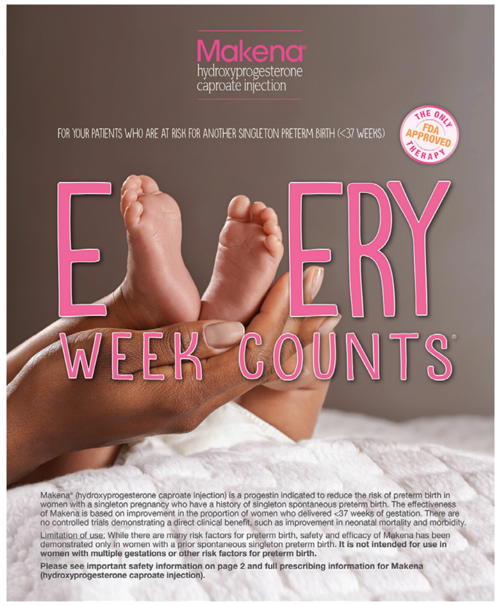
100 AGENCIES

ABELSON TAYLOR

Chicago bellwether grows its roster and still finds time for other pursuits



> **“WE’RE MORE EFFICIENT ON THE ACCOUNT SIDE OF THE BUSINESS. IT ALLOWS US TO HANDLE MORE WORK WITH THE SAME NUMBER OF PEOPLE.”**
> —DALE TAYLOR

When asked to give a quick, Cliff Notes-y summa-tion of the year that recently concluded, most heads of big agencies commence with “great question! We had a year that was so sublimely double-super-fantastic that …” and conclude 18 minutes later with “… so that’s why it absolutely was not premature to open a satellite office in Bora-Bora. We’d do it again in a minute.”

Happily, AbelsonTaylor president and CEO Dale Taylor is not your typical big-agency prexy. His response to the same query: “Well, we’re busy and the work looks good. As far as we know, there are no clients who are terribly upset with us. So there you go.” And … *scene!*

The irony is that Taylor and his AT colleagues have at least as much, if not far more, to celebrate than their more loquacious peers. Fueled by a late-year surge in new business, AT grew revenue by 10% in 2014, Taylor reports. Eight of the year’s 20 new assignments came from already-existing clients. And before the calendar is turned on 2016, the agency will have launched nine new brands.

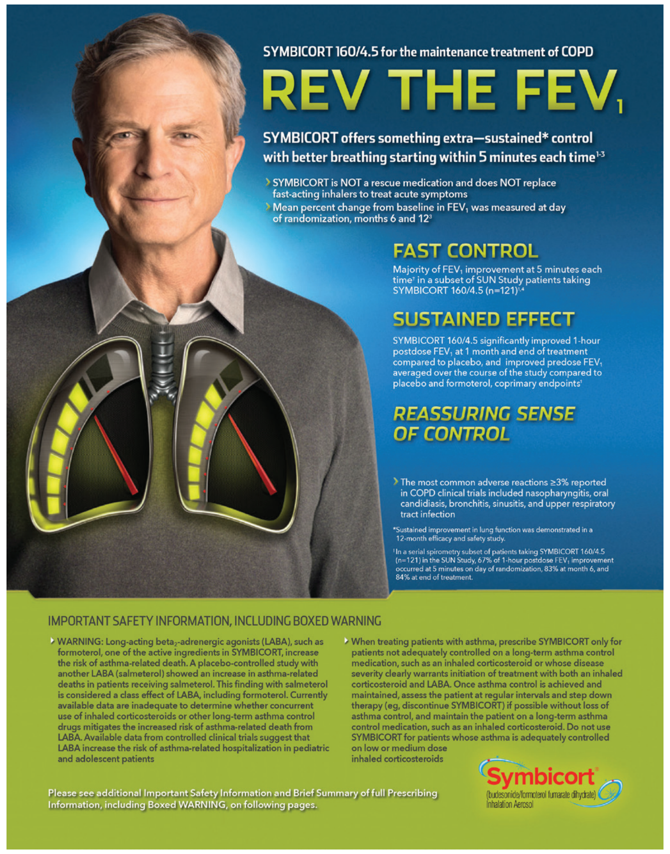
And yet Taylor and SVP, director, strategy services Jay Carter seem to define their company less by these professional-order successes than by ones relating to workplace culture and work/life balance. Before any mention of agency growth, they bring up AT’s third-place finish in Pharmapalooza 2014—the company had taken the gold in 2013—and upcoming participation in Battle For Hope, a Chicago-area battle of the bands benefiting the local Off the Street Club. They speak warmly about their pro bono work for La Rabida’s Children’s Hospital, both its professional component (a new strategy for communicating with donors) and its more personal one (“putting feet on the ground and spending time with the kids,” Carter says). They reference a big agency milestone: the 25th anniversary of Free Lunch Fridays, which is everything its name implies and more.

“The job is about more than just the work. People at AbelsonTaylor have lives, too,” Taylor says. Carter expands on the thought: “You can throw all the parties and movie nights you want, but if you expect people to work 60 hours a week, they’re not going to have fun. There’s a generation of staff now that really cares about community involvement, much more than people did 20 years ago. So we’re always involved with lots of things beyond making money … though that’s pretty good, too.”

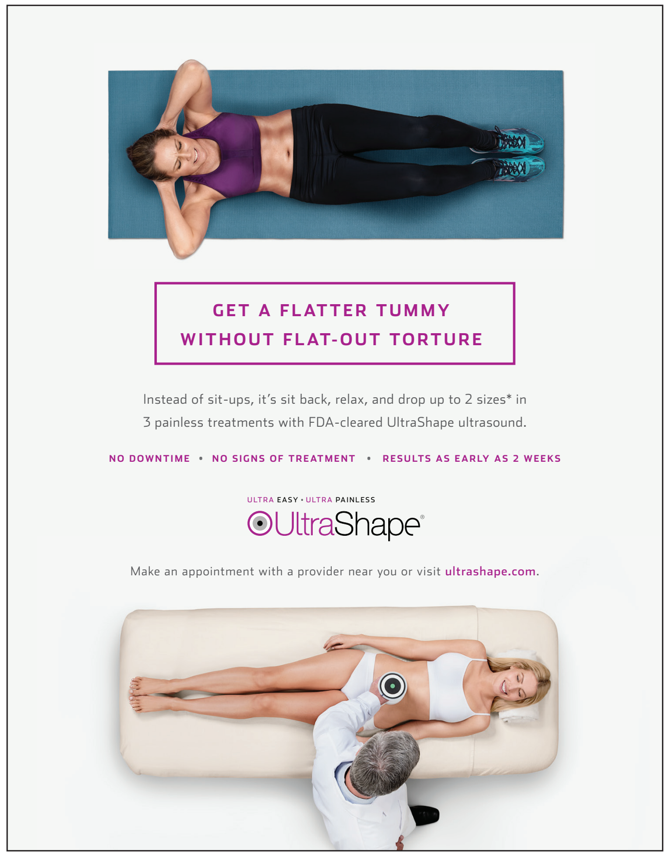
Indeed, AT found a bit of time for such pursuits in 2014, with revenues reaching approximately $70 million (AT neither confirms nor disputes that sum). While Carter can only reveal so much about the agency’s new-business scorecard during 2014—“the day the issue comes out, I get 10 angry phone calls from 10 angry clients. There’s nothing in it for them to have these relationships be made public,” he says, a bit ruefully—AT is known to work alongside big-pharma A-listers like AstraZeneca, Eli Lilly, Amgen and Allergan. Reports published elsewhere identify Chiesi as a new AT client for work on a handful of cystic fibrosis, hypertension and asthma brands.

That much of AT’s roster growth came from existing clients gratifies Taylor on several levels. “What it says to me is that our clients don’t feel like we’re always trying to sell them something more. We’re authentic. We don’t try to be anything that we’re not,” he notes, before discussing the logistical benefits of organic growth. “We don’t have to put the staff through the rigmarole that a big pitch requires. We don’t have to spend the money. Those are factors, obviously.”

On the flip side, the FDA did the agency no favors during the last year and a half, with AT losing three different drugs to labeling issues. “It’s frustrating, obviously, but that’s the industry. Products with flaws die. It’s not like we’re selling Doritos,” Carter explains. “When science says, ‘This is not the drug we thought it might be,’ you move on.” Taylor chimes in with a quip: “Hey, it’s good in the sense that it eventually means better public health, right? But yeah, the FDA has not been our friend of late.”



Opposite page: AT’s ad for Makena to avoid the risk of premature birth.
Above: An AT journal ad for AstraZeneca’s Symbicort employs rhyme.
Below: A consumer-directed ad for the UltraShape ultrasound



None of that prompted any layoffs—or, really, a reaction stronger than “that stinks” and a shrug. While head count didn’t increase beyond the 400 people employed at the end of 2013, Taylor says that the implementation of a new project management system freed up personnel resources. “We’re more efficient on the account side of the business. It allows us to handle more work with the same number of people,” he explains.

A few of AT’s recent big-name hires (notably digital aces Jose Andrade and Emily Tower) came on board in 2013, so the agency spent 2014 constructing teams beneath them. As for other significant changes, structural or otherwise, AT didn’t try to fix what wasn’t broken.

“We think we got the structure right 30 years ago. Nobody has thought all that much about changing it, to be honest,” Taylor says.

Up next: a raft of launches, including a 100% fully digital one for what Carter describes as a “revolutionary” product aimed at a younger audience. “We’ve passed the tipping point. Our industry is more digital than print,” he says. Taylor, on the other hand, speaks optimistically if cautiously about a “significant new business opportunity” that recently came AT’s way. If the situation plays out the way he hopes, it will prompt “a big change in the client roster”—and likely a hiring jag.

When he addresses bigger-picture industry issues, however, Taylor’s tone turns more serious. “I really don’t know if there are going to be any big new things in the market—drugs are still going to be expensive, payers are still only going to back one or two horses,” he says. Then Carter picks up the conversational thread and takes it to a slightly darker place.

“I’m not happy about this, but I believe the industry is going to get smaller. The amount [pharma companies] spend with agencies will decline,” he says. “Our challenge, because we care about our staff, is to win an even larger share [of new business] than we win today. A handful of agencies died last year. We have no intention of ever becoming one of them.”

—Larry Dobrow

AT THE HELM
Dale Taylor, CEO

PERFORMANCE
Revenues of approximately $70 million, up 10% over prior year’s

HIGHLIGHTS
Won 20 new assignments that came from existing clients

Picked up Chiesi as a new client

Several product launches

CHALLENGES
Dealing with shrinking pharma budgets

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