



AT THE HELM

From left: Blue Diesel executive team members Amy Swissler Hutnik, Joel Gerber, David Grillo, Andy Crawford, Paul Miller

PERFORMANCE

Diversified client roster

HIGHLIGHTS

Expanded business from such accounts as Astellas Pharma, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Bayer

Named AOR for Endo Pharmaceuticals' Fortesta Gel

CHALLENGES

Lost business due to the Merck agency-consolidation process

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—Paul Miller

Blue Diesel

A firm that has deep digital roots subtly expands its offerings



Blue Diesel’s team could easily be excused for enjoying a quiet chuckle when, on reading this issue, they happen upon roughly 4,000 enthusiastic quotes from other firms about “increasing our digital capabilities.” Blue Diesel, you see, opened its doors years ago as a digital specialty agency and has never strayed too far from that strength. “Everybody else is trying to add digital, but we’ve always been digital, through and through,” says executive vice president, managing director/client development Paul Miller. “Our roots are deep.”

Still, over the past few years, the company has quietly and subtly expanded its offerings. At a time when the industry is falling over itself to get up to speed on digital, Blue Diesel has evolved into a full-service firm, one just as comfortable assuming consumer AOR duty as it is designing a web site. It goes without saying that the irony isn’t lost on anyone at Blue Diesel. “We’re coming at it from a different direction, but that doesn’t mean we’re abandoning or de-prioritizing digital,” Miller says. “It’s just that the distinction between digital offerings and core offerings has evaporated. It’s not a one-or-the-other thing.”

Over the last few years, Blue Diesel has diversified its client base along with its services base. It no longer focuses on top-20 pharma clients; several small- and

mid-tier companies have been added to the client roster. Similarly, it has added medical devices and even animal health to its slate.

Miller believes that the firm’s digital heritage has been an asset in its expansion effort. “What we find is that applying our core digital capabilities to traditional problems helps us solve those problems in a different and maybe a better way,” he explains. By way of example, he cites web design, long a Blue Diesel mainstay: “When you’re creating a web site, typically a great deal of thought goes into making the user experience the best it can possibly be. That idea—planning around the user experience and how a user interacts with a brand—can be applied to all sorts of multichannel interactions with a customer, not just the ones that are digital.”

Clients have responded to that thinking. Executive vice president, managing director of /operations Andy Crawford points to Blue Diesel’s role as consumer AOR for Endo Pharmaceuticals’ Fortesta Gel, for low testosterone, as a “watershed assignment.” The firm also serves as interactive AOR for a handful of brands in Endo’s pain franchise.

Other new business came from Zimmer, for which Blue Diesel designed an iPad initiative around its Universal Bone Saw. “For a salesperson to chase a surgeon around a hospital carrying this kind of tool, it would be kind of cumbersome,” Miller deadpans. “But the virtual demo we created is perfect for the hospital setting.” And while digital firms are often discarded after completing a project—“historically, you finish and then you’re on to the next thing,” Craw-



Digital and beyond: putting VESiCare on the iPad (above left) and an ad for Fortesta Gel (above)

ford notes—Blue Diesel clearly proved its worth to such clients as Astellas Pharma, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Bayer, all of which expanded the firm’s charge in recent months.

The new-business surge came at a particularly welcome time, as Blue Diesel found itself on the outside looking in when longtime client Merck finished its agency-consolidation exercise. “We were able to carry on without any downsizing or rightsizing or whatever we’re calling it nowadays,” Miller says. “It took a lot of hard work from a business-development perspective. That was a big point of pride for everybody here.” —Larry Dobrow