

SONIC Health

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The managers at SONIC Health describe their agency: “Once upon a time there was a little indie agency in southern California that set out to discover what world of healthcare would look like through the eyes of story-loving, wine-drinking, marketing misfits.”

RECENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Let’s start with some backstory,” agency executives say.

According to management, SONIC Health was coming off its most successful year as an agency in 2017. The agency had transformed some small strategic projects with the world’s leading hemophilia franchise into a role as global AOR for nine brands. “It’s like we went from playing an extra on *Days of Our Lives* to a leading man in *Avengers: Infinity War*,” says Ross Fetterolf, co-founder. “It afforded us the opportunity to re-imagine the whole agency process, because our client was frustrated with the lack of special effects their current agency was bringing to the table.”

To round out its roster of superheroes, SONIC cast a health economics guru and a world-renowned patient influencer to engage on the business. Despite SONIC’s rapid scaling, the opportunity ended abruptly in the fourth quarter as the entire global marketing team was suddenly zapped with a relocation beam and transplanted to Switzerland as part of an acquisition. “Evidently, Switzerland does not always remain neutral,” says Fabio Gratton, co-founder.

And so it was that SONIC set out in 2018 to build new relationships with a variety of rare disease companies, landing eight new clients throughout the year. Notes Fetterolf, “We explored a new client engagement approach that was rooted in sharing our knowledge and expertise of storytelling as a way to benefit their brands and their careers.”

SONIC embarked on a whirlwind tour of storytelling workshops, educating organizations on how to apply the MOA of story to everything from internal presentations to worldwide campaigns as a means to make ideas unforgettable.



SONIC’s founders Fetterolf (left) and Gratton (right) strike the perfect balance of facts and feelings found in a good story.

“The culmination of our storytelling engagement was an event we called ‘The Feast,’” according to Fetterolf. “We had 25 members of a global marketing team out to our offices to immerse them in storytelling best practices. We featured lessons from the world’s greatest storytellers – Jobs, Musk, Churchill, even the movie *Sideways* – but we also made it very relevant by inviting a patient influencer (a YouTube star) to be part of the curriculum. They did a lesson on improv in storytelling, and the VP of franchise marketing had to rebrand and sell cheese balls as a medical innovation through a two-minute story. That is not something you forget.”

Clients took note as SONIC’s new portfolio of brand engagements read like a series of summer blockbusters, with a few indie art-house flicks mixed in: The agency helped launch a start-up tech company that used simulation to help study decision-making in healthcare, developed a go-to-market strategy for a medical device company pioneering the use of “spray on skin,” and created a community to offer strength and support to caregivers of kids with a rare form of epilepsy.

“We look back on the year and we’re really proud of what

we’ve accomplished, of the stories we’ve told and the new relationships we’ve built,” Fetterolf says.

STRUCTURE AND SERVICES

While great storytellers often follow a “rule of three,” according to agency managers, SONIC has applied a two-part structure for its services.

“We’re one-part strategic storytelling ‘think tank’ and one-part lean-agency production studio,” says Natalie Noble, executive producer at SONIC. “The strategic engagements are typically where we begin our work with clients, but we’re quite comfortable building on that work and moving into the most complicated of execution. We like to draw on our heavy digital and technical experience, and feel there’s no challenge we can’t solve.”

Due to its deep Southern California roots (having spun out of Gratton’s digital agency powerhouse Ignite Health), managers say SONIC is able to tap into a highly experienced network of freelance talent to scale engagements to meet client needs, putting talent to task. “We can scale up or down very quickly, which means clients get the best people working on their projects if and when they need

them, not just because we have those services occupying a desk in-house,” Noble says.

One specific capability that SONIC spent time crafting was its social community building offering, called CULTURE. “We were very fortunate to partner with a client in the epilepsy space who wanted to think differently about connecting with the community pre-launch,” agency executives say. “We turned to Facebook as a platform to interact with patients and caregivers, learning everything we could about what made the culture of that condition unique – including the language, symbols and values. We authored over 100 posts and watched the community grow to more than 15,000 members in six months. The insights gained through that experience can be used to create value for patients for years to come.”

SONIC is the marketing arm of a trifecta of healthcare services companies within Gratton’s Alchemy Factory incubator. The lineup includes CureClick, a crowdsourced clinical trial recruitment company, and inVibe, a “listening company” that helps organizations capture the real stories told by patients and physicians, in their own voice. All three companies share the same SoCal office

QUICK FACTS

ACCOUNTS

Account wins	8
Active business clients	12

SERVICES MIX

Full service AOR	40%
Strategic consulting	40%
Social media AOR	20%

space, which makes collaboration frictionless, SONIC says.

“When we bring this collection of offerings to the table for our clients, it has exponential effects,” agency managers say. “CureClick is our first act, helping accelerate trial recruitment through social influencers and community creation. In act two the drama escalates, we use inVibe to listen to patients and physicians to understand and embrace their needs. The third and final act is where SONIC pays it off through world-class story development and pull-through marketing services.”

FUTURE PLANS

With a small, independent, experienced team and no outside revenue projections to hit or exceed, SONIC sets its 2019 sights on bringing in more of the kind of clients that believe story is critical to connecting with patients and physicians. SONIC management says specific areas of new business generation will focus on rare disease, social community building, and a hopeful return to the hemophilia category to apply the agency’s wealth of experience and connections.

“Fabio and I would like to look back at the end of this year and say that we did the kind of work that helped people better engage in their health and turned our clients into better storytellers,” Fetterolf says. “Like so many of the bedtime stories we share with our kids, we’d like to see 2019 end happier (and healthier) ever after.” medadnews



SONIC’s 2018 highlights reel included storytelling workshops, global campaigns, marketing events, and community movements.