

Grasping detail and seeing the big picture

Four Communications received £10m of growth capital from the Business Growth Fund last July to accelerate its expansion. Here, its chief executive and chairman explain how their very different talents combine to drive the company, which has more than 600 clients and aims to become one of the top players in the communications sector

NAN WILLIAMS, 53, CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Four Communications was named after the number of people who co-founded the company in 2001, three of whom remain. We started in PR but the plan was to expand rapidly. Now we have 245 people at hubs in London, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, plus offices in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Aberystwyth.

We have more than 600 clients including Etihad Airways, the Man Booker prizes, Sotheby's, International Realty, InterContinental Hotels Group and American Express.

We've been very acquisitive, buying seven specialist businesses in the past five years as part of a plan to widen the industry sectors we cover and gain scale to become one of the top three or four players.

BGF funding has helped us speed this up, with three more purchases. Our key services now include PR, public affairs, marketing, sponsorship, digital and content, media planning and buying with a particular focus on the property, travel, culture, healthcare, financial services and public sectors.

Last year, we grew revenues by 39pc, of which 10pc was organic growth. We have revenues of £42m and aim to double profits over three years, from a base of £4m in the middle of last year. We will keep on acquiring: we plan three or four purchases this year.

As part of the BGF investment, our former chairman Chris O'Donoghue stood down after 14 years but remains a significant shareholder. BGF suggested three candidates to succeed him and we chose John Farrell, who has worked for some of the world's biggest advertising groups. John suits us down to the ground. Fifty per cent of our business is in cross-selling all our other integrated services so we



did not want another PR person in the chair. John came from another side of the marketing services field and had operated at a much more international level.

He's also very forthright, which we like because we are too, and he understands creative people. It takes a sensitive person to come into a business like this and make a difference, pointing out things we've become too used to without disturbing an ecosystem that works. That's a hard thing to do but John has that knack. John and I are also quite different. He's

more creative and always wants us to look at the big picture.

I tend to be very task-oriented, running the day-to-day processes of the business. I don't think that's of so much interest to John at this stage of his career – quite rightly. We're trying to do different things so it's complementary. It would have been problematic if we'd ended up with a chairman who was a micro-manager.

John doesn't do that. He keeps his eye on strategy and doesn't interfere overly in the detail. He trusts us to get on with that.

JOHN FARRELL, 58, CHAIRMAN

My background is in direct marketing and advertising, and I was chief executive and president of American advertising agency group D'Arcy, Masius, Benton & Bowles worldwide. I then took the same positions at Publicis Groupe's Specialised Agencies and Marketing Services organisation (SAMS), one of the world's top four communications groups.

I left to run a portfolio career in 2011. Now, I sit on the boards of six advertising, media, marketing services and retail businesses, provide consultancy to organisations ranging from the European Golf Tour to Saatchi & Saatchi, and serve as visiting professor of marketing at Nottingham Trent University.

When I was approached to be chair of Four Communications, I had never worked with a company that had a relationship with the BGF. I thought that was a very different and interesting opportunity. Several things attracted me to the company. The quality of the leadership team and the level of their ambition to take the business to the next level is really energising.

I could feel the culture and quality in the organisation when I first walked in and I believe I can add to that. The belief that the Business Growth Fund has shown in the business with its significant investment and the additional growth opportunities this is fuelling made it an incredibly exciting time for me to step in as chairman and help the business fulfil its potential.

Having spent a lot of my career in mergers and acquisitions, it's interesting to be at Four Communications when it is expanding through acquisitions. Nan Williams and I are quite different personalities in terms of our view of the world but we're very similar in our standards and



expectations and we hit it off very well right from the start.

I was recommended by BGF. Sometimes that can create some interesting dynamics but in our case it was one plus one equals three in terms of the opportunity that we saw. I think Four has done an outstanding job of developing its business through intelligent mergers and acquisitions activity and very successful integrations.

The company is also building new skillsets and digital capabilities based on reputation management and public

relations, which I know very well. I am hugely impressed with Nan and her attention to detail. The last thing you want from a chairman is to duplicate what the chief executive is doing in terms of knowledge and awareness of all the detail of the company.

I think the chairman's role is to try to explore the vision for what comes next. Nan has a fantastic grasp of the day-to-day running of a successful business. It makes my role as someone trying to inspire us about where to take the business next a lot easier.

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CHRISTOPHER PARSONS

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