



AT THE HELM

Wendy White, founder and president

PERFORMANCE

While Siren's industry profile rose, headcount dropped from 44 to 35

HIGHLIGHTS

Named digital AOR for NPS Pharmaceuticals' hypoparathyroid drug Natpara

Added BioMarin and QOL Medical to agency roster

Opened new office space in downtown Chicago

CHALLENGES

Loss of part of its Baxter portfolio

For contact details, service offerings and client roster, see Agency A-to-Z, beginning on page 187

"In rare disease, we are solving complex problems. There's no 'easy' button"

—Wendy White

Siren Interactive

A leader in the rare-disease market is primed for a new burst of growth



Siren Interactive founder and president Wendy White isn't the sort of person to say "I told you so." But a decade or so after she shifted the focus of her web design/e-learning firm to concentrate on the rare-disease space, she finds herself heading up one of the few truly experienced agencies in an burgeoning niche.

White modestly admits that she "saw it coming," but it wasn't business prescience so much as her own experience that motivated the shift. White's daughter was born with a rare disease: nail-patella syndrome, a connective-tissue disorder that produces defects in the fingernails, kneecaps and kidneys. While serving as her daughter's caregiver, she saw firsthand how the Internet could play a huge role in influencing—and even defining—the culture that grew up around a given condition.

Fast forward to 2012, in which a quarter of the 35 drugs approved were for the treatment of rare diseases. The phone rang early and often, which led to a banner year on the new-business front and helped Siren achieve the goal of raising its industry profile (speaking gigs for White at prestigious events, like the Economist Summit in London, certainly didn't hurt). The firm added BioMarin Pharmaceutical and QOL Medical to its roster and expanded its relationship with Lun-

dbeck. It also scored the digital AOR assignment for NPS Pharmaceuticals' hypoparathyroid drug Natpara.

White attributes her agency's successes to a single-mindedness of sorts. "Hey, we were prepared," she says with a laugh. "It's a mindset, really. [The rare-disease space] is different and requires a special kind of expertise and a special kind of handling. We don't deviate from that."

But while Siren's work affirmed the firm's rare-disease marketing bona fides, it's now a smaller operation, headcount-wise, than it was at this time last year: 35 employees, down from 44. Some of this can be attributed to the loss of part of its Baxter portfolio; White describes the parting as "amicable" and notes that Siren still works on Baxter's hemophilia products. Still, in some corners any reduction in head count registers as a step in the wrong direction.

White dismisses this line of thinking. "We'd hired an awful lot of people to deal with our growth, but then we realized that some of those roles weren't really critical," she explains plainly. "Head count is a little bit seductive. 'Oh, you're adding people?' That's how some people decide how to salute. They base it on how many people you have."

"It's an ego thing," she continues—again, with no defensiveness in her voice. "You want the core people you can rely on, but you also want the flexibility to bring in experts. Especially in rare disease, we are solving complex problems. There's no 'easy' button. It's not like you can solve something once and then replicate it."

Beyond chasing new clients, then, managing change and preserving the Siren culture proved two of the



Duchenne Central (above left) and FH Journeys (above) show off Siren's multimedia expertise

year's biggest challenges. White says the agency came through the "heartwrenching" period even stronger than it was before, owing to complete transparency throughout the recalibration process. "We gave people a vision for the future, even if everybody wasn't moving forward with us."

That said, Siren is primed for growth before the year is out; its new office space in downtown Chicago can accommodate all comers. Another priority is continuing to forge relationships with all of the relevant stakeholders as early as possible. "We're doing more clinical recruitment through social media," White reports. "In the rare-disease space, you can't start building those relationships soon enough." —Larry Dobrow