

PCI FITCH HIRED AN INTERIM MANAGING DIRECTOR TO HELP STABILISE THE BUSINESS AFTER A MERGER AND THE DEPARTURE OF ITS PREVIOUS MD

Restoring the balance

PETER COWIE ENJOYED probably one of the best transitions into the role of managing director you could hope to have. Managing Director of design and events company PCI Fitch, he took over from Impact Executives interim executive Richard Owen, who had been holding the fort, in February.

“It was like being given your first two-wheeled bike with stabilisers,” he recalls. “I benefited from Richard’s experience, knowledge and skills and sought his advice, and then took the stabilisers off and went freewheeling. It was all very smooth.”

“It’s no good sticking an interim executive in a glass box in the corner,”

Owen had stepped into the void in November, seven months after the departure of the previous managing director Richard Bamford. The company was going through a period of change as a result of the takeover of PCI by WPP in 2004, and PCI’s subsequent merger with Fitch. Distracted by the reorganisation, the company’s attention was turned inwards, and it lost its ability to attract new clients as a result.

Though the quality of the work it did for its existing clients remained high – “they probably wouldn’t have

realised we had a problem,” says Owen – PCI Fitch was struggling financially and shed one-third of its 95 staff, including most of the senior team. As one of the remaining employees said later: “It was as though the parents had gone, leaving the kids home alone.”

Owen joined as interim Managing Director three days before 20 of the staff were due to go. “Emotions were running high,” he says.

His first task in the role was to firefight the redundancy exercise. “The head of HR, Mandy Habgood, had prepared well for the redundancies, and a measure of our success was that we lost no key members of staff subsequently, despite the inevitable shock to the firm.”

The next challenge was to take control of the company, recover managerial focus and ensure that the appropriate financial disciplines were in place and understood by everyone. “The people beneath management level were extremely good creatively and in terms of project delivery, but they had not been that well educated in the commercial and



financial aspects of how the company was run," says Owen.

His routine day-to-day work involved getting a handle on hygiene factors such as terms and conditions and contracts. But a big part of his role was to provide a sense of security, stability and reassurance, as well as practical help, to people who just wanted to do a good job.

"Lots of people were stepping up to new roles and needed support to do that," he says. "The presence of someone with grey hairs and a certain calmness helped to rebuild their confidence. A lot of what I did was to remove things that were getting in people's way so that they could get on and do what they did best and fulfil their own, and the company's potential."

PCI Fitch took its time appointing the new managing director, given the critical importance of getting the right

person after the turbulence of the preceding months. They hired Cowie from advertising agency JWT, but as his strength was in winning new business, the powers that be thought it would be sensible for Owen to coach him into the MD role while allowing him the time to focus on building the client base.

Richard is very adaptive to different environments,

The pair sat side-by-side for three months in order to share their experiences. As Cowie says: "It's no good sticking an interim executive in a glass box in the corner."

They got on very well. "Peter is very nice and easy to get on with and was looking to learn rather than being macho and thinking he had all the answers," says Owen. "I deferred in a formal sense to him and weaned people off me onto him, while ensuring the operational side of the business was as tight as possible. As a result the handover was very smooth and we soon got to the point where he thought he could handle it on his own."

Cowie credits Owen for the role he played in stabilising the business.

"Richard inspired people who had been through a really difficult time with the confidence that they could succeed," he says. "He introduced new systems, improved communications, built on the business's strengths and reduced its weaknesses and, in short, gave me a much better operational platform."

Cowie also pays testimony to Owen's people skills. "Richard is very adaptive to different environments. The chemistry between us was very good, though we were from different backgrounds. He also dealt brilliantly with the creative types in the agency."

Cowie conducted one-to-one interviews with all 65 staff, and, with Owen's help, appointed a new management team of six people, who meet every morning to review the past day. All the staff meet every Monday morning, and on the last Friday of the month everyone participates in a 'show and tell' to share their work.

The also pair identified five key areas of development for PCI Fitch, including financial efficiency, creative output, internal communications, office environment and business development, and allocated teams to drive each as part of a process of continual improvement.

Cowie had never worked with an interim executive before. "The experience was highly positive and I would do it again," he says. "Interims have a helicopter view, they share best practice from their experience of a variety of different businesses, they ask questions that others are not prepared to, and they are objective and apolitical."

Cowie says that Owen left earlier than was planned "because he did such a good job," and Cowie is now building the business from the platform he inherited. "We have a new sense of confidence, clients are reassured and we are winning new business," he says. "We are also working as a full team rather than as isolated units, and we are communicating more efficiently both internally and externally. We are even hiring a few people now again too."

Owen says: "In a curious way I enjoyed leaving most, because of the satisfaction of a job well done."

And Cowie's view of Impact Executives? "Quite simply: they put the right person in the right place at the right time."

THE INTERIM

52-year-old Richard Owen spent 20 years with Nationwide, starting as a graduate trainee and working his way up through a number of senior roles, including Company Secretary, Head of Corporate Planning and Head of Customer Services. He had a stint in the mobile phone industry before joining marketing agency Wunderman as Operations Director.

He has been an interim executive for six years, working in sectors from telecoms and financial services to marketing, for clients including BT, Broadsystem and Learn Direct.

He says: "I go into places where there has been some sort of operational or managerial disturbance and get things back on track by reinstating calm and stability and allowing the positive energy to resurface."

