

Decade to remember for city company

Having discussed their original business plan over a pint of beer, Steve Johnstone and Dan Hay are raising a glass to ten successful years in charge of Alliance Creative.

From those early conversations in an Edinburgh bar a decade ago, the pair have established the firm as Scotland's biggest creative collective and are looking to build an even stronger brand going forward.

From humble beginnings, the Alliance now has a core team covering print and digital design, web development and motion graphics all backed up by a dedicated project management team. The business boasts a further network of more than 100 specialists drawn from a wide range of creative disciplines, all based throughout Scotland.

From TV/video and artwork to copywriting and brand strategy, they provide creative services to a diverse UK-wide client base, including the likes of Virgin Money, Phoenix Group, VELUX, Macdonald Hotels, ZSL London Zoo, National Museums Scotland, National Galleries of Scotland and Edinburgh Napier University.

"We're a completely different company to the one which started out in 2011, but that has been a gradual process," said Dan. "We have had to change with the times and I'd like to think we

have managed that quite successfully.

“Steve and I knew each other for over 20 years before setting this up. It was all about attracting people we trusted who had a really good name in our industry. We are very selective about the people we get involved with, meaning our clients know we only supply a high-calibre workforce.

“The reputation we have built up has really helped us expand our client base.”



Co-founder Steve admitted it took a “lightbulb” moment a few years ago when the business model was changed to allow the Edinburgh-based company to grow and unleash its potential.

“At the outset we felt compelled to do everything ourselves, but about four years ago we had a massive “growing up” period when we realised we had to change to take the business to the next level,” he said.

“We looked at our roles as directors and learned to step back

and entrust our staff with more of the management of day-to-day operations. The staff know that their input is crucial to driving success, as well as shaping their own career paths, essentially making sure we are playing everyone to their strengths.

“We want to give greater ownership to the people who work in our business. In other agency cultures, the feeling of self-worth and inclusivity had often been eroded and we are proud to have bucked that trend. It’s not about Dan and I always calling the shots, we want to give people a voice in determining the direction in which the business is going, and also how they live their lives outwith work.”

It’s appropriate that the foundations for Alliance Creative were first discussed over a beer or two as the social aspect of business life continues to play an important role in the company’s progress.

“It’s always been a key driver to foster a real community aspect to our business, by re-addressing things like paying everyone for every hour they work and paying them on time. These complaints were common in our industry and ones we felt we could put right,” said Steve.

“We are proud to have brought a bit of stability to the self-employed in our sector, making sure people’s rates remain appropriate and them not having to chase invoices either, even though we maybe as a business hadn’t been paid ourselves by our clients.

“We have managed to do that from very early on and it has been a big plus for us as a company. It helps enforce that element of trust, we can’t underplay how important that is. We also applied an overtime payment structure for any out-of-hours work they conduct, something that seems to be very rare these days, in our experience.

“Socially, we also realised the need for regular get-

togethers. We have a focused event for just the Alliance folk, hosting a summer and Christmas party as a 'thank you' as well as a few other Friday "gatherings". It's hugely important to us, giving people a sense of belonging to an organisation rather than just being out there on their own.

"It's something we have had a lot of positive feedback about and aim to continue."

While delighted to celebrate 10 years of driving change in the industry, the pair are relieved to have coped with the challenges of Covid over the last 24 months or so, staffing levels having actually risen by 25% during the pandemic.

"We had to knuckle down and protect the core part of the business, which thankfully we managed to do," said Dan. "Everyone pulled together when they needed to and were brilliant.

"The last couple of years have been tough but everyone has been so patient and understanding as we figured out the best way forward for the business. We had to furlough everyone at the start so it was just myself and Steve doing the work, but gradually we were able to bring them back as the workload increased again.

"We have an amazing team behind us and Covid showed just how well they get on and want to support each other. Securing jobs for our workforce has been a major highlight of the past couple of years. That experience, as tough as it was, has us in a good place to push on this year and we're really looking forward to the future."

So what does 2022 have in store for Alliance Creative?

"Big idea creative campaigns are one of the things we want more of in the new year, as is strategic planning – we are confident in our services, and have a lot to offer," added Steve.

“We are the agency alternative. The depth and breadth of high-quality creatives you can tap into with the Alliance is unrivalled in Scotland, so we’re as good as any agency out there in terms of the level of experience on offer, we just want to put them all to good use.”

For anyone looking to market their business more effectively in 2022, it costs nothing to have a quick chat with the Alliance – maybe over something cold and refreshing!

www.alliancecreative.co.uk