



AT THE HELM

Lisa Bair, founder and chief executive officer

PERFORMANCE

\$25 million in revenue for 2012

HIGHLIGHTS

Pushed the number of top-20 pharma companies on its client roster to 12 with work from Merck and Novartis

Opened digital unit Hobart Innovations

Headcount passed the 100-employee mark

CHALLENGES

Sticking to the company policy of remaining firmly within the payer sector

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

The Hobart Group

A clear sense of purpose leads to a position of true leadership



Having a look back at the 10 years since she founded The Hobart Group out of her home, Lisa Bair is quick to hand out credit for the company's success to various sources. She thanks clients—especially those who came on board early—for their faith in her. She thanks past and present employees, both high and low in the company hierarchy, for their trust, dedication and good cheer. Surprisingly, she even thanks her competition, crediting them with giving the push that was necessary to successfully differentiate Hobart's offerings.

The one person or entity that Bair doesn't even bother to mention is perhaps the one who deserves the accolades: herself. During an era in which many mid-size firms were attempting to be all things to all of their clients, Bair carved out a niche all her own in the payer space. In the process of doing so, she accepted exactly zero dollars and zero cents from outside investment partners.

"I self-funded the growth of the agency," she says. Which isn't to say that the financial path she chose didn't come with its share of headaches. "When it's just you, you're so vested personally. You feel the worries and the stress much more acutely than you would otherwise."

Bair, now founder and CEO of Hobart Group Hold-

ings, points to the period during which she debuted Hobart Forte—one of a handful of independent units that operate under the HGH banner, along with The Hobart Group, Hobart Core and the just-opened Hobart Innovations—as the one that really tested her mettle.

"We were down the path of launching it when Pfizer, which was one of our key clients, cut way back on spending," she recalls. "Someone less risk-averse might have pulled the plug, or maybe I would have pulled the plug if I had investors. But something in my gut told me it was the right approach and that Pfizer would start spending again."

Most of Bair's decisions, of course, don't come from the gut. Over the years, clients who were satisfied with HGH's work in the payer sector put out feelers to see whether or not the agency would accept assignments outside that sector. Each time an offer was made, Bair has declined it.

"There's always a temptation in this business to go outside your core, but it takes true discipline and commitment to be a leader in any given space," she says. "When you try to do things that are a bit of a stretch, that's when you lose that leadership position." HGH clients haven't seemed to mind, especially since the company is happy to pass along names that would be a better fit.

Hobart Group Holdings closed out 2012 at \$25 million in revenue—a little short of the \$30 million prediction Bair made at this time last year, but a number that is still up quite a bit from 2011's \$18 million. She expects to end 2013 somewhere between \$30 and \$31 million and notes with pride that the company passed



Work for an Astellas rebranding (above left) and Baxter's Gamma-gard (left) were on The Hobart Group's roster last year

the 100-employee mark on April 29. The firm added Merck and Novartis as clients during the last year, pushing to 12 the number of top-20 pharma companies with which HGH works.

Bair hopes to grow that number to 14 before the year is out. She also has high hopes for the newly christened Hobart Innovations. The digital-minded unit, which is led by Larry Blandford, aims to bridge the divide that currently exists between payers and pharma companies.

On the home front, Bair's major goal is to extend a streak that's somewhat amazing in the uncertain world of mid-sized marketing agencies. "In our 10-year history, we've never laid off an employee," she reports. "We're very fortunate." —Larry Dobrow

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—Lisa Bair