

How to maintain a startup culture when your business grows

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Startup culture is synonymous with innovation, adaptability, and a relentless pursuit of success. However, as businesses transition from fledgling ventures to established entities, they often face the challenge of preserving the entrepreneurial spirit that propelled their initial growth.

Durban-based digital marketing and e-commerce specialist The Digital Media Collective (TDMC) was founded around director Cheryl Ingram's dining table in 2013 and has quickly become one of South Africa's top digital agencies operating in the e-commerce and performance media realm. It now has more than 120 clients, 60 staff members and two offices.

But despite her agency bagging gold at the Smartie Awards last year, and being named Santam Fairlady Women of the Future Awards finalist, Ingram still likes to call her business a non-agency agency that leads with innovation and embraces a startup mentality. Here she outlines how she and her team manage to achieve this – and why she believes it is integral to their success.

Build your team with the right people

"At the core of our company culture are three values that define who we are and how we operate, creating a dynamic and cohesive environment," says Ingram. To maintain this, it is essential that new hires match the company culture and don't undermine it – that means prioritising cultural fit over mere skill sets in the hiring process. "This approach ensures that every team member not only contributes their talents but also resonates with our carefully nurtured team dynamics. Experience has taught us that preserving our team's harmony is crucial, as a single mismatch can disrupt the balance we've worked so hard to achieve."



Cheryl Ingram, TDMC

The second value is maintaining an entrepreneurial mindset by seeking out team members who are both thinkers and doers, and who are unafraid to question conventional methods, including challenging ideas, even when they come from senior members of the team. "There should be no fear around having a different opinion and no fear of challenging what's always been done before. This trait fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, ensuring that we are always at the forefront of our industry."

The final value is passion – for Ingram this is non-negotiable. When building their team, TDMC seeks out individuals who are passionate not just about the industry, but about the business's unique mission and vision. "Candidates must demonstrate a genuine interest in being a part of our story and show that they understand what makes us more than just a workplace. This deep sense of connection and enthusiasm is what propels us forward and sets us apart in a competitive market."

Streamline your leadership structure

As a company grows, so too does the need for more structured teams. It can be tricky, however, to balance this with the agility and innovation typically associated with startup environments. TDMC's approach has been to maintain a streamlined leadership structure while distributing management responsibilities across an extended leadership team.

“By limiting the number of direct reports to three or four for each manager, we can ensure that directors remain agile and focused on strategic initiatives rather than getting mired in the day-to-day details of people management,” says Cheryl. “This setup not only facilitates quick decision-making but also fosters a clear understanding among team members about their roles and the expectations within the business.”

Empower and reward staff

Often when companies scale up and team size increases, innovation and creativity get thwarted by more hierarchy and approval channels. To avoid this, it is essential to empower teams to think creatively and take ownership of their projects, giving them the sort of autonomy you often see in startup environments.

“Everyone is empowered to run their portfolio like it’s their own business. They are invested too – they own their monthly forecast, plus our bonus structure rewards performance monthly. The team has to deliver exceptional results for their clients, and in doing so, they get rewarded beyond their salary every single month,” she says. This instant earnout model was implemented at TDMC in July 2021, and Cheryl says it has completely transformed how they run their business.

Strive to be your clients’ favourite

As companies expand, clients can often feel like they are simply a number – the personal attention that they used to receive can be undermined. It is important to ensure that clients still feel like they are valued and that your team is wholly committed to their success. One way to do this is to ensure that your business has the capacity to deliver the best service to each client.

“Much of the reason we have a staff of 60 is so that our teams are not managing a list of clients the length of their arms. Every portfolio at TDMC is small. We align number of billed hours to every single portfolio and look at capacity and capability versus client need,” says Ingram. Every client has access to their account team’s personal contact numbers, and Ingram’s too. “I always make myself available even if that means a 10pm WhatsApp or a call on a Sunday afternoon.”

Ingram says the advice shared with her team by the keynote speaker – entrepreneur, author and chef, Miles Kubheka – at their recent company offsite team event really resonated with her. “He said you don’t want to be the *best* in the industry, you want to be the *favourite*. You want to be your clients’ favourite. Miles used the analogy of restaurants. You might eat at the best restaurant once – as a treat. And often leave underwhelmed, feeling like the value wasn’t there. But you eat at your favourite every week because the service is consistent, the value is exceptional, they know you when you walk in, you always have your same favourite waitron, and the relationship is tried and tested and underpinned by trust,” says Ingram. And that is exactly what her team strives to be, their clients’ favourite paid media partner.

Celebrate your wins and don’t neglect team building

Ingram says to ensure that the spirit of enthusiasm and camaraderie stays alive, it is important to celebrate wins, take on board learnings as a team, and invest in team-building activities.

“We celebrate everything! From birthdays to babies, engagements to marriages and all our clients too. We announce our wins loudly and proudly across the team and celebrate them as a business,” she says. “We also share the learnings from our losses and apply the takeouts.”

It is also important to create opportunities for your team to bond outside of the office environment. “I believe team building is exceptionally important – and it’s the very reason why we take the whole team away for two nights at the start of each year,” says Ingram. “This is our ‘bonding tour’ and what goes on tour stays on tour. These two days are special beyond measure, and this is where our culture comes from.”

In addition, the agency schedules monthly roundups and often includes a social to go hand-in-hand with that. “We have a rolling padel court booking and an excellent crew that roll up to smash a few balls. Our culture comes from our people – and they are magical.”

Check your mindset

But perhaps the most important thing is mindset – Ingram says despite TDMC's phenomenal growth, she still thinks of the agency as 'small'.

"I guess it's a bit like being a parent and still seeing your 17-year-old as your baby. Maybe we are considered 'big' as an independent agency, but we are not at the scale of the network agencies, and that's not where I want us to be. When I stand up at our offsite team meetings and speak about our annual award winners, I need no preparation"

She says she knows exactly why they have won, what they have done through the year, what accounts they work on and what their family life is like. "I can talk off the cuff about them with meaning and from the heart," says Ingram. "And this is something I never want to change – we are after all a people first business, and I want that to ring true every single day."

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