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Making the Leap From Holding Co. Exec to Indie Entrepreneur

Sean Finnegan Talks About Leaving Omnicom for Vibrant Media

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- In a move that surprised much of the interactive marketing community, Sean Finnegan, who was elevated to CEO of Omnicom Media Group Digital in July, has left the company to become chief media officer of independent contextual-advertising company Vibrant Media.

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What does Vibrant do? The 7-year-old digital shop places ads within online editorial content by hyperlinking words within the text. When a user moves a mouse over a word, an ad related to that word is activated. In many cases, that ad contains a click-to-play video.

Mr. Finnegan, who will officially assume the post Feb. 1, and his new boss, Vibrant CEO Doug Stevenson, spoke with Ad Age yesterday.

Ad Age: You were just named CEO of Omnicom Media Group Digital in July. Why make the jump and why now?

Sean Finnegan: I've been on the service side for seven years. I decided personally and professionally to look into the product side. It's a new environment, one that's intimate and entrepreneurial, yet still proven -- we have 3,000 publishers, 120 million-person reach. It's doing extremely well revenue-wise, has a great reputation and performs well for advertisers. I made that decision about the environment and came to a place where I have passion about the product and a [place that has a] proven model. And Doug has given me the keys to oversee marketing, business development and product innovation.

Ad Age: This is not the first time we've seen major executives jump from client side to smaller, more entrepreneurial sell-side companies, and it's surely not the last. Is this a trend?

Mr. Finnegan: It's becoming more similar than dissimilar. We're seeing buyers buying sellers buying buyers. Everyone's cooperating and competing. It does come down to the difference between size and scale. I'm not sure I could have gone to a pure start-up where they're constantly seeking funding. These guys are profitable, proven and established. We've been doing business for years.

Within our industry it's a little par for the course where there are a lot of digital-marketing experts and veterans trying different things but not changing too much of their job descriptions. This is a real business now, it wasn't 10 years ago. There's real profit generated and real value being created for consumers.

Ad Age: What'll be goal No. 1 at Vibrant?

Doug Stevenson: It'll be about taking the message to the publishers and advertisers that there's a hell of a lot of power with contextual advertising and the brand impact of video. Bringing those two elements together is very powerful. Also important is focusing on users -- in 2008 we'll be thinking, "How do we optimize the service we deliver to our 120 million users?" You'll see some innovations on the product that will be supplying more information and more resources to the user. We have a great position in the content, but over time we've realized we can supply more than advertising in that spot. We're communicating the power of relevancy and user initiation in advertising. And it's video that's delivered in a format that isn't pre-roll or post-roll.

Ad Age: It's interesting that you're trying to add more content to the ads -- tell me more about that. Is that to make them less annoying to those of us who inadvertently mouse over them?

Mr. Stevenson: If users choose to mouse over [the highlighted word], there is advertising. For most users, they won't see ads unless they choose to move over. But we'd hope that if you're on the AutoWeek site and you're reading about Jeep, there'll be a relevant advert from Jeep and there'll be sight and sound ... but alongside that, there's other elements of information that we can supply. Imagine us as a browser within content.

Ad Age: Sean, tell me about leaving Omnicom and what happens to your role at that company?

Mr. Finnegan: Well, truthfully it wasn't a surprise. I'm helping with the replacement. I've got a trusty list of stars that I'm beginning to engage. The entire management team is in place, the functions are in place. They're just going to replace my position.

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