quite daunting," says the global chief executive of MediaCom.

With widespread adoption of social media websites such as Facebook, devices such as iPads, and countless applications, advertisers can be excused for finding it difficult to keep up. But Mr Allan believes too much time is spent by clients on attempting to catch the latest big wave.

"Mobile advertising is still a very small part of the media pie, but while clients may only spend 1 per cent of their budget on it, they will spend 40 per cent of their thinking time on it," he says. "It's our job to tell our clients not what they want to hear, but what they need to hear - and keep them ahead of the game."

After more than 30 years at the same company, Mr Allan offers sage advice. From a young age he had a strong interest in photography, an interest that veered towards advertising over time. After completing his studies at the City of London School for Boys, he ditched his Ucas university application form and instead began applying for jobs.

He had no clue what kind of job he wanted, he just knew it had to be in advertising. So rather than sit back and wait for interview offers to come in, he began staking out regular drinking haunts of those in the industry, networking with as many people as possible until eventually he landed a temporary job with Mike Yershin, who had set up a media agency.

"From there my whole world opened up. But I was more specific this time - I wanted to work in media. I started getting interviews, and I still have every letter, even the rejections."

It was at this time that he interviewed for a job at The Media Business. The owner, Adam Rich, met with Mr Allan and offered him a job then and there, which he accepted. However, that same day he also met an advertising agency in Kensington, and Mr Allan was bowled over:

"It was a creative, full-service advertising agency. There were beautiful people wandering around - it was glamorous," he says.

After being offered a job in its media team, with a larger salary, Mr Allan found himself at a crossroads - advertising agency versus media agency. It was too early in his career to specialise, so Mr Allan decided to call Mr Rich and tell him he could no longer take the role. But he hadn't been prepared for the response.

"He said he thought I was making the biggest mistake of my life. The future lay with media agencies, and that the ad agency I'd been to see wouldn't exist in two years. He gave me 45 minutes to change my mind. After that I wasn't ever to speak to him again."

Persuaded, Mr Allan decided to go back to his original decision and join TMB, and 31 years later he looks back on it as a good move. He has stayed with the business, seeing it develop in various guises to what has become MediaCom. Meanwhile, two years after making his choice, Mr Rich was proved right as the Kensington agency disappeared.

Asked what has kept him at the company, he believes it's a case of the people and personal development. He has worked his way up, starting as the tea boy and progressing to media planner, new business director and then managing director. During that time he set himself the goal of making

MediaCom the number one agency in the UK. Three years later he succeeded. After advertising giant WPP bought the company in 2006, its chief executive Sir Martin Sorrell asked Mr Allan if he would be interested in setting up an umbrella organisation for its four global media agencies, known as Group M.

Mr Allan jumped at the chance, and today one in every three advertisements globally comes from that group.

Having launched the group, Mr Allan rejoined MediaCom five years ago to run its global operations, a role that continues to motivate and challenge, conducting business across continents and cultures.

Besides work, his other passion is a charity, Rays of Sunshine. Set up with his wife and friends, the charity grants wishes for terminally ill children. What started as an idea around the kitchen table has grown into a team of 16 based in Wembley, north London. In 2012 they fulfilled 650 wishes, from meeting various heroes and idols to flying passenger jets. It's a venture Mr Allan describes as his "real joy".

But he also retains his passion for media and advertising: "We're looking at things I wouldn't have imagined a few years back. Clients approach us wanting shows, video, online programmes, or to address the 'two-screen' issue, where it's now common to watch TV while also having a laptop on your lap."

There's no doubt that technological advances continue to place pressure on agencies to innovate and recapture tired audiences. But it's a challenge Mr Allan is more than happy to rise to.

"On the day I took the global MediaCom role I said 'let's see if we can become the number one agency in the world'. We're now number three, knocking on the door of number two. It's very exciting."

SECRET CV

Your biggest challenge?

It's always going to be the economy, and trying to demonstrate the real value of what we do, not allowing it to become a commoditised business.

If you could do any other job?

Probably a photographer. I've had a burning interest in it since I was young. And everyone wants to be a champion golfer.

Your proudest moment?

In my personal life, my son. He had a very difficult start in life, so I always call him the 'one in a million kid'. In work, the day we became the number one agency in the UK.

Your career advice to others?

You've got to listen, but you've also got to speak up. In this industry the cleverest person in the room doesn't always get noticed. Also, you should want your colleagues to be better than you, because smart people work with even smarter people. This is not a 'one-man' industry.

First published by the Financial Times on 28th March 2013.

[Read the article on the Financial Times website here.](#)

MEDIA