

A Technology-Fueled Creative Agency

An Interview with Gay Warren Gaddis,
President and Chief Executive Officer, T3 (The Think Tank)

EDITORS' NOTE *Gay Gaddis has been recognized as one of Fast Company's "Top 25 Women Business Builders," Inc. magazine's "Top 10 Entrepreneurs of the Year," and 25 Advertising Working Mothers of the Year by Working Mother magazine. She is a regular contributor for Forbes, the Texas Governor's Business Council's Executive Vice Chair, a member of the Advertising Women of New York (AWNY), and current Chair of the Committee of 200 (C200). Starting her career as*



Gay Warren Gaddis

a copywriter with The Richards Group, Gaddis then served as Public Relations Director for Baylor University Medical Center; Marketing Director for Leadership Dynamics; and a full partner at an Austin advertising agency before founding T3. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Texas at Austin.

COMPANY BRIEF *T3 (t-3.com) is an independent integrated marketing and advertising firm with headquarters in Austin, Texas and offices in New York City and San Francisco. Gay Gaddis started the company in 1989 with a cashed-in IRA and two employees. Today, T3 is the country's largest independent advertising agency owned by a woman. With over \$200 million in capitalized billings and a staff of 200, T-3 is organized as a marketing and creative think tank, working with clients like UPS, Cosmopolitan Hotels, Coca-Cola, Which Wich Superior Sandwiches, Reliant Energy, JPMorgan Chase, Allstate, 7-Eleven, and WhitePages.*

What did you see in 1989 that made you feel the market was ready for T3?

It was a tough time when many people were getting laid off. I had started working with several of my team members at my previous job to come up with a business plan that I thought would help propel our company into the right sphere for the future. I finished the plan but the president of the company was not onboard with it. At that point, I was so invested in it that I told him that I was going to quit and do it somewhere else.

I cashed in my IRA, found an attorney to incorporate my company, bought a phone and electric typewriter, and I was sitting at my desk March 1st waiting on the two employees I had managed to hire. It was a terrible economy but I really believed in what I wanted to do.

I was determined to do wonderful, interesting creative and prove it was working by measuring everything we did – so it would be art and science combined.

There were companies that were research/science-based, but their work was pretty boring; and there were total creatives who only wanted to win awards and have a good time, but there was no accountability.

We started measuring everything we could from day one, and it started to work. We picked up a national piece of business right away and won ESPN's top cable advertising campaign for the year. Then we won two national ADDYs in the first three years.

In 1992, we had an opportunity to present our ideas to Dell, who wanted to branch out from their in-house agency. We started doing some interesting programs with them. The Internet came about and Michael (Dell, Founder and CEO) came to us and said, we're going to have to sell on the Internet – you guys have to figure it out. We immediately started gathering people together who had Internet knowledge.

Technology fuels everything we do.

By the mid-90s, we were all into the Internet and people started calling us. It was the beginning of changing us into what we call a technology-fueled creative agency. Technology fuels everything we do, even though it may not be Internet-oriented such as mobile or social.

Do you focus on specific industries?

We work across many industries. Clients hire us because we have this deep understanding of the connectivity behind all things technology and how it works together. It's looking at the total strategy. It has to look good and delight customers, but the most important element is how it's working.

How did you become involved in the Committee of 200?

The Committee is probably one of the best-kept secrets in the world. It was formed 31 years ago and, for many years, it was a secret society. We have some extraordinarily high-profile women who are dedicated entrepreneurs and corporate women.

I was asked to be a member in 2005. I have received much support and gained much information through the training we do and meeting with other members.

I'm now the Chair of the Committee of 200 for this year and next, and a lot of what we're doing through our foundation is trying to bring on that next generation of women. We're all about paying it back through our scholar network, and we go to universities around the world and offer advice on how to make their lives work and grant scholarships.

Are there enough opportunities for women at senior levels today?

As women, we tend to take two steps forward and five steps back. Any time a woman is in a prominent leadership role, there is a spotlight on her like no guy has ever had.

On corporate boards, women are still very much underrepresented. This is another issue the Committee of 200 is really dedicated to working on – trying to introduce more women to those opportunities.

We're making progress, but I also see that the millennial women don't necessarily want to do the 24-hour daily grind. That's changing the dynamics on what will happen on the corporate side. We will have to change how we do business. Technology has already made some inroads and I now don't have to be at my desk all day long.

I did something 20 years ago called the T3 and Under program, where I allowed moms and dads to bring their babies to the office until they were nine months old. It's not day-care – the parents have a specific office while the children are brought here. As a family and business, we help them care for the kids until they turn nine months old. Almost 80 babies have come through our office since T3 and Under began.

These are the types of solutions that we have to encourage women to remain engaged. No one is going to suggest that it's easy to have children and be 100 percent corporate without a great support system. ●