

DIGITAS HEALTH LIFEBRANDS

It might have been slow at the start, but the digital path paid off for this agency



“THE INDUSTRY HAS TO CELEBRATE WHAT IT DOES, WHICH IS MAKE MEDICINE FOR SICK PEOPLE. THAT’S ITS AUTHENTIC PURPOSE.”

—ALEXANDRA VON PLATO

Digitas Health LifeBrands has an origin story worthy of a Marvel character. Years ago, right around the time when the shackles had been taken off healthcare/pharma DTC, a handful of the agency’s founding mothers and fathers were plotting its course for the future. The two roads they were considering? One in which they invested heavily in DTC marketing and the other in which they cast their lot with “this new thing called the Internet,” recalls Alexandra von Plato, one of the people in the “small, tiny conference room” in which the executives convened.

Ultimately, the agency that would, years later, evolve into DHLB picked the Internet path. “We figured we’d let the network agencies go after advertising—and for a while we really regretted it,” von Plato continues. “Lots of people made lots of money early in DTC and we almost went under

when the dot-com bubble burst. But when the Internet became the life force that it is, we were just standing there and ready to go. We’d already done the hard yards.”

That’s a roundabout way of saying that, yes, being first to digital has been very, very good for DHLB. Other agencies will claim that digital is in their DNA; Digitas, on the other hand, has never known analog.

“We’re the only large brand agency that’s digitally native and at scale,” says von Plato, who became group president North America, Publicis Healthcare this year when her fellow DHLB co-president, Michael du Toit, left in February to become president of Everyday Health. (Von Plato’s remit includes oversight of DHLB, Publicis LifeBrands Medicus and Heartbeat Ideas.) “The digital part isn’t bolted on,” adds Graham Mills, global chief creative officer, Publicis Healthcare—himself recently promoted from managing director of the firm’s New York office. “We learned everything the hard way. Digital was central to brand strategy from the first day.”

That’s probably why pharma and healthcare clients have an easier time buying DHLB’s we-know-digital assertions than they do similar spiels from agencies without a similar heritage. Which isn’t to say that DHLB doesn’t occasionally get called on it, Mills notes with a laugh. “I was in a meeting the other day with a team and client who asked, ‘What gives you the right to say you’re a digital-native agency?’ I thought the answer we gave was very clever: ‘Because we have nobody in the agency with the word *digital* in his or her title.’”

DHLB spent much of 2014 and the first half of 2015 preaching change, hoping to “move healthcare marketing to a place beyond selling features and benefits,” in von Plato’s words. Clients seemed happy to go along for the ride, especially those organizations with which the agency enjoys a longer-term relationship. Work for Gilead sciences in the HIV space earned high marks from industry wags, owing to a grassroots-minded, hyper-local approach targeting tough-to-reach young urban men. Two Shire campaigns, one around ADHD in tween-age girls (“Keep Momming”) and another around binge-eating disorder, similarly resonated with their undertargeted audiences.

But if there’s a piece of 2014 work that truly showcases DHLB’s bona fides—digital and otherwise—it’s probably the agency’s continued efforts on behalf of EMD Sereno/Pfizer MS drug Rebif. The campaign, “Strength in Numbers,” saw DHLB transition Rebif from a traditional brand into a social one, to the extent that the Rebif Facebook page became the largest MS community on the Internet for a stretch, Mills reports.

“We’re not selling Kraft cheese here. We’re selling hope and wellness and all the things we really crave as people,” he says. “The huge sense of hope that we captured [in the Rebif campaign]—I think that’s the key for so much of what we do.”

"As moms, we just want to create better versions of ourselves."
-Holly Robinson Peete

keep momming.

Being a Mom means being the one person my daughter Ryan can count on. It's just what I do.

But when I noticed she was daydreaming often, having a hard time focusing on her homework, and struggling to focus during conversations with her friends, I was at a loss.

So we went to Ryan's doctor, and he diagnosed her with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Turns out there are 3 types of ADHD (Inattentive, Hyperactive/Impulsive, and Combined) and Ryan has Inattentive ADHD. Since inattentive symptoms like hers may be less noticeable than hyperactive and impulsive symptoms, it's important that moms like me know what to look for. I'm so glad we found out what was going on.

Sound familiar? Get the ADHD Symptom Checklist, then talk with your daughter's doctor.
keepmomming.com

keep momming™

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Mom Central
WORKING MOTHER
everyday HEALTH
CHADD
Shire

Opposite page: DHLB transitioned MS drug Rebif from a traditional to a social brand for EMD Serono/Pfizer. Above: DHLB's work for Shire on ADHD caught tween-age eyes

Von Plato agrees, adding that both DHLB and its progressive-minded clients are keen to jump-start comparable transformations. "People who want to be in the next-generation space see healthcare as a place where they can really flex their muscles," she says. That's part of the reason why the agency was one of the first to sign up as a sponsor at the CES Digital Health Summit half a decade ago: to align itself with individuals and organizations who similarly view healthcare as an industry on the cusp of transformative change.

"The first time I went I was on a panel and there were maybe 100 people in the audience," von Plato recalls. "This year, [the Health Summit] needed an entirely separate venue... There are many reasons we work with innovators like [healthcare-minded VC fund] Rock Health and create events like [mobile health conference] Mdot. Our clients need us to do it, but there's also something to be said for attracting the type of people who think the way we

do." Among the individuals fitting that description added to the agency roster in 2014 and 2015: Dana Wade, head client services and marketing innovation, DHLB New York, and Darryl Kluskowski, SVP, group creative director, DHLB Philadelphia. At the end of 2014 head count sat at 465, up from 426 at the end of 2013.

As for frustrations, von Plato says the globalization of the Digitas Health brand hasn't proceeded as quickly as the company would've liked. "Maybe my vision of what we thought we'd be able to accomplish was bigger than the reality, but pushing out the brand has gone slowly," she explains. "We have the global capability within the network, but establishing Digitas Health as a global brand with equity in Mumbai and China and Japan has been difficult."

That's one item on the rest-of-2015-and-beyond to-do list, as is winning an Oscar. Wait, what? "I'm not kidding: I want to win an Oscar," von Plato says.

As a TV producer earlier in her career, von Plato remains a big believer in the transformative power of content. She wonders why, with all the storytelling opportunities inherent in healthcare, brand teams have been content to pump out minute-long spots and call it an afternoon. Von Plato isn't just talking the talk: At Cannes last month Publicis Healthcare Communications Group sponsored a presentation about the power of storytelling and documentary content featuring Academy and Emmy Award-winning documentarians Todd and Jedd Wider.

"There's so much drama in health content, yet we continue to go to market with ads. Why is that?" von Plato asks. "We have stories about how patients experience health, but we also have the science of these incredible medicines and the stories of how the molecules are discovered, the years of hard work and toil. Those stories need to be told in compelling ways, and far more often. The industry has to celebrate what it does, which is make medicine for sick people. That's its authentic purpose."

—Larry Dobrow



AT THE HELM

Clockwise from top left: Alexandra von Plato, group president, North America, Publicis Healthcare; Graham Mills, global chief creative officer, Publicis Healthcare; Marion Chaplick, EVP account management, general manager, Digitas Health LifeBrands Philadelphia; Craig Douglass, executive creative director, general manager, Digitas Health LifeBrands Philadelphia

PERFORMANCE

Chalked up another good year with double-digit growth

HIGHLIGHTS

Hired Dana Wade as head, client services and marketing innovation, in New York City, and Darryl Kluskowski, SVP, group creative director, in Philadelphia

CHALLENGES

Globalization of the Digitas Health brand not proceeding quickly

For contact details, service offerings and client roster, see Agency A to Z, beginning on page 183