

Golin, Text, Jackson Spalding, Revive Named Best Agencies To Work For

[Global](#), [North America](#)



Paul Holmes 22 Apr 2011

With more than 75 firms participating and more than 5,000 employees responding to our online questionnaire, the 2011 Best Agencies to Work For survey was the biggest in the 11-year history of the survey—and the competition for the top rankings was tougher than ever.

And the fact that three of our four Best Agencies were first-time winners is evidence that the best agencies are competing more fiercely than ever to be recognized as employers of choice for the industry's best talent.

Best Large Agency to Work For: GolinHarris

In the early days of his tenure as chief executive, Fred Cook (pictured) added a new dimension to the warm, collaborative culture at GolinHarris: a focus on winning. And (surprise!) people like playing for a winning team, and the firm's ability to outperform its peers over the past few years—without losing the almost family feel fostered by founder Al Golin—has led to a steady improvement in its score in our survey and this year to the number one spot among large agencies.

Cook and his management team have also invested in an expansion of the firm's professional development program, from a GH PhD initiative that focuses among high-performers among midlevel staff to the new media-focused Dialogue University to the proprietary Gold Standard approach to client service to a robust mentoring program.

Internal communications has been another priority, with Cook himself starring in a new quarterly video series—as well as authoring a monthly newsletter featuring highlights from the firm's network

in the US and beyond. Perhaps the most compelling employee communications tool, however, is the Real People Real Stories video sharing site, which encourages individuals from every part of GH to share personal stories about what the agency and its work means to them.

Finally, Golin has made a real commitment to diversity (“diversity makes us stronger” is one of its core values, offering “externships” to students at historically black colleges and supporting the work of the Lagrant Foundation in providing scholarships to multicultural candidates.

Respondents say things you don’t often hear about a firm of Golin’s size. “It feels like a family,” says one. “I love how important their employee's opinions and feelings are the upper management,” says another. Others hail “a real commitment to integrity and ethics.” In summary: “I think GolinHarris has a great deal of integrity and a drive to achieve excellence with all of its clients. They respect their employees and do everything possible to keep them happy and motivated at work.”

Other Best Large Agencies: Edelman, Weber Shandwick, Waggener Edstrom, Ogilvy Public Relations

Best Midsize Agency to Work For: Text 100

Text 100 is the only one of this year’s four winners to have been recognized with a Best Agency to Work For trophy in the past, but that was four years ago. Having said that, the firm has maintained its commitment to workplace excellence since then, scoring consistently high marks from employees in recent surveys, so its return to the top spot among midsize firms is no great surprise.

The firm is guided by several “people principles,” from respect for the individual (“we respect people as individuals and place emphasis on having their individual needs met in relation to the needs of the business”) to liberating potential (“we believe our people all have amazing potential and we are dedicated to providing a work environment where this potential can flourish”).

If there’s one thing that stands out at Text, it’s the firm’s exceptional emphasis on professional development and continual learning. The firm takes a uniquely inclusive approach: training and development is not the responsibility of just one “trainer” or HR professional; employees take on the roles of teacher, coach, mentor and student at different points in their career.

Specific initiatives include Text Life, a program designed to include both client-facing and “support” staff. Each office has a Text Life Ambassador who coordinates the delivery of training sessions by senior consultants, designed to support business strategy and developmental areas of growth. For new hires, the firm offers Text Start, an induction program that helps people acclimate quickly. An ongoing performance management program includes a robust objective-setting process and attributed 360 feedback based on core competencies. Finally, an active secondment program gives employees the ability to work in other offices around the world.

Text 100 also offers an array of flexible work options; employees earn four weeks of vacation during their first year and five weeks thereafter (although with paid holidays, floating holidays and “duvet days” employees get about seven weeks off each year); there’s an eight-week maternity leave for most female employees; sabbaticals are available for staff with six years of service; and same-sex partners

have their benefits “grossed up” so they receive the same benefits as opposite-sex spouses.

Finally, community involvement is encouraged, from a canned food drive in San Francisco to providing prom dresses for underprivileged high-school girls in New York to the “Home for Little Wanderers” holiday gift drive in Boston.

Text 100 provides a “unique culture and best balance of work and play,” says one respondent, while another hails the “lack of hierarchy. There are no egos; every employee is valued and heard. When a job needs to be completed, everyone pitches in, regardless of title.” And finally: “Every day, I have an opportunity to challenge myself (and others) to innovate and do more for our clients. The team-oriented environment is extremely supportive and we really do work together toward common goals to achieve success on our accounts.”

Other Midsize Best Agencies: Coyne PR, Marina Maher Communications, APCO Worldwide, Chandler Chicco

Best Small Agency to Work For: Jackson Spalding

At the very best firms, the cultural tone is set by the principals, but if the culture is authentic and values are truly shared it becomes almost self-perpetuating, with employees at every level reinforcing a consistent message about what kind of behaviors the company rewards and the messages it communicates internally and externally.

That seems to have happened at Atlanta-based Jackson Spalding, Where the distinctive culture starts with a hiring process that considers what the firm calls the 5Cs—character, competency, class, confidence and chemistry—and allows employees a vote on the candidate in question. In most cases, the vote has to be unanimous.

That democratic approach is also expressed through the firm’s JSATs (Jackson Spalding Advancement Teams), one of which is focused on career development and mentoring. Each JS team member has an assigned mentor who serves as an advocate to help the mentee obtain the skills, training and career opportunities to advance.

A Career Development JSAT, meanwhile, meets monthly to plan internal training and evaluate external training opportunities. A New Employee Orientation JSAT serves to welcome new team members and explain the firm’s culture and expectations. Another JSAT is focused on work/life balance and conducts an annual survey of our team members and plans events designed to help with work/life balance.

“We have a clear set of values that has not changed since the founding of the firm, we actually live them every day,” says one respondent. “That may sound hokey or clichéd, but it is who we are.” Adds another: “I think of my coworkers as more of friends and collaborators. I have the pleasure of working with talented, intelligent people who are committed to what they do and are a lot of fun to work with.” And finally: “I have independence, and am encouraged to be an entrepreneur.”

Other Small Best Agencies: Davies, Allison & Partners, CooperKatz & Partners, 360 Public

Best Boutique Agency to Work For: Revive

Revive founder and chief executive Brandon Edwards previously served in a senior role at Davies, a California-based public affairs firm that has been named our Best Small Agency to Work For in four of the past five years, and he obviously brought some of the same philosophy about agency management to his new firm.

“The quality of the work and the service we provide our clients is our top priority and the caliber of which is nothing short of stellar,” says one respondent to our survey. “Our company culture is a close second as we truly value each other, both our career and personal lives—fostering growth, high morale, and a true sense of both accomplishment and all-inclusive success. Each member is as valuable as the next, from the top down. The goals of the company are clearly communicated, understood and agreed upon. Suggestions on any level are welcome at any time.” (Revive employees wrote the longest responses to open-ended questions of any firm in the survey.)

For one thing, the firm’s values are all about people first: have fun, be real, be authentic, personal growth, respect and transparency. Says Edwards:

“In all employees at all levels, we value character, integrity, sense of humor, intelligence, healthcare industry knowledge, and a sense of dedication more than anything else. Working at Revive is really is more than a job, so if people are looking for one of those, we want them to keep looking. If they’re looking for a place to call home—if they're someone interested in making a long-term commitment—we want to meet them.”

Still just 20 months old, there’s not a lot of formal professional development, although the firm launched the first phase of its professional development program, with a customized learning plan for every member of the staff, at the start of 2011. But there is a flexible work environment: several employees telecommute, there’s an opportunity for flextime if needed, and vacation time and sick days are individualized—governed by guidelines rather than policies.

Communication is unusually open: there are no individual offices to facilitate the sharing of information and ideas, and an open book management philosophy about everything except individual compensation information.

Other Best Boutique Agencies: RLF Communications, Trevelino/Keller, Linhart PR, Group Gordon