

INTOUCH SOLUTIONS

Digital prowess drives Kansas City-based agency toward \$100-million mark



“INNOVATION IS IN OUR BLOOD. THE FASTER WE EXPAND OUR ABILITY TO INNOVATE, THE BETTER.”

—FARUK CAPAN

There are several reasons why Intouch Solutions ranks as one of the industry’s most successful—\$82 million in 2014 revenue, up 12% against the year-ago period—and highly regarded agencies. It has, by virtue of its Kansas City, KS, home base, enjoyed a degree of remove from the agencies that dot the NYC/Jersey/Philly landscape. It has remained proudly independent, which has insulated the company from the pressures felt by firms with publicly owned parents and allowed it to grow at whatever pace its leaders deem appropriate. It has experienced minimal turnover in its upper executive ranks, never finding itself caught in the game of C-suite musical chairs that has hamstrung any number of similarly sized agencies.

But in the end, the primary reason might be Intouch’s lineage. It was birthed, famously, in CEO Faruk Capan’s garage as a digital-first shop, at a time—1999—when “digital” was mostly an adjective used to describe a clock. Such an explanation for 16 years of sustained success is somewhat reductive—and doesn’t take into account the care and focus with which the firm evolved its offerings—but that doesn’t make it any less true.

“This is just my personal opinion, of course. But

if you started as a digital company, it’s easy to continue to innovate. It’s what you’ve been doing since day one,” Capan says. “For most of our competitors who started more traditionally, it’s difficult to just adopt a digital mentality. It’s not something you just hit a switch and go, ‘Hey, it’s on.’”

EVP Boris Kushkuley, who leads the company’s growing New York office, agrees. “Where marketing is now—where it’s evolved to in the past few years—is close to where we are and where we’ve always tried to be. It was much easier, I think, to close some of the gaps we historically had than it was for traditional agencies [to close theirs].”

Capan, Kushkuley and the rest of Intouch’s executive team discuss the company’s evolution without a trace of I-told-you-so in their voices. But the self-deprecation and easygoing ‘tude (“We’re a 600-plus-person start-up company,” Capan jokes) belie the ferociousness with which Intouch has moved to protect its turf against would-be contenders to its digital throne.

The company counts 150 developers among its 630 staffers (436 in Kansas City, 168 in Chicago and 32 in New York, with another 65 slots to be filled before the year is out). It doesn’t just have a huge team devoted to social media: It has subspecialists in most every social-media realm. When quizzed about the company’s YouTube chops, EVP Wendy Blackburn immediately responds with, “Oh, that would be Jordan. She’s our YouTube expert. We go deep and broad here.”

“Deep and broad” could double as a description of Intouch’s client roster, following a year in which the company says it notched 52 wins across new and existing clients. They include Alexion (for work on blood disease drug Soliris), Boehringer Ingelheim (for its oncology franchise), Sanofi (for Afrezza, an inhaled insulin, and Toujeo, a long-acting insulin) and AstraZeneca (for gout therapy lesinurad). Specific assignments run the gamut from digital projects to strategic consulting to full-service AOR treatment.

“In some cases it’s a single brand or project that gets us in the door,” Blackburn says. “But if history repeats itself, we’ll expand the relationships from there.”

Intouch reports only one client departure: Galderma’s Cetaphil, which was replaced on the roster by a handful of other Galderma brands, including Restylane and Sculptra. The agency did experience a handful of close calls, however, owing to what Kushkuley calls “the roller-coaster merger mania.” Five of Intouch’s corporate clients were either snapped up by another company or did the snapping up itself, situations that often result in a, uh, “refreshing” of the agency roster.

Whatever Intouch did, or didn’t do, worked. By acting aggressively—“we don’t sit back and wait to be called,” Capan says—the firm survived the corporate and brand shuffling with its client relationships intact. “We developed a thicker skin,” says EVP Angela Tenuta. “We know how to steady the



Intouch Solutions’ ad work has long demonstrated cross-channel mastery. Opposite page: Digital work for exocrine pancreatic insufficiency for AbbVie. This page, top left: HelpC, AbbVie’s online solution center for hepatitis C. Above right: Patients can access Novartis’s cancer solutions by tablet and smartphone. Right: Intouch’s “Inflammation Tool”



ship. We don’t want panic on any of those teams.”

Sculptra, which has moved from Sanofi to Valeant to Galderma in recent years, might stand as the finest example of Intouch’s ability to sustain a relationship through thick and thin. The agency has worked on the drug under all three ownership regimes, outlasting some of its in-house brand managers.

Such client “overservice” is promised by any number of agencies, of course. What distinguishes Intouch is the way it attempts to inject some science into the hiring/staffing process. Capan says the agency has borrowed a page from the Southwest Airlines HR playbook, conducting some degree of behavioral pre-analysis to measure if an individual is likely to fit into the existing Intouch culture. “You have to be careful. If you bring in 60 new people a year, as we’ve been doing, your culture can get hijacked pretty quickly,” he notes. Key recent additions include Dirk Reinhardt (SVP, director of strategic planning/Chicago) and Shane Meyer (VP, client services/New York).

Meyer might’ve been one of the better-known execs to join Intouch’s New York office, but he wasn’t alone. The company grew the office from three people at the start of 2014 to 30 at the end of

it. Kushkuley is on the lookout for new office space that can accommodate 100 staffers. “Having teams much closer to clients is a big part of it, obviously, but [a bigger New York presence] also allows us to attract highly qualified people,” he explains.

For the rest of 2015 and beyond, Intouch projects growth across all three offices to continue. The firm expects to end 2015 at just under 700 employees and above the \$100-million mark in revenue (which, if the firm lands at \$100 million on the dot, would represent 22% growth over 2014). It’s likely to invest more deeply in tech-forward services (such as predictive modeling) and encourage clients to pursue more social-media-minded programs, like the one the firm is currently managing for Novartis’s oncology arm.

“We’re using social media—Facebook, Twitter, you name it—in clinical trial recruitment. That’s not something you see pharma companies do very often,” Kushkuley says.

“Innovation is in our blood,” Capan continues. “We’re doing hackathons and encouraging our associates to come up with things that have never been done before. The faster we expand our ability to innovate, the better.”

—Larry Dobrow



AT THE HELM
Faruk Capan, CEO

PERFORMANCE
Revenue: \$82 million, 12% higher than the prior year

HIGHLIGHTS
52 wins across new and existing clients including Alexion (for Soliris), Boehringer Ingelheim (oncology), Sanofi (Afrezza and Toujeo) and AstraZeneca (lesinurad)

Enlisted Dirk Reinhardt as SVP, director of strategic planning, in Chicago and Shane Meyer VP, client services, in New York City

CHALLENGES
Lost Galderma’s Cetaphil for skin care

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