

DAVID GORDON: HELPING BUSINESSES GET CREATIVE

By Karen Christensen

Many people aren't creative in the workplace – but this has less to do with their natural abilities than with the environment they work in, according to **David Gordon** (MBA '97). David has a great recipe for stifling creativity in the workplace. "Put up organizational barriers that encourage people to take the most obvious way out of every problem. Like magic, creativity will vanish from your organization." Luckily for him, David has never worked in a place like that.

As vice president of the Corporate / Public Affairs practice at Cohn & Wolfe in Toronto, David oversees a creative team and provides senior level support on accounts that include Ford Canada, Citibank Canada, Rogers AT&T Wireless and Deloitte & Touche. He is part of the Toronto senior management team headed up by senior vice president & general manager and fellow Rotman alumnus **Carol Panasiuk** (EMBA '91). Originally established in 1970 in Atlanta, Cohn & Wolfe is the 16th largest Public Relations agency in the world, employing close to 400 people in 12 countries. Its Canadian operations are in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal.

Creativity is Cohn & Wolfe's bread and butter. "It's what we do," says David. "We even have a Chief Creative Officer here, which is unique in the PR industry." David's job involves "finding creative ways of packaging my clients' stories and communicating them to the world – and that doesn't simply mean attaching a basket of balloons to a news release, or staging a photo-op."

Rather, David must pay close attention to a client's corporate goals and develop creative mechanisms to communicate them that are consistent with the corporate objectives. "The marrying of the strategic and the creative is the crux of PR," he says. "At the end of the day, we're helping clients achieve their corporate strategy, improve their brand image and reputation, and communicate their distinct story to the market."

To encourage creative thinking, Cohn & Wolfe has developed a 'Creativity Tool Kit' – a patented process for creative thinking, developed for the company by psychologists. Just what might we find in the Cohn & Wolfe tool box? "Word association tools, visual prompts, role-playing, storytelling, puzzles – all kinds of fun stuff," he says. To help people think creatively, David says you've got to challenge their perceptions and force them to look at the world from a different perspective. "One trick we use is that we don't always give people the 'whole picture' – we make them fill in some of the blanks on their own."

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The challenge in PR isn't to come up with creative ideas, he says, it's to figure out how to best use creative ideas to achieve a particular strategy. "That's the hard part: that's where the skill comes in." That's also where his MBA comes in, he says. Cohn & Wolfe Toronto has three MBAs on its 35-member staff. "Having a business perspective helps us grasp our clients' corporate strategies."

David says the key to managing creative people is to challenge them, reward them, and recognize them. Giving them room to grow is another key component. "As a consultant, and I need to bring a lot of the same sensitivities to managing my team that I bring to my clients: I make sure they get recognized, and I encourage them to share their aspirations with me, so I can help them achieve them."

A lot of organizations don't put enough effort into encouraging innovation, says David. "It's too easy to set up a 'procedures manual,' where everyone gets the same amount of office space, a job description, etc. It's harder to constantly challenge yourself by loosening – or eliminating – those structures. But that's how innovation happens."

When he's not pondering recipes for creativity and innovation, David loves to ski and hang out with his wife Gillian and kids Conor, Devin and Caitlyn — aged 10, seven and four. "We're city-dwellers, but we head up north most weekends – whenever there's snow." David is also an active volunteer who works as a member of the board of Junior Achievement of Toronto & York Region. His commitment to volunteerism extends to the workplace. "We do a lot of *pro-bono* work for charities like the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, the Canadian Business Hall of Fame Foundation, and for the past three years, Fashion Cares. This allows our people to get involved in something that's meaningful to them."

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