David Cohen oversees media activities worldwide for Universal McCann, the global media company that is a unit of Interpublic Group, and is the agency’s go-to guy for digital media strategy. As the former US director of digital communications, Cohen spearheaded the agency’s digital and alternative media offerings across the globe and integrated digital best practices throughout Universal McCann. The agency’s global clients include The Coca-Cola Co., Johnson & Johnson, L’Oréal, MasterCard, Microsoft and Sony.

Can you describe your role and what it entails?

David Cohen: In my current role, I’m taking everything we’ve done in the past 15 to 20 years in digital—leveraging data, market optimization and buying against business outcomes—and trying to apply that to all facets of our business across channels and legacy media types. The erosion of mass media has necessitated our going to market in a different way. The rise of programmatic ad buying and the use of third- and first-party data have had profound implications. We’re looking to develop much more of an in-market optimization model for traditional media, similar to digital.

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I wear a couple of hats. I ran digital media in the US for several years and digital globally for almost two years. I oversee all of our investment across channels today in the US, and I continue to maintain a global digital community.

At the core, my job is about taking the things we have learned and succeeded or failed at in digital and applying that to legacy channels and media.

How do you extend your role globally?

Cohen: We have leads that have been identified by cluster around the world. We get together biweekly with some of our leading global partners to talk about learnings, best practices and the activities going on with our global clients to create some synergy there. We want to create relevant global deal structures such as ad-serving partnerships, media relationships and so forth.
We're trying to standardize ad operations in a similar way. We have a process that's the same if you're in Singapore, Mexico or New York. We want to make sure we have consistency in the way we go to market as it relates to digital trends—because our global clients demand it. I maintain a community of people around the world who bounce ideas off of one another like, “Hey, did you see this company? I just met with them and they have great visual recognition software.” That kind of stuff.

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What are your three biggest business priorities?

Cohen: As a large media brands organization, our goal is to drive an automation agenda. The business is very complex—it’s still highly manual and requires a lot of human capital to do what we do. We are trying to use technology, data and systems to automate what can be automated. Automation and reduction of complexity is definitely an objective.

Second, we want to buy against and get paid against our ability to drive business results for clients. Success isn’t about driving a CPM from $10 to $9—it’s about increasing market share, driving brand preference, increasing Keller Fay [Group] scores, and so forth. We want to buy against business outcomes and get paid for that.

Third, we want to change the dynamic from the historical way that we have gone to market, which has been spending most of our time upfront in planning, a little bit of time in execution and an even smaller amount of time in analytics. We want to turn that on its head.

Obviously, we’re planning appropriately and determining what insights will drive the business. But once the programs are in-market, we’re spending the majority of our time making sure that we extract the greatest value from them.

How do you and your team use eMarketer to inform your thinking about these issues?

Cohen: We opened eMarketer up to the entire company, which was something I was very supportive of and helped drive. It’s trite, but there is some truth to the adage that “knowledge is power.” And it’s not necessarily about knowledge for knowledge’s sake; it’s about seeing what others have done before us—whether that’s a case study or something another marketer has succeeded or failed at. Or it could be about helping us to size the market or the opportunity for something we might not have done before.

Understanding variations across geographies is interesting. Using eMarketer is very good for strategic guidance, premarket planning and identifying best practices—eMarketer does a really good job at providing intelligence to meet these needs.

Why was it important to make eMarketer available to everyone at Universal McCann?

Cohen: Despite the fact that I said that we are really focused on driving in-market optimization, we want the best insights that lead to the best plans before we go to market. In a world of complexity, this requires us to have good insights. And those insights are either audience-based, vertical or category-based.

We use services like eMarketer and first-party or proprietary tools, and there is no reason to keep this information from anyone in the organization.

Great thinking, strategy and ideas can come from anywhere, so we wanted to make sure that everyone had access to, at the very least, a strong and robust syndicated tool.

Are there any examples of where the team has used eMarketer to inform a plan or to solve a problem?

Cohen: We are asked all the time for trends we see on the short-, mid- and long-term horizons. We are building recommendations for clients based on those perspectives.

Personally, myself and others on my team use eMarketer to help separate fact from fiction. We tend to get very excited about the bright, shiny object of the moment, and eMarketer allows us to ground that. We ask, “Is that truly a trend we need to watch? Or is it something we believe is going to be a fad?”

Bright, shiny objects could be anything from second-screen applications to location-based services to programmatic ad buying. They could be services like Shazam, GetGlue and IntoNow. I think social and mobile are both areas that have a lot of noise.
eMarketer really helps us separate fact from fiction in predicting the future, and helps us build trend presentations and recommendations, along with testing and learning opportunities.

**What are some of the things that you like best about eMarketer?**

**Cohen:** To be honest, I like the diversity. When I need a full report, I can have that. If I need a quick stat, a visual, graph or image that I can just pop into a presentation, I like that. I like that there are a wide array of assets at my disposal. Sometimes I don’t have time to weed through a long report and I just need a quick hit of information. I like the organizational structure that enables me to get a quick table, chart or stat or get the integrated depth if I’d like.

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**What are the challenges facing your business right now?**

**Cohen:** I was recently talking to someone about what we were doing back in 1998 and 1999 when we were starting in the digital industry. It was a pretty simple world then, although we still had to convince marketers this was not a fad. Complexity in the marketplace is probably the No. 1 challenge. There’s an astronomical number of potential touchpoints—which are disparate and disconnected—that one needs to be an expert at now.

At the end of the day, agencies are a business. There has always been a very sharp focus on driving down costs from the system, whether that’s media costs or fees. So how do you create products and services that create incremental value for clients? And how do you create opportunity for an incremental revenue stream? That is definitely another challenge.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention the talent acquisition, retention and training development challenge. We’re in a talent business, so you can have the greatest tools, systems and data in the world, but if you don’t have the best people, you won’t win. I think that is an ongoing challenge that hasn’t changed in decades but it’s more intense now.

**What are you working on now?**

**Cohen:** Top of mind for me is our organization around programmatic ad buying and the evolution of Cadreon, our trading desk, the evolution of AMP, our audience measurement platform, and the role of media brands vs. individual brands. The idea of a trading desk is one that’s more than five years old, but its role in the grand scheme of things is evolving and changing so I’m thinking about how we evolve and change with it.

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