

Abelson Taylor

A history of doing the unexpected has kept AT at the top of its game



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—Dale Taylor

AbelsonTaylor is "the only agency in the business that hasn't changed their name. We did remove a hyphen... a couple of years ago," the agency's president and CEO Dale Taylor tells *MM&M* when walking us through some of the changes that did happen over the last year.

Among the changes: a revamped website that replaced the agency's understated presentation with a vibrant one that shares imagery and insight about the people who create its award-winning campaigns. "We've developed fabulous websites for our clients and never spent much time developing our own," Taylor explains.

But even post-revamp, it is still understated, or at least unexpected, by what it leaves out: jargon or words like "patient-centricity" which get kicked around a lot. That kind of sums up how AT approaches its projects—head-on, few sideshows. "Our work is, you know, the basic service we provide to any client, regardless of media—great strategy and great creative," Taylor says.

One way this expresses itself in the client experience is exemplified in Taylor's description of a meeting

in which a client had divvied up an account among agencies and brought representatives in at the same time. Taylor says AT brought a few people, while the other two agencies brought 11 account people to the meeting "only two of whom provided content... clients eventually figure out how inefficient that is."

This sense of purpose and restraint influences everything from the creative work the independent agency accepts to the work it turns down. It's even led the agency to turn away from strategies like creating a conflict shop. This may seem crazy in an industry where chatter about holding company mega-mergers have provided a background hum, but the unexpected is a big part of what makes AT work. "We like the way AbelsonTaylor feels... we don't really know who we would be anymore, so we've avoided that agency strategy for being able to work on competing drugs," Taylor says.

This is also despite pressures that have been rolling through the pharmaceutical space, like the patent cliff which hit AbelsonTaylor's portfolio so hard in the past year that it had to downsize in February. Patents were not the only issue—Taylor notes that new medications also pinched business, such as "when Vertex realized that hepatologists were no longer prescribing Incivek because they were warehousing their patients because they knew [Gilead's hepatitis C medication] Sovaldi was coming."

Yet the year closed with enough ups that overall revenue fell just 4% in 2013 compared to 2012, and Taylor and SVP Jay Carter say this year has started off at a pace that could lead the agency to growth of between 7% and 10% over last year.

So far the count of business won includes 15 in 2013 and three "big ones" in 2014, two of which Carter notes are consumer, which he says are even cooler because "everyone one on the creative side wants to prove they're real. It's a great morale booster."

"And it's cool to see your work on TV, too," Taylor notes.



This new business has come via what seems to be the usual AbelsonTaylor method: without a pitch. Clients either gravitate towards the agency because of previous experience with AT or because people moving from one client to another liked the AbelsonTaylor way of doing things so much that they brought the agency along to their new place of business.



AT THE HELM

Dale Taylor, president and CEO

PERFORMANCE

A slight revenue drop of 4% last year, but estimates of 7% to 10% growth this year

HIGHLIGHTS

There were 15 account wins in 2013, as well as three “big ones” so far this year

Two big consumer wins, which Taylor calls a “great morale booster”

Most of the new business has come without AT having to do a pitch

Launched a revamped agency website that drew attention to the people who create the agency’s campaigns

Focus on insight led to greater connection with customers

CHALLENGES

The patent cliff hit the agency so hard that it had to downsize in February

Smarter consumers necessitate a greater degree of knowledge from the agency

New medications also pinched some business from the agency’s roster

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

Talking to recent hire Luke Perez, who at the time of this interview had been working as AbelsonTaylor’s VP of account planning and strategy for all of five weeks, the unexpected permeates the place. For example, Perez says not only is it unusual to have account people be able to talk about a mechanism of action, but to be able to pull together a group of people from account, strategy, clinical and creative teams and have each person be able to “basically tell you the mechanism of action . . . I just haven’t come across that.” He adds that “my first five weeks here have been pretty incredible. I’ve learned as much as I have been able to contribute.”

VP director of interactive technology Jose Andrade, also a new hire since 2013, describes the agency’s unique perspective as sort of “putting mayonnaise on the other side of the bread,” in that it is eager to embrace new ideas, and can’t be bothered with wrapping it in the unessential. “They are very conversational

but “now patients know their numbers” and the task is to talk to them “in a way they understand and appreciate. Getting really granular.”

Carter adds that “the patient-facing piece is an area where we need to focus on the smarter consumer. And we love that because we’re good at it,” and says clients are now more open to this approach.

Finding that “in” to reach the customer is something Emily Tower, AT’s new VP of digital strategy and analytics, says is special. Tower, whose previous experience was in a digital-only shop, says she was used to letting the channel dictate content, a handicap of sorts because her firm did not have access to insights. With AT, Tower says she’s been “pleasantly surprised with the level of insight we’ve been able to glean,” and says work on a cardiovascular account surprised her when the research showed that the go-to answer—provide health-and-wellness information—was not the right answer. Instead, Tower says, research revealed that

From left: AbelsonTaylor work promoting Aczone, a prescription medication for acne; an ad for Latuda, which treats bipolar depression; a piece from a Teva Oncology awareness campaign

in their tone. They try not to sit at the table with too much buzz, too much jargon... you don’t have any kind of this ‘push presentation.’”

Among the challenges the founders see ahead for the industry: consumers are smarter about their health and what treatments are available to them, and it is essential that the creative that reaches them comes from a point of knowledge. “For me, the biggest change of the ACA is that you’ve just got a smarter end-marketer,” Carter says referring to healthcare reform.

As an example, Carter says there was a time when patients did not know their cholesterol numbers “and you had to tell them about bad vs. good cholesterol,”

“sometimes it’s just about passing the test and doing what you think your doctor wants you to do”—which completely reframes what constitutes relevant content.

“It’s really marketing 101. It seems so simple, but I think it’s really forgotten—let insight drive your strategy... often we see it in reverse,” Tower says.

But simple does not mean simplistic. Finding the basic idea that propels creative by not allowing it to hide behind generalities is a new task every time it is undertaken. Which is why Carter hands off quotes like the following, “If you know one pharmaceutical company, you only know one pharmaceutical company—every one is different.” —Deborah Weinstein