SMALL AGENCY PLAYBOOK

How to recover from a giant account loss—from a small agency that did it

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Proof CEO Bryan Christian (left) steered his agency out of trouble after a big account loss with moves like getting out of an expensive office lease in favor of holding meetings at a lakehouse—and on this boat. (Proof Agency)

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Plenty of agencies had a rough year in 2020—but few fell as quickly as Proof Advertising. The Austin, Texas-based shop saw 65% of its revenue vanish in the span of 15 minutes on April 25 of that year, when Travelocity and another large client cut fees by some 70%. In response, Proof slashed its workforce from about 100 people to around 20.

Today, the shop is growing again and is projecting more than $9.3 million in revenue this year, up from $7.7 million in 2025. Recent wins include agency-of-record duties for Four Roses Distillery.

Revenue is still 35% short of what it was before the 2020 gut punch. But Proof's profits are up 10%, and its headcount has rebounded to more than 50, according to the agency, which was founded in 2010.

For other small agencies, the lesson is clear: Trouble can strike at a moment's notice, but no hole is too deep to climb out of—if you have the right plan in place. Ad Age recently caught up with Bryan Christian, Proof's owner and CEO, to learn more about how the agency did it. Below, a snapshot.

1. Value your people, not your real estate

Asked to describe the comeback plan, Christian is quick to recall the initial step: "First of all, we cried—openly and willingly." But soon after, leadership took a hard look at what it actually needed. "We just stared at the mirror and said, 'Why do we have to go to work every day and drive in Austin traffic? Why do we need to pay the rent?'"

So the agency got out of its lease, saving more than $100,000 in rent, in favor of paying a local bar owner $1,500 a month so that agency staffers could congregate in the space from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., before the bar opened to the public. The bar was eventually replaced with a house at Lake Austin that Christian owns and uses for agency team meetings and client gatherings. Often, the meetings occur on a boat. Besides that, "our people can work anywhere in the world that they want to, as long as they show up on the Zoom call," he said.

Christian credits the workplace flexibility with the agency's 1% turnover rate. "If you're a great place to work and people love each other, they leave less, they work harder," he said. "And you don't have to keep retraining people to do the job."

2. Get leadership on the same page, break down silos

As Proof was mounting its comeback, Christian parted ways with his creative partner. "We had tension, so therefore everybody had tension," he said.

He hired a former McCann-Erickson colleague, Craig Markus, as chief creative officer. Christian said Markus helped change Proof's culture: "We broke down all the walls, there's really no departments." As a result, "people felt like they could say anything," he said. "Everybody has a role, but everybody gets to contribute in the other department's role."

Markus died in 2023 following a battle with a neurological disorder. Claire Jordan, who served under Markus, succeeded him as the agency's top creative.

3. Diversify your client list, and find your sweet spot

Proof's reliance on Travelocity proved to be a major risk when the Expedia-owned travel brand cut fees in the wake of COVID-19 in 2020. It later cut all ties with Proof when it hired Doner as its AOR in 2021. Today, no single client accounts for more than 25% of Proof's revenue. The agency won nine clients between January 2025 and February 2026, spread across various sectors. They include Hangry Joe's Hot Chicken, dirty soda chain FiiZ Drinks, Breeze Urgent Care and GoodCharlie Energy, a Texas electricity provider known for its pet perks.

"We'll pitch anything," Christian said. But the agency focuses on its strengths. "We are best as a full-service agency of record—creative, social and media for a brand that spends under $10 million," he said. "Social is like a Trojan horse for us. We're so good at it that if we can get in that door, we'll typically pick up more work on the flip side."