

Critical Mass: the unagency

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HQ: Calgary

Offices: Chicago, Toronto, New York, Austin, Atlanta, Las Vegas, London, UK

Founded: 1995

Employees: 530

Ownership: Omnicom (52%), Employees (48%)

Major clients: Dell, Hyatt, Rolex

With "BeerCamp unconferences," a generous sabbatical program, free breakfasts, frequent parties and an internal awards show, Critical Mass

knows how to keep staff happy. As the

award-winning (including Webbys, One Show and London International) interactive agency continues to add big clients like Dell Europe to its roster, having the right people - the ones who "get" the importance of one-to-one marketing - in place to facilitate its growth is a big focus.

"Getting and keeping the right people is essential," says Dianne Wilkins, CEO. "The thing we look for above all else is attitude."

The agency puts its money where its mouth is. If it finds someone who is "Critical Mass material" - smart and passionate about the ad business - the managers are empowered to hire first (even if candidates don't have industry experience) and figure out where to place them later. New hires tend to be youngish, from fields like illustration and product design.

The company has invested heavily in incentives to promote employee referrals. Staff who recommend successful candidates receive "significant" cash bonuses, and are entered into a draw for a big prize, like a trip. The company is averaging 147 hires a year, with a turnover rate below industry standards.

Critical Mass's focus on professional development certainly helps the out-of-industry hires. The Chicago office brings in outside speakers every two weeks to educate staff on new technology and trends, and Calgary flies in prominent speakers to educate and pump up staff. The agency also hosts "BeerCamp unconferences," in which employees lead informal seminars, complete with beer.

The Calgary, Toronto and Chicago offices have living room-like areas called "Hives" equipped with gadgets like Nintendo Wiis to not only help employees relax, but also keep them in touch with new technology and clients' products.

Staying in touch with the brands they work on extends beyond home electronics, too. For Hyatt, Critical Mass recently launched an online contest with a grand prize of 50 free nights. The Hyatt Ultimate Adventure Challenge invites families to submit videos demonstrating their passion for travel. To research the brand's offerings, some Critical Mass employees had the arduous task of flying to various Hyatt resorts to compile original footage for the contest site, www.hyattultimateadventurechallenge.com.

Collaboration is big at Critical Mass. The agency is organized into multidisciplinary "business units" that can include up to 60 people - account, tech, creative, insight, etc. - and are divided by client. Rolex gets its own unit, while other units may work on up to five accounts. "There's a healthy rivalry between the units," says Wilkins. "It helps raise the quality bar."

The agency recently launched a new digital studio called "Curium," out of the Calgary and Chicago offices, which specializes in CG, audio and video. The studio led the latest online project for Las Vegas Tourism, VegasVisionary.com, to generate viral buzz for Sin City. The site revolves around a character, Vic Wonder, who delivers customized fortunes for visitors. Curium filmed over 5,000 different clips of the actor giving "fortunes" mapped together with a database to customize responses based on information visitors are prompted for on the site.

"We are definitely building the company for the future." says Wilkins, adding that at any given time there are over 30 paid interns on board. Critical Mass also offers a generous program in which employees are entitled to one sabbatical - typically three months long - every five years.

The agency opened a London office to work on the Dell Europe business

last month.