



**AT THE HELM**

Mike Rutstein, founder and president

**PERFORMANCE**

Revenue rose to more than \$7 million in 2012

**HIGHLIGHTS**

Added business from Amgen and NxStage Medical

Moved into the specialty space with accounts from ITI and Onyx

Used a freelancer-heavy model to tailor each job to client needs

**CHALLENGES**

Making sure the agency lives up to what it calls a “no-excuses” philosophy

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

# STRIKEFORCE Communications

Agency with a mission diversifies its base and comes up a winner



**“Most healthcare brands deserve so much more than they’re getting”**

—Mike Rutstein

**S**TRIKEFORCE Communications founder and president Mike Rutstein doesn’t enter every conversation about his business with the goal of working himself up. But more than most of his fellow agency chiefs, Rutstein doesn’t shy away from discussing what he sees as the flaws in the traditional healthcare marketing model. He writes articles. He gives speeches. To use the sort of cliché Rutstein openly disdains, he wears his passion on his sleeve.

Here’s his take on the quality of creative work many agencies produce: “For years, products sold themselves, because the data was so compelling. ‘A 30 percent reduction in lipids’? You can pretty much take a magic marker and write that across a white sheet of paper, and that’s enough. But the business has changed and people haven’t changed with it. They make excuses—‘well, gee, this is a highly regulated category’—and they end up falling back on clichés and twisted metaphors.”

And here’s his take on the freelancer-heavy agency business model, one to which STRIKEFORCE has subscribed since its inception. “More and more agencies are doing this, but they’re sort of hiding it behind

the façade of the larger structure. The fact is, going out and assembling the best mix of people is good for business. No one agency can manage every dynamic and every challenge with a set group of people. You can’t get best-in-class out of a single box.”

Rutstein doesn’t convey any of this in an “I’m right and you’re wrong” manner, mind you. He just cares, and perhaps can’t help himself. “We’re very up front with clients: we tell them that we cherry-pick the best people for a given job,” he continues, still on the topic of freelancers. “Other agencies have people they have to use because they’re paying them a salary, whether or not those people have any relevance to the client’s business. The guy who was working on chocolate chip cookies last week is now doing oncology. That obviously affects the work.”

If you push him, Rutstein might say a few words about his own agency, which pushed past \$7 million in revenues in 2012. STRIKEFORCE employs 25 full-time staffers, most of them assigned to the firm’s AOR relationships. It offsets those relationships with a larger percentage of project work than most firms take on. “When you have interesting projects coming in and out, it fuels innovation. It fuels creativity,” Rutstein says.

Clients have bought into the model. In the wake of the firm’s highly acclaimed work on Teva Pharmaceuticals’ ParaGard contraceptive, the agency added brands and diversified its therapeutic mix. It got its foot in the door with Amgen, as the lead agency on the Neulasta business. It pushed deeper into the medical-devices category by winning NxStage Medical, which manufactures home hemodialysis machines. It established itself as a presence in the specialty space by adding ITI (for its Quantum wound therapy) and



In addition to ParaGard (above left), STRIKEFORCE clients include Alcon and Ziemer (above)

Onyx (for oncology products). Teva and Alcon remain what Rutstein calls “foundational clients.”

Rutstein attributes the new relationships—in particular, the Amgen win—to STRIKEFORCE’s progressiveness. “Amgen had a corporate mandate to do things differently,” he says. “We danced for three years. It wasn’t until the ParaGard success that they really took notice.” So don’t expect the agency to veer down a different path anytime soon. “Our philosophy is ‘no excuses’ and we live by that. Most healthcare brands deserve so much more than they’re getting.” —Larry Dobrow