

Strategic Marketing and PR Consulting Services For Government and Commercial Clients



Towan Isom
President & CEO

CEOCFO: Ms. Isom, what is the concept behind Isom Global Strategies?

Ms. Isom: We provide marketing, public relations and graphic design creative services for enterprise and federal government agencies. What makes us unique is that we have a very entrepreneurial environment, so we really empower our employees to not look at IGS as just a company they work for, but essentially to see it as the company that they would create themselves. We are very collaborative, it is very high-energy, and it is very entrepreneurial.

CEOCFO: When you are bringing someone onto the team, how do you know that they really understand that concept and what it means?

Ms. Isom: We look for people who are creative, who like to think outside the box, and we also look for people who have a thirst for a company that wants to do it differently. They don't just want to do it like everyone else does it.

CEOCFO: Would you give us an example of how that plays out day to day?

Ms. Isom: Fifty percent of our employees are millennials, so most of our project directors function in the role of a counselor. They give strategic direction, guidance and tools, and the millennials actually do the execution of the work. It is like a parent almost. We guide and direct, but a lot of the day-to-day is done by the millennial employees with close supervision by the more senior employees. For example, when we go out to a client site, we actually take some of the junior employees with us. With most companies, you would only have a person with 10 years' experience working and talking to a chief communications officer at a C level. With IGS, we have junior and senior people talking, meeting, lunching, participating and engaging with C-level and C-suite leaders. It is very different. I am only 42, but during the time when I was coming up in generation X, we would have never had the opportunity in year one to sit down with a CFO or CMO to actually talk, get ideas and strategize. We are a company for people who are very creative, extremely smart and capable, and very self-assured. As you can imagine, when you are interacting at that level and you are 21 or 22 that is something that is not common. You have to have the emotional and professional responsibility to be able to do that. It can make recruitment difficult. The DNA of our employees is very different from the DNA of other companies. Where some company may get 500 resumes and take 100 employees, it is not uncommon for us to go through 500 resumes and do 40 interviews and still not find the right fit for IGS. We are that particular about who we bring on board, especially when dealing with millennials.

CEOCFO: What do millennials bring to the table?

Ms. Isom: I think it is a good balance for us because they have a level of creativity and are very astute with technology. For us, doing marketing and PR, we always like to stay ahead of technology. We create a lot of what we call soft IT solutions to fit our clients. If there is an app or plug-in, we may say we can do it better with the millennials who work for us. They are constantly on social media and constantly doing demos and apps. From the electronic and digital perspective, they are far more advanced than most of the generation Xers because they grew up with this technology. To have them on board and then to have the skill set of someone senior is the perfect marriage. It is like having the brains and creativity to be limitless in what we do. They bring another level of innovation.

CEOCFO: Are many clients turning to you because they are aware of the difference in how you work or are clients surprised and pleased finding out that you have this approach?

Ms. Isom: Service has always been important to me. I started out as an independent marketing consultant, so I worked on various projects. One of the things that always made me stand out as an individual and a consultant was my ability to provide excellent customer service. IGS is built on customer service. Our first contract was with FEMA, and the best thing for us was that it was a small-business-certified contract. I believe that one of the things that was essential for us was that we offer excellent service. That is spread throughout the culture of IGS. We stay late, and if a client needs something we will get it done by any means possible. That is really important to us. And that is missing in a lot of businesses now. Service sets you apart. It is one of our key value propositions, along with innovation. Our other value proposition is excellence. We do everything at a level of excellence. I would say that providing great service sets us apart to the point where most of our current contracts were once held by large businesses. The fact that some of our clients say they don't even notice a difference and that it's unbelievable that we're a small business says that we are competitive. There are a lot of small businesses that can do great work, but at the same time there are large businesses that just get business because they are large. That is something that ticks me off, because most large businesses started off being small. It's amazing how people completely forget that.

CEOCFO: How do you decide what areas of the government you want to work with or what types of projects you want to go after?

Ms. Isom: It's interesting. Most of our projects are in military. I am a huge veteran supporter because my father was in the military, and most of our clients are military clients. We also do health. Our core competency is military health, which is a niche that we managed to carve for ourselves. You typically see some of the larger government contractors in military health, but the great thing about IGS is we are really forging a name for ourselves one step at a time. It is just one project at a time that allows us to grow organically, and most of our contracts now, I can say, are organic and started as a small project. They might have started off with \$50,000 and are now at least a couple million dollars. That has worked for us, and I think when you have organic growth, it says a lot about the ability of a company to provide great service. You are not going to grow at an agency if you are not doing good work.

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CEOCFO: What types of projects do you prefer if you are given a choice?

Ms. Isom: I love program design and creation. We are currently working on a project with a commercial client, a Fortune 100 client that allows us to have full range of creativity and execution, which is great. We love projects when we can go to the client and they tell us who they are trying to reach, and from there our team will come up with a strategy and tactics, and execute everything to reach that particular audience. We do really well when the client knows what they want the end result to be, but they don't know how to do it. We are great at deciding how to get them there.

CEOCFO: What is the key to combining trends with innovation and what people are used to and find comfortable?

Ms. Isom: I don't think you ever get the right balance. It's just a gnawing in the gut. I don't listen to trends. I think IGS sets trends. I don't care what someone else is doing. What I care about is what we are going to do. I am concerned about what we can make trend. It helps us think outside of the box. We are so against the grain, and that is why we are winning. I think so many companies want to be like an Ogilvy or an Edelman. I want IGS to be like IGS. It starts with the audience first, and the project we are working on now is a huge multicultural effort. One of the things that we are going to definitely bring is innovation from the audience perspective. Often, you have people who speculate what the audience wants, and it is inaccurate. You see it countless times when you see ad campaigns and marketing campaigns, and all the campaigns are driven by people in the boardroom who know nothing about the end-users. In marketing and PR, you have to go against the grain. We do things that are so out of the box and unique, and that's what our clients like. They say they would have never thought of that, but why would you hire someone if they're not going to complement what you are already doing by pushing the envelope? For IGS, we don't really follow trends. We create the trends.

CEOCFO: What surprised you along the way as your company and philosophy have grown and developed?

Ms. Isom: What has really surprised me is the employee workforce. For one, it's expensive to run a business, and the taxes are a killer. The cost of doing business is extremely high. It has to be your passion. When you look at taxes, FICA, what you have to pay employees and insurance, it is just really expensive to run a business. I always tell my employees

that they get their salary of maybe \$100,000, but I have to pay 30 percent on their salary just to have them. Most people do not understand the cost of doing business. As an entrepreneur and a business owner, you're squeezed on all sides. Because we do government work, I watch CNN and MSNBC constantly throughout the day because it matters to me whether the Department of Homeland Security is going to get their funding. It matters to me who is in office, whether it is a Republican or a Democrat. That matters to me because that is going to impact my funding and the projects that we work on, which directly impact companies. I think politics plays a huge part in business, so I am always amazed when I hear about business owners who don't watch Fox, CNN or MSNBC constantly. What has also surprised me is how you also constantly have to educate employees because many of them have no clue what it takes to run a business. That, to me, is amazing, and I think the work pool itself is not as strong as we would like to think it is. Educating the workforce from an employer's perspective is really key. IGS is developing a series called Millennial Matters, dedicated specifically to the millennial workforce. Forty percent of the unemployed are millennials. A different education process is really required to interact and engage with them. They have a different perspective than generation X and baby boomers about what is expected in the workplace. Sometimes if it is not managed correctly, it can be catastrophic in the workplace primarily because when they enter the workplace, they have a confidence and expectation that is unrealistic. They expect to come into the workplace with a \$50,000 salary and no experience, and they expect their MBA to create opportunities for them, but it is very different now. Managing the employee relations part was overwhelming for us last year. It had nothing to do with capability, but compatibility. Having a compatible team is just as important as having a capable team.

CEOCFO: *What is ahead for Isom Global?*

Ms. Isom: We are moving into the international arena, and we want to focus more on specific niche audiences and diversity initiatives. We'll be focusing on building a strong relationship internationally and continuing to stay in the military health arena. We are very specific about our brand. We want to be the preferred small business for all military health and diversity inclusion, nationally and internationally.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine



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