



AT THE HELM

Kerry Hilton, president and CEO

PERFORMANCE

Revenue surged 40% in 2009 after slow start

HIGHLIGHTS

Enjoyed the biggest first quarter of its history

Landed AOR work for Alcon Labs, Medtronic and Lanx

Won print and web work from US Oncology

Headcount up 9 to 38, recruiting executive CD

CHALLENGE

Finding talent willing to relocate to Austin

For contact details, service offerings and client roster, see Agency A-to-Z, beginning on page 173

HC&B Healthcare Communications

Huge first-quarter gains, new business help Texas shop shine in bleak year



Kerry Hilton, CEO of Austin-based HC&B, says many companies were feeling squeezed last year and looking for options and change. After a slow start to 2009, spring brought a strong surge of new business that resulted in a 40% rise in revenue, compared to 2008. Momentum has continued, and Hilton says HC&B has enjoyed the biggest first quarter of its history.

“Our positioning is to outsmart, not outspend,” he explains. “Last year, clients were looking to do something new and we were something new and fresh. We’ve become—in a very good way—the alternative to the big holding companies in the healthcare agency space. We’re smaller, more aggressive, willing to take a few more chances. There are no handcuffs that keep us from being very aggressive and honest with our approach.”

Digital is more pervasive throughout the agency, and Hilton and his team challenge clients who are “more on the traditional side” to ramp up digital.

“Digital isn’t a trend—it’s a way of life,” he says. “A trend inside digital is the ever-growing need for clients to get better and better at search. Our search

business is really growing—not just US but global search. Clients want the analytics behind it.”

Hilton has noticed what he calls “a return to the big idea,” as clients are seeking out fresh strategy. He also sees clients showing willingness to take some risks now.

“It’s almost like there’s been a reset button hit on creativity,” he says. “Everyone’s in digital. Everyone is sticking their toe in social media. We get all that, but a lot of clients are also saying, ‘Let’s go back to big brand ideas.’”

New business last year included multiple divisions of Alcon Laboratories (AOR assignment for Alcon Surgical), as well as AOR wins for three Medtronic stents and for spinal company Lanx.

A US Oncology assignment included print and website work, and web work also came in from Austin Gastroenterology. GeoDigm Dental and Spectrum Dental Labs awarded the agency brand and recruiting work.

Three people were let go in January, and they were replaced with digital talent. Headcount ending 2009 was up five to 34, and it has since increased to 38.

New hires included Joe Doyle, interactive services director, and Amy Chase, interactive project manager. Construction will begin soon to nearly double office space.

Hilton is currently recruiting an executive creative director to join in 2011 and take over some his workload. In general, he says he’s “constantly” looking for talent, and finding the right people can be tough.

“It’s continued challenge for us to find talent that’s willing to relocate to Austin,” he says. “When you leave New York, you’re out of the mainstream. You’ve got to believe in our vision and in what we’re trying to do.”

Keeping up with growth is a priority for the rest

“Everyone’s in digital. Everyone is sticking their toe in social media. We get all that”

—Kerry Hilton



Above: A professional ad for Alcon Labs' I-Caps; Top: From a journal ad for Medtronic Endeavor stents

of the year. An outside consultant is also helping the agency with vision planning, which Hilton says is helping “rally the agency behind a bigger vision as we get ready to grow.” A new agency website that reflects the new vision is planned to launch late this year.

“We caught a wind last year, and we’re raising our sails as high as possible because there’s a lot of interest in the agency,” Hilton says. —Tanya Lewis