

Agency of the Decade, Edelman

In a decade during which almost all of the world's largest public relations agencies—nine out of the top 10—were owned by giant publicly-traded, advertising-dominated holding companies, Edelman's performance demonstrated that independence was not a liability; that it could, properly leveraged, be turned into a significant source of competitive advantage.

Edelman began the decade as the world's sixth largest public relations firm, with fee income of \$186 million. It ended it as one of the top three, having increased fees by more than 150 percent over a 10 year period, almost certainly the largest increase among any of the top tier agencies (it is difficult to be sure, because of the way most holding companies chose to respond to the Sarbanes-Oxley regulations that were introduced early in the decade.)

But it is not only Edelman's financial performance that earned it recognition as our Agency of the Decade.

The firm, which at the beginning of the decade was probably best known for its work in the consumer and healthcare arenas, expanded its capabilities in the corporate and public affairs sectors, handling some of the decade's most significant initiatives, from the launch of GE's groundbreaking Eco-magination campaign to the petroleum industry's public affairs efforts in Washington, D.C., to a wide range of reputation issues for retailer Wal-Mart.

Geographically too, Edelman diversified its business. Long a leader in the North American agency realm, it had struggled to find the right leadership in Europe and Asia-Pacific, but the appointments in the first half of the decade of David Brain and Alan Vandermolen delivered much needed stability and impressive growth, so that today Edelman can legitimately claim to be among the top three in terms of quality in each of the world's three major regions.

It was also a pioneer in integrating first word-of-mouth and later digital and social media into mainstream public relations programming, hiring prominent industry bloggers to establish itself as a thought leader and a first mover, and later launching a training program designed to ensure that all of its people, young and (though reverse mentoring) old, were well-versed in the latest communications tools and technologies.

Its intellectual leadership was similarly impressive. Its Trust Barometer, launched at the turn of the century, was the industry's signature piece of research for the duration of the decade, measuring opinion leader confidence in government, corporations and media; tracking the rise of peer-to-peer communication and the decline of traditional authorities; and providing data that was quoted widely within the industry, by the media, and by anyone interested in tracking changing patterns of influence.

Perhaps most important, however, a firm that began the decade with a culture that appeared to encourage a focus on new wins rather than existing business and individualism rather than teamwork ended the 00s as one of the leaders in our Best Agencies to Work For research, with a first-rate professional development program, a variety of internal initiatives designed to encourage personal development and community involvement, and a best-in-class quality control campaign.