

Your room is here, by the beach

Clients, as guests, at its Mallorca base? Welcome to start-up WtOC

▶ **PICTURE THE SCENE.** It's 7.00 am. The sun streams in through the shutters. It's too hot and bright to sleep, so you stumble out of bed for some coffee. There in the kitchen is the account planner from your ad agency, eating breakfast.

Most marketers would admit, albeit under duress, that they couldn't live without their ad agency. But that doesn't mean they want to live with them. That, however, is exactly what is expected of clients at Welcome to Orange County, an ad agency set up by four Scandinavian advertising executives, for marketers with pan-European aspirations.

New clients spend two or three days locked up with the agency, developing their brief in a session WtOC calls "the dream definition workshop". To make matters worse, this cosy client-agency sleep-over isn't held at a conference centre or hotel, but at the agency itself.

WtOC's partners, former DDB Copenhagen creative directors John Schoolcraft, Joachim Hedvall, Jakob Wastberg and Christian Aronson, say the intention is simply to engage more deeply with their client's business.

"We are trying to develop a different way of working. We want to construct a creative refuge away from all the pressures of everyday life. It's the best way to ensure that the client retains ownership of the work while we come to a rapid understanding of them and their problems," explains Wastberg, WtOC's chief executive.

If the prospect is underwhelming, the good news is that WtOC is located in the pretty town of Caller, on the northern coast of Mallorca. Clients are put-up in one of four architect-designed guest suites, with 20ft ceilings and 12ft windows, carved out of an old clothing factory.

But location isn't the sum of their positioning. A key plank of the WtOC platform is that the agency only works on a project basis. "Retainers reward the wrong thing. They encourage agencies to provide services that the client may not actually need and fail to compensate for the thing of real value we provide - ideas," says Wastberg.

Obviously one of the great advantages of having so much client contact in one session is that it does away with the subsequent need for routine contact during the life of the project - difficult when you are on the far side of a distant island.

It is tempting to dismiss their "way of working" as little more than a clever rationale for a bunch of scamsters intent on the good life. But while there is undoubtedly a quality-of-life argument, there are also powerful business reasons for being in Mallorca, claims Wastberg.

For one thing, it's accessible. "If you are doing pan-European work, you have to locate somewhere and there will always be lots of travel involved. Mallorca is only a couple of hours flight from anywhere in Europe and there are many flights a day to most countries from Palma."

It's also cheap. With the advent of budget airlines, travel costs are possibly lower than for other locations. Property costs are also significantly lower than in more established cities, (how else could WtOC afford to put up clients?), as are local labour costs.

"More to the point, we don't have account people and we only take on skills as and when we need them. It's far easier to lure freelancers (and clients) to spend a few days in Mallorca than it would be to



WtOC: "We are trying to develop a different way of working"

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ask them to Brussels or London," says Schoolcraft, the creative director.

Once you've got past the seminars and client hotel, it becomes clear that WtOC is at heart a no-frills operation that is trying to do to advertising what the low-cost airlines did to air travel - strip out all the unnecessary costs and focus on what really matters.

Nonetheless, the agency admits that it is not markedly cheaper than its rivals. "It's just that we charge clients for insight and creativity and nothing else. We are completely transparent on all other charges. In fact, we prefer suppliers of print and photography to invoice clients direct. As a result, we believe we are actually better value," says Wastberg.

He agrees that its location and way of working mean WtOC will appeal only to a minority of clients who don't want or need hand-holding. But its structure - four principal fee-earners supporting very low fixed costs - means that the agency, which is largely self-financed, is in clear profit after only six months.

So far, WtOC has devised the launch of a global liqueur brand, developed a new brand strategy for furniture giant Ikea in Denmark, and plotted the pan-European debut of an online digital business service called Chambersign.

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Those clients certainly had to overcome some initial scepticism. "At first I was very reluctant. But once I actually went to Mallorca, the workshop was one of the best I have ever done. We quickly became a team and now we work with weekly reports by phone and e-mail, and meet monthly," says Anders Orre of Scandinavian Trust Group, which owns Chambersign.

Ikea Denmark is another fan, although it found the no-frills approach more alluring than the location. "I'm not interested in social lunching and Mallorca is irrelevant," says marketing manager Richard Gotbring. "But I want good ideas delivered as inexpensively as possible. The seminars work very well to force you to make decisions and commit to a course of action. I bought them for their cost-consciousness, their honesty and their creativity."

WtOC will never rule the world. But then, it does not want to. However, it is doing something different that may just provide regional advertisers with a real alternative to the big agency chains - and get a tan in the process.

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