

## Big Commitments

**Ford Wiles joins John Montgomery in his Big adventure—already in progress.**

By Rosalind Fournier

Many partnerships are a long time in the making, the product of months behind closed doors negotiating terms and strategy. For John Montgomery and Ford Wiles, the decision to join forces last April could be better described as the unplanned, organic result of a single phone call.

For 13 years, John Montgomery had been the sole owner of Big Communications, building it from a one-man operation starting in 1995 into a firm which today has a staff of 16 along with an impressive list of long-standing clients. Even as the agency multiplied in size, however, Montgomery always kept a hand in every aspect of the business—finding and retaining clients, managing accounts and overseeing the creative department. “By last year, I realized I was wearing too many hats,” Montgomery explained recently over breakfast at Urban Standard downtown. “There was always the fear that one area might be getting shortchanged.”

Meanwhile, Ford Wiles, executive vice president and director of creative services at another prominent advertising and public-relations firm, o2ideas, was looking for a new challenge. He was interested in investing in his own agency and making a go of it on his own. But Montgomery, who knew of Wiles by reputation, envisioned a different scenario: bringing him into the fold at Big, at least temporarily. “John called me up and said, ‘Hey, what are you doing?’” Wiles recalled. “I told him I was about to start my own thing, and he said, ‘Well, right now I have some projects I could use help with. Why don’t you come hang out at least for a day?’”

The day stretched into a week, and then a month, during which time the two collaborated on the In Birmingham campaign for the Greater Birmingham Convention and Visitor’s Bureau. The campaign, which is aimed at increasing local tourism by identifying some of the city’s most “in” spots, continues to generate buzz and earned Big a Best of Show award in the Birmingham Advertising Federation’s ADDY awards. The success of that campaign helped to confirm the two businessmen’s professional chemistry, and before long a casual working relationship solidified into an official partnership.


“Timing is everything, and the timing was perfect,” Montgomery says. “Ford was just what we needed here, and after a number of years in the business, he was ready to become invested in a firm, which made perfect sense.”

Montgomery adds that he already felt great about where Big was headed, thanks largely to accounts that

have been with him for multiple years, including the Convention and Visitors Bureau, Nationwide Insurance, Colonial Properties and the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex. Still, in a challenging economic climate, he felt there was an element of strength-in-numbers—and complementary talents—that made for a solid strategy in continuing to take Big to the next level. “No one is ever primed for this kind of economy, but we’re probably as prepared as you can possibly be,” he says. “Ford and I can do a lot more together than we can apart, so it’s been a great decision for both of us.”

For Wiles, it was also a natural mental shift to realize he’d rather join forces with the Big team than start an agency from scratch, for a number of reasons. For one, with two young children ages 6 and 2, he worried that the stress involved with launching a new business would likely take him away from his family more than he was truly comfortable with. At the same time, in the period he spent working with John before they struck a partnership deal, he realized how much he enjoyed the collaborative process—something that would be missing, at least for a while, if he’d gone the other route. “I realized I didn’t really want to do it alone,” Wiles says. “I want to work with people who inspire me, and whom I can inspire. It’s about being with like-minded people who share that same vision, which is basically the philosophy that I brought with me when I came over here.”

Both men admit to having had some trepidation, initially, over the possibility of friction in a situation where a new partner joins a well-established firm that had always been a sole proprietorship. But Montgomery says he was almost surprised by how comfortable, even relieved, he felt being able to hand one of his hats over to Wiles. “As soon as he took over in creative, I was able to say, ‘Oh good, you’ve got that? I’m going to go take care of other things.’”

For Wiles’ part, he says that sharing a common viewpoint and business approach also goes a long way towards minimizing potential conflicts. “It’s a very natural thing,” he says. “We have a common thread. Sometimes you have an agency where there are ‘suits,’ who always want to make more widgets for less money, and the creative people are saying, ‘No, we’ve got to produce the highest quality work we can.’ So they’re constantly butting heads. But John sees both sides of that—he wants to make money but he always wants the work to be awesome, too. So it’s the marriage of art and business coming together in a great way.” 



Ford Wiles and John Montgomery of Big Communications

Photo: B. Gustafson