

Intouch Solutions

A David that can go toe-to-toe with the network-agency Goliaths



"We want to take a leading role in designing the customer experience for clients"

—Boris Kushkuley

It's hard to envision many situations in which Intouch Solutions would be cast as the David in a David-versus-Goliath scenario. The company ended 2013 with revenues of \$70 million and 460 full-time staffers, with both figures set to rise significantly before the year is out. "We are definitely going to be a \$100 million company before long," Intouch chief executive officer Faruk Capan predicts confidently.

So how is it that, in Capan's mind, Intouch remains the scrappy underdog? Part of it could relate to the agency's status as one of the largest pharma/healthcare marketing companies without affiliation to a global ad conglomerate. But it also has something to do with Intouch's ambition, with its desire to match wits and wisdom against the world's largest multidisciplinary consultancies.

"We don't just compete with agencies. More and more, we'll pitch against big consulting companies like Accenture," Capan says. "When it comes to clients in our area, we'll put ourselves up against anyone. We were born pharma and digital. We are experts."

Capan is similarly thrilled whenever Intouch has the chance to barge its way into invite-only parties, especially those in which only network firms are on the VIP list. "Some of our multinational clients can only work with a network, so our job is to get in the door," he says. "Once we're in, once [clients] get a taste of our services, they always find holes in their other contracts. 'We might not call you an agency,' things like that." The approach seems to be working, judging by a client roster that includes Pfizer, Sanofi, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Teva, Eisai and Bayer, among other industry giants.

"Really, most of the time we're David," Capan insists. "We can be Goliath at times, but I know how to work as a David."

That's probably because Intouch has a vastly different back story than most of the companies in its line of work. While working in healthcare IT during the 1990s, Capan sensed that the imminent Internet revolution would transform patient communities. The firm opened its doors in 1999 and grew slowly at first. In 2004, it counted a mere 20 people under its roof.

Contrast that with the modern-day version of Intouch. While the company still calls Overland Park, KS, home, it will move into more spacious Kansas City quarters—think 90,000 square feet—in August or September. The firm's Chicago office, which now houses more than 100 people, required expansion onto a new floor. Its small New York presence is growing bigger and the office is "hiring aggressively," according to executive vice president, multichannel marketing and consulting Boris Kushkuley—himself a recent Intouch arrival following a decade-long stint at Ogilvy CommonHealth, most recently as chief digital officer.

Some of Intouch's attention during 2013, then, was focused on managing growth ("not a terrible challenge to have," Capan admits). According to executive vice president Wendy Blackburn, the key has been staying true to the company's traditional digital strengths, while remaining cognizant that the pace of change within the industry isn't going to slow anytime soon.

"Five or six years ago, when clients started shifting to do more digital, we saw the need to do much more than that. We needed to become a strategic partner. We needed to create an environment at the agency to support that model," she says. Adds Kushkuley, "It was about having all these services under one roof,

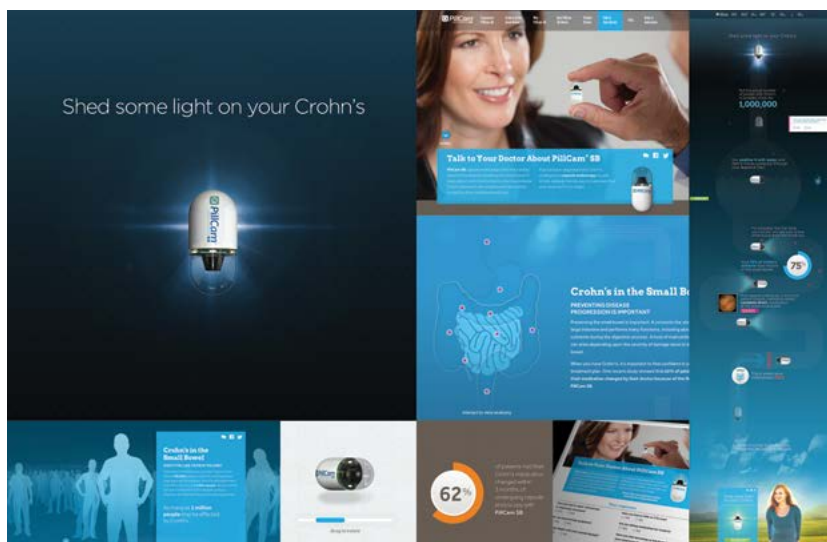


but also about one team creating this exquisite web of touchpoints with our customers and their audiences.”

What all that led to was a host of forward-looking initiatives and anticipatory staffing practices. Intouch doesn't hire based on what it needs at this very moment so much as on what it will likely need tomorrow. To that end, of the just under 500 people on the current payroll, about 200 are technology-oriented: developers, strategists, data crunchers, database architects, etc. Additionally, the agency recently debuted Intouch Science, a new specialty group designed to apply the firm's tech skills in a deeper medical/scientific context.

“It's mostly driven by clients' need to reach the HCP in non-promotional ways,” Blackburn explains. “We understand digital channels and we understand how HCPs behave. The idea is to delve deeper into that and to meld it with clients' science experience.”

Having a great handle on the technology—and being able to handle the perils that occasionally come with it—has been one of the drivers of Intouch's growth. Take social media as an example. When the agency launched its social media group back in 2008, clients were intrigued but cautious (owing at least in part to the FDA's silence on such matters until recently). Now, with clients requesting solutions more intricate than shepherding audiences over to a Facebook page, Intouch has become a Yoda of sorts to them.



From left: digital work for AbbVie's CREON, the KidneyAPPetite mobile app, work for Alkermes's Vivitrol and a piece promoting the PillCam SB from Given Imaging

“At first, social media was just a shiny object. Now, it's something that requires a long-term commitment. It's not just about having a cool page or a spokesperson; it's more about customer service,” Capan explains. “So that's how we've tried to lead: You have to have that [long-term] mindset. You can't just have a page or a feed or a blog for six months then shut it down because a campaign is going away. Will there be issues? Every so often, but there will be protocols to handle them.”

Clients, forward-minded and hesitant, have responded to the Intouch, uh, touch. Just as importantly, they've acknowledged the firm's skill independent of its digital chops. One example is the work done by Intouch on behalf of Given Imaging, for which it launched the PillCamCrohns.com website. Among other things, the site sought to debunk myths about the product: a swallowable pill outfitted with a camera and light source, making colonoscopies less invasive and unpleasant.

“It was unique in that it was the first consumer campaign in this category and that the patient was at the center,” Blackburn reports. “The website takes people on a journey through the bowels—which is much more pleasant than it sounds, I promise—and asks them to answer a few questions along the way. On the back end, it builds out a doctor discussion guide. Everyone's so pleased with the completion rates.”

Expect many similar such programs in the rest of 2014 and beyond. Kushkuley hopes that clients will continue to allow Intouch to “be the glue for them, to help with a lot of tactics across multiple channels... It doesn't mean we'll do every tactic and strategy across the spectrum, but we want to take a leading role in designing the customer experience for clients.”

Capan, too, hopes to see his company continue its outward evolution from digital specialist to jack of all trades. “It used to be, ‘Here's the content, now go build the website,’” Capan recalls. “Then it was extending ourselves into social, then the iPad revolution, then big data. We'll keep adjusting ourselves. The way we evolved into a full multichannel agency was that we didn't ever stay stagnant.” —*Larry Dobrow*



AT THE HELM

Faruk Capan, chief executive officer

PERFORMANCE

Intouch ended 2013 with \$70 million in revenues, and Capan estimates that it will be “a \$100 million company before long”

Headcount at the agency grew to 460 full-time staffers

HIGHLIGHTS

Got the kind of clients normally associated with network agencies, such as Pfizer, Sanofi, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Teva, Eisai and Bayer

Prepared to move into new larger quarters in Kansas City, expanded its Chicago office and grew its presence in New York

Debuted Intouch Science, a new specialty group design to apply the firm's tech skills in a medical/scientific context

Launched the PillCamCrohns.com website for Given Imaging's swallowable pill

CHALLENGES

Remaining true to the company's traditional digital strengths while keeping in mind the rapid pace of change within the industry

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