



AT THE HELM

Dorothy Gemmell,
president

PERFORMANCE

Agency grew its business by bringing in work from both large pharma clients and consumer-facing entities

HIGHLIGHTS

Expanding relationships with Sanofi and Biogen Idec

Bulked up creative leadership with some key hires

New work from Walgreens and Nestlé

CHALLENGES

Working within the budgetary margins set by clients

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

Havas Life New York

For this agency, it's not about saying "digital," it's about doing it



Havas Life New York gave Dorothy Gemmell two directives when she arrived to lead the firm in April 2013: Grow the business and make the agency more digital. More than a year later, she's crossed both items off her to-do list (though one presumes that growing the business isn't a one-time-only charge). What's interesting is the way she accomplished the second of the two goals.

During Gemmell's first 90 days, she did what any incoming leader would do: asked questions and listened intently to the responses. "What surprised me was when we talked about digital," she recalls. "Everyone I spoke with had the same answers. 'Do we build responsive websites? Do we build apps?'" "Yes, yes, yes." I came away from the conversations thinking, "What do we do that's not digital?"

Gemmell thought on this for a bit, then acted: She banned the word "digital" from Havas Life New York. No "digital" in PowerPoint decks. No "digital" in titles. No "digital" anywhere.

The mandate was surprisingly well-received by agency staff, Gemmell reports. "I think it took some pressure off people," she says. "Everyone's been there: The client says, 'Oh my God, I need an app or a Facebook page or a wearable strategy!' Part of losing 'digital' was to train our people to stop clients when they went down that road, and ask instead, 'What are you

trying to accomplish?' Sometimes you don't need an app that will end up ranked 39,000th in the App Store."

For Havas Life New York, then, it's about formulating strategy and creative tailored to the client's needs, rather than breaking it down along digital/nondigital or online media/traditional media lines. To that end, the agency bulked up its creative leadership with a handful of key hires, among them chief creative officer Allison Ceraso and senior vice president, experience strategy Chris Beland ("but I had to change his title from head of digital strategy," Gemmell jokes).

On the client front, Havas Life New York diversified its mix. It grew its relationships with global pharma behemoths like Sanofi and Biogen Idec, but continued to make space for more consumer-facing entities like Walgreens and Nestlé. The roster-diversification push came with its frustrations, not so much in the type of clients the agency was able to reel in but in the hoops it had to jump through along the way.

"I've been in this industry for more than 25 years and there's never been a time when clients need strategic partners more. There are few brand teams that are bigger now than they were five years ago," Gemmell explains. "At the same time, the margins are a huge challenge for everyone. Sometimes it's hard to get procurement people to see the value in what we do." Asked if that has dimmed Havas Life New York's prospects in recent months, Gemmell responds, "If you have smart people that clients want to partner with, they'll find a way to make it happen." The key, she believes, is laying out the ROI case early.

Look for Havas Life New York to continue to diversify its client base, perhaps via the pursuit of entities outside the aegis of Big Pharma. "I'm a high-science and techy kind of girl," Gemmell says. "I'd like to have a few more small biotechs on board. I'd love to do more with healthcare technology." — *Larry Dobrow*

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Promoting All's products for consumers with sensitive skin (left) and Wyeth Nutrition (above)