

Why In-House Matters: *The Case Against Fragmented Production*

When a project crosses four suppliers and three handoffs, something always gets lost. Here is why keeping production under one roof changes the outcome.

By Studio Sowow · High Wycombe, UK

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The brief goes out to a CAD studio. Their files go to a fabricator. The fabricator sends panels to a paint shop. The paint shop returns them to a different fabricator for assembly. Nobody on the project has spoken to anybody else directly. The deadline arrives, and the piece does not fit together.

This is not a hypothetical. It is a pattern that repeats across the industry, and it has a straightforward cause. Physical production projects are routinely broken up across multiple suppliers because no single supplier can do everything. The coordination cost of that fragmentation rarely appears on a quote, but it always appears on a project.

What fragmented production actually costs

The obvious costs are time and communication overhead. Each handoff between suppliers requires a briefing, a file transfer, a review, and at least one round of clarification. Multiply that by four or five suppliers and the project management burden becomes significant. Someone has to own that coordination, and it is usually the client or the agency, neither of whom built the thing and neither of whom can fully answer the questions that come up during production.

The less obvious cost is tolerance stacking. In physical production, every process introduces some degree of variation from the original specification. A CNC-machined part comes out at plus or minus a fraction of a millimetre. A vacuum-formed panel adds a little more. A painted finish changes a surface dimension slightly. When each of these operations happens in a different facility with different equipment and different quality standards, the variations accumulate in ways that are difficult to predict and expensive to correct.

When the same hands manage every operation, the people making decisions at each stage understand the full chain. They know what tolerances downstream processes can absorb. They can adjust a machining pass to compensate for a forming characteristic. They can flag a finishing problem before it becomes a fabrication problem. This is knowledge that does not transfer between suppliers via a brief document.

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The accountability gap

Fragmented production also creates an accountability gap that is nearly impossible to close retrospectively. When a finished piece does not match the approved design, establishing which supplier introduced the deviation requires a forensic review of files, measurements and process records across multiple facilities. Even when the cause is identified, the question of who bears the cost of correction is rarely straightforward.

When everything is produced in one place, accountability is simple. The studio that built it is responsible for making it right. There is no gap to fall into.

This matters most on high-value or high-visibility projects, where the cost of getting something wrong is measured not just in the rework itself but in delayed launches, missed shoot dates, and the credibility of the agency or brand team that commissioned the work. These are the projects where the apparent saving from splitting production across cheaper individual suppliers tends to evaporate most dramatically.

WHAT CLIENTS GAIN FROM A SINGLE-STUDIO RELATIONSHIP

The practical benefits run in both directions. A studio with full in-house capability can run processes in parallel rather than in sequence, which compresses timelines significantly. CNC machining can begin on structural components while CAD is still being refined for detail parts. Vacuum forming tooling can be made while surface finishing specifications are being confirmed. This kind of overlap is only possible when the same team is managing all of it.

A single studio also gives clients a cleaner creative process. Design intent does not get diluted through successive translations between parties. The people who built the thing are the people who understood the brief, and they can adapt when the brief changes, which it always does. Late changes are absorbed rather than triggering a chain of revised purchase orders across five suppliers.

IN PRACTICE

Every project Studio Sowow produces — from a packaging prototype to a full retail installation — is designed, engineered, fabricated and finished in one workshop in High Wycombe. One team, one accountable contact, no handoffs. The lead time from brief to delivery reflects the actual build time, not the coordination overhead of a fragmented supply chain.

When fragmentation is unavoidable

There are circumstances where external suppliers are necessary. Specialist processes like chrome plating, certain printing techniques, or large-format metalwork beyond a studio's machine capacity occasionally require a trusted external partner. The difference is whether that external relationship is managed by the studio on the client's behalf, with full accountability for the outcome, or handed to the client to coordinate themselves.

A studio that manages its own supply chain extensions takes responsibility for the result. A client managing multiple suppliers takes on the coordination burden and the accountability gap simultaneously. These are very different commercial arrangements, even when the individual components look similar on paper.

The question worth asking

Before any significant production commission, it is worth asking a direct question: how many external parties will touch this project between brief and delivery? The answer tells you a great deal about where the risk in the project sits, and who is carrying it.

A studio that can answer "none" or "one, which we manage" is a different proposition from one whose production model depends on a network of suppliers the client will never meet. Both can produce good work under ideal conditions. Only one of them produces consistently good work when conditions are not ideal, which is most of the time.

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Studio Sowow works with brands, agencies, design studios, film and TV productions and museums. To discuss a project, visit studiosowow.com/contact or email hello@sowowltd.com