

PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL

Executive Inc: Playing by different rules

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Phoenix Business Journal

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After a decade working for a *Fortune* 100 company, Aric Zion was ready to venture out on his own and create his ideal work environment.

Zion worked for Nortel Networks for 10 years in the U.S., Japan and the United Kingdom. After leaving Nortel in 2002, Zion and his wife, Dugue, moved to Phoenix and started their own marketing agency.

Zion & Zion was founded in 2003, and the company has grown quickly in terms of employee count and clients. In 2014, Zion & Zion was the largest public relations agency in the Valley and one of largest advertising agencies, according to the 2014 *Phoenix Business Journal Book of Lists*. It employs 39 people, and last year the company moved into a unique 14,000-square-foot, \$4.3 million office in Tempe.

Establishing the right agency culture is more important than making money, Zion said. Luckily, Zion found a way to do both. In 2014, the company reported billing \$42.1 million for advertising work.

Zion's approach to culture is multi-faceted. He doesn't want hierarchy in his organization. He wants any of his employees to be able to step up and lead on a project, and he wants people to work on different types of projects.

With Zion's background in computer science and at Nortel Networks, he said he looks at the agency world differently than most marketing professionals. He tries to mix creativity, analytics and business sense. By allowing employees the freedom to work at different functions, he grooms them to think creatively and analytically.

"I get so much satisfaction of seeing smart people be smart that I like it when I'm wrong or when there is push-back," Zion said. "I like to be talked out of things."



Aric Zion loves to travel and has scuba-dived all over the world, from the limestone... more

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The party aspect of the Zion culture is even more accepted by employees.

A May 5 shindig brought on an elaborate effort to celebrate **Cinco de Mayo** and Dugue's birthday. Parties are easier at Zion & Zion because the office has beer on tap. Zion said the party was fun but "people were drinking in the office, definitely having a few too many."

Zion told his employees that was enough, the day was over, and he had everyone call an Uber (he paid for it) to head to his house for a pool party.

"The next thing you know, people are at our house for seven hours," he said.

This happens roughly 10 times a year, Zion said. On the company's website, there is a counter of how many games of pool are played at work and how many boat trips the company has taken. This part of the company's culture is what makes it all worth it for him.

"That is something we get to take home and enjoy," he said. "We still would have built the culture the way we did because that is something else I get out of (the business), besides money."

Zion is not the only person who likes it. During the past two years, there has been only one employee who voluntarily left the agency. Not only are people sticking around, many have become friends. Two of his employees are engaged to be married.

Since Zion & Zion is privately owned, Zion believes that gives them the freedom to have the company's social aspects be more important than bringing in a certain amount of money.

While Zion's work and personal lives intermingle, he still finds time to get away. He loves to travel and has scuba-dived all over the world from the limestone caves in central Florida to the Mediterranean Sea.

Aric Zion

Title: CEO, Zion & Zion

Residency: Phoenix, Arcadia neighborhood

Education: Bachelor's and master's degrees in computer engineering, University of Florida

Favorite musical artist: Taylor Swift

Favorite restaurant: Steak 44

Favorite fiction book: "Pillars of the Earth," by Ken Follett

Favorite nonfiction book: "Reinventing Organizations," by Fred Laloux

Favorite vacation spot: French Polynesia

Favorite film: "The Lion in Winter"

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