

Digitas Health LifeBrands

Top on this agency's to-do list: establishing itself on a global scale



“We heard clients asking us to engage across the globe”

—Michael du Toit

Digitas Health LifeBrands leaders Alexandra von Plato and Michael du Toit would hardly seem to be the sort to sit around and dummy up a to-do list at the start of each year. Yet to hear them tell it, that’s exactly what they do—on a grander and far more strategic scale, of course.

Two years ago, Digitas made a choice to go customer-agnostic, eliminating whatever barriers existed between its consumer, HCP and other arms. Pleased with the results, the company set its sights even higher in 2013.

“We decided we wanted to become a global powerhouse, or whatever you want to call it,” says du Toit, president of Digitas Health LifeBrands and Publicis Healthcare. “We saw the market moving and we heard clients asking us to engage across the globe. We started to think that we’d be remiss if we didn’t do it.”

That might be a bit of an overstatement—given its status within the global Publicis network, Digitas could have passed for a global shop without fully committing to the process—but the company took to it. First, it executed what von Plato, president and global chief

creative officer of Digitas Health LifeBrands and Publicis Healthcare, describes as a “branding refresh” by adding LifeBrands to its moniker. “That makes us able to connect with our LifeBrands agencies around the world,” she explains. “It’s an opportunity to align agencies around a common philosophy that thinks about marketing through the lens of the consumer.”

The agency also strived to create better alignment between itself and its Publicis Healthcare Group sister companies. But ultimately, the global push prompted Digitas to turn its focus inwards. “Everything we do as an agency starts with the right people,” du Toit says. “With any strategy, whether it’s being global or anything else, the first question we ask is, ‘Who can do this?’ not, ‘How do we do this?’”

As a result, Digitas kickstarted its global ambitions by elevating a handful of execs and empowering them to take a closer look at the company’s business and anything else that might help. “We built up our senior bench,” von Plato says. The execs are: Marion Chaplick, EVP, general manager for AbbVie; Craig Douglass, EVP, executive creative director, DHL, Philadelphia; Brendan Gallagher, EVP, experience strategy and innovation, DHL; Susan Manber, EVP, brand strategy and insights, DHL; and Jacqueline Nolan, EVP, executive creative director, DHL, New York. Key additions during the year included Diann Hamilton, executive planning director, DHL, Philadelphia, and Michael Lies, SVP, social strategy DHL.

That added intellectual and creative might helped Digitas get off to a fast start on its global plans (“it’s not something you accomplish in a year or even two years,” von Plato notes). Still, looking at a company goal through the lens of its staff is consistent with the way the firm has traditionally gone about its business.

“Because of how we started, we’ve always had a very eclectic people strategy. Most of our team never worked in healthcare before they came here,” von Plato says. “Digital is so in our DNA, which is important to a lot of the people who have joined us.”

Du Toit agrees, noting that the recruitment process is a never-ending task. “I said to Alex yesterday: I’m not worried about where the next \$10 million is coming from. I’m worried about where the next 10 great people are coming from. For us, finding great talent has always translated into finding great clients.”

Which means that Digitas must’ve found some talented folks in 2013. Du Toit reports “double-digit growth and great margins,” attributable in part to additional work from Merck Serono, Pfizer, Shire and AbbVie. To bolster its relationship with Gilead and other left-coast clients, the company opened an office in San Francisco. Perhaps most importantly, Digitas continued to diversify its client base—which, in the wake of two huge brands going off patent in 2012, was another item near the top of the to-do list.

Von Plato gives much of the credit for this to Greg Lewis, SVP, business development, who is charged with shepherding the company’s new-business efforts. “He’s been an absolute rock star in terms of looking for great clients and opening doors for us,” she says.



AT THE HELM

From left: Tim Pantello, managing director, Digitas Health Philadelphia; Alexandra von Plato, president, global chief creative officer; Graham Mills, executive creative director, Digitas Health New York; Michael du Toit, president

PERFORMANCE

Agency reports “double-digit growth and great margins” for 2013

Made inroads toward becoming a “global powerhouse”

HIGHLIGHTS

Additional work from Merck Serono, Pfizer, Shire and AbbVie

To bolster its relationship with Gilead and other west-coast clients, opened an office in San Francisco

Diversified its client base to ward off the threat of brands going off patent

Built up its senior bench of executives

CHALLENGES

Finding the right people to help the agency meet its goals

Helping clients take advantage of “our office to explore mobile and social more aggressively”

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

From left: the website for the Sanofi Connecting Nurses global initiative; a poster produced to support the Gilead-sponsored HIVANSWERS.com

Lewis’ arrival, in retrospect, helped paved the way for much of what has happened at Digitas since.

“We work in a vertical where brands die. It’s not like we have a Toyota Camry, which could live forever,” du Toit explains. “We had two clients that made up 30% to 40% of our business. While we had to be very diligent in replacing those clients, we did so with a specific purpose of making sure no one client would dominate.” As a result, Digitas now counts far more mid-size pharma, medical device and OTC companies as part of its product mix.

Planning at Digitas has been similarly forward-looking from its first days, when it made digital work the hallmark of its client offering. It might’ve taken a little while for clients to take the AOR leap of faith, but the agency’s early skill and agility in the competency that (now, at least) matters the most may be the factor single most responsible for its continued growth.

“Starting as a native digital agency—that was important,” du Toit admits. “We started seeing that digital was going to become a core aspect of any brand strategy, so we sought to move digital to the core of everything we did.” What du Toit knows but chooses not to mention is that many firms birthed as digital shops haven’t been

able to make that jump to AOR-worthiness in clients’ eyes. “Was all of it a huge plan? Some of it was. A lot of it was luck. But we were certainly in the right place at the right time with our strategy.”

Thus when Digitas throws its weight behind the Digital Health Summit at the annual Consumer Electronics Show or the MDOT conference on mobile health innovation, it has an unusual degree of credibility. And when it comes to future-minded conversations with current and would-be healthcare clients, Digitas can perhaps speak from a position of greater authority.

“We want to see clients taking advantage of our offer to explore mobile and social more aggressively,” von Plato says. “We’ve already seen the flip, from us pushing them about these things to them asking us.”

Du Toit’s goals are even more ambitious. “When speaking to our clients, they say they’re not behind their competitors when it comes to adopting new things; they’re behind their customers,” he says. “So I don’t want to compare myself to other companies in our business; I want to compare myself to whoever’s best at communicating to patients or other audiences. I want to be on par with the best, not just the best in pharma.” — Larry Dobrow