

# Abelson Taylor

Successful beyond its wildest dreams (even the one with Abe and the beaver)



**“We’ve been on a roll. I remind everyone that there have been other years when we worked just as hard and won nothing”**

—Dale Taylor

AbelsonTaylor’s biggest challenge during the past 12 months was keeping agency growth under wraps. “We’ve won a lot of business and we’ve tried not to pitch very much,” explains agency president and CEO Dale Taylor.

“We’ve turned down a lot more than we’ve taken in and to a large extent we’ve accepted pitches from current clients.”

During the past year the agency strengthened its profile by accepting DTC assignments for the first time.

Notably, the agency partnered with Chicago consumer shop Cramer-Krasselt (C-K) to launch the “Abe and the Beaver” campaign for Takeda’s sleep drug Rozorem. “It has been received with a lot of acclaim,” Taylor tells *MM&M*.

“It’s obviously very controversial. Some people like it, some people hate it. It tends to be a little bit polariz-

ing, which seems to be true of a lot of the work we do, since we tend to do work that’s not in the middle.”

Taylor doesn’t take full credit however, explaining that C-K came up with the core idea behind the campaign. (AbelsonTaylor handles primarily the Web and interactive components of the campaign, Taylor says.)

Also in the DTC arena, the agency launched a new multimedia campaign for Zimmer’s Gender Knee Solutions. “That’s also been a wonderful adventure for us and a great client,” Taylor says.

AbelsonTaylor’s foray into DTC has been overseen by director of DTC David Levin, who joined the agency last November. Levin was previously at Drafftcb where he worked on marketing programs for Kaiser Permanente and Baxter Bioscience. Prior to that, he worked extensively with Novartis and Pfizer at Deutsch.

The added DTC work doesn’t mean the agency will lose site of its core focus, Taylor says.

“DTC offers an opportunity to do creative in a different way to a different audience and keep the creative juices flowing amongst the people here who always wanted to do it,” he says.

Meanwhile, AbelsonTaylor kept its pitching skills sharp by competing for work on TAP’s Prevacid.

In March, the agency won back the Prevacid professional advertising business, along with the account for TAP’s follow-on, TAK-390MR. The agency previously handled Prevacid professional from pre-launch, in 1994, until 2004, producing the iconic “Heals Tough” campaign for the drug, before losing it to GSW Worldwide.

“We just couldn’t say no to that pitch,” Taylor says.

Other highlights included wins on brands from Astellas and Web site business for Takeda’s Actos.

Just a year-and-a-half ago, AbelsonTaylor took over an additional floor in its previous office building. By June, the agency had outgrown the space and planned a move to a new 100,000-square-foot office in the heart of Chicago’s Loop.

“That’s a big change for us, especially since we were in the previous offices since the early 1980s,” Taylor says. “There are a lot of people whose only job in the industry has been at AbelsonTaylor and whose only home has been 35 East Wacker. It’s going to be a lot of fun, because we are going to be able to design this one in our own way.”

Despite the rash of success, Taylor remains cautiously optimistic. “We’ve been on a roll,” he says. “But I remind everyone that there have been other years when we worked just as hard and won nothing. It’s a risky business. You do the best you can every year and hope for the best.”

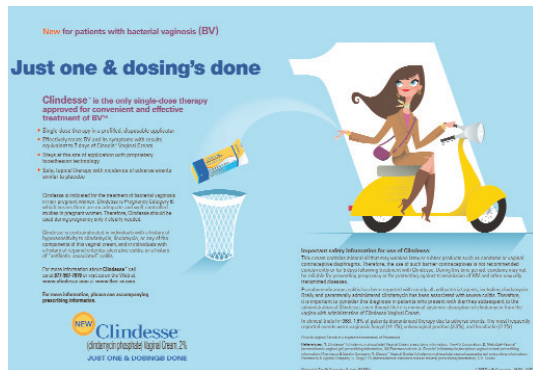
One of Taylor’s concerns has been the advent of the procurement function, which has caused a lot of sleepless nights among agency execs throughout the industry.

“Our take is when the procurement function is done well, it can be a great boon to agencies,” he says. “It

brings a certain rationality to the way decisions are made about not only hiring and firing agencies but working with them. We have been fortunate to work with some clients who have done that function well and I think it has benefited us.

“When it’s done badly and to squeeze prices lower, well that’s tough tough and there’s only one solution to that: agencies need to recognize that if they produce commodity work, they’ll get commodity (results) and if they are not willing to accept those results then they just have to walk away or they’ll have to find a way to make sure their work is quantitatively different than the work of the agencies they compete with so they can command a higher price.”

Another concern for the agency has been finding and maintaining a highly-talented staff, Taylor says.



**Above: Journal ad for Ther-Rx Corp's Clindesse**  
**Far left: Professional ad for Astellas' Amevive**

Because of that, AbelsonTaylor relies on a program of internal development, with over half of its account staff developed from within.

“We are growing our own copywriters because we think it’s easier to make a scientist into a copywriter than a copywriter into a scientist,” Taylor says. “That’s helped us a lot because copywriters are in very short supply in this industry. We’ve done the same on the art side. It’s relatively unusual for us to go outside for talent except at the mid- to senior level, where we may need a specific experience base, or if we haven’t had time to develop it internally.”

A contributing factor to AbelsonTaylor’s reliance on internal development is its Chicago location.

“We are a bit isolated from the revolving door syndrome in New York and New Jersey,” Taylor says. “Let’s face it, the bulk of the people who work in this industry work on the East Coast and it’s not easy to get people to move. Lot’s of people move for their own reasons. We get a lot of East Coast talent coming here because they have decided to move to Chicago to follow their spouse or they have just decided they want to have a life again and they know they can do that better here than they can in New York.”



**AT THE HELM**

Dale Taylor, president and CEO

**PERFORMANCE**

“We’ve won a lot of business”— Taylor

**HIGHLIGHTS**

Accepted DTC work for the first time—work on accounts included the “controversial” “Abe and the Beaver” ads for Takeda’s Rozerem insomnia drug and for Zimmer’s Gender Knee Solutions

Brought on board David Levin as director of the DTC practice

Won back professional ad business for TAP’s Prevacid

Planning a move to a new 100,000-square-foot-office in downtown Chicago

**CHALLENGES**

Finding and maintaining top-notch talent. AbelsonTaylor relies on a program of internal development called Clinical Research Associates, with over half of its account staff developed from within

*For contact details, service offerings and client roster, see Agency A-to-Z, beginning on page 143*

However, those who find themselves working at AbelsonTaylor tend to stay put. “The senior staff never leaves,” Taylor says. “I don’t think we have ever had anyone above the level of account director resign in the history of the place. It’s very stable.”

To illustrate just how low to the agency’s turnover rate is, Taylor points to the 21-member creative staff that was part of the agency 12 years ago.

“Since then, two have reached the age of retirement and left the industry,” he says. “Out of the remaining 19, 16 still work here. Now that is unusual for any ad agency.

AbelsonTaylor has had to work diligently at maintaining a culture where people aspire to do great work as it has grown in recent years.

“It’s not easy to keep that same spirit going when you are 350 people, at least not as easy as when you are 100



**Above: Professional ad for Scios' heart failure treatment Natrecor**

people,” Taylor says. “But the fact that we have remained independent has a lot to do with our success because we don’t have any outside pressures forcing us to return a certain revenue stream or forcing to get rid of people when we lose accounts. Maintaining that culture has been the most important thing. It’s a culture that our clients recognize too.”

Perhaps the best kept secret to the agency’s success, Taylor says, is always remembering that it’s the doctor/sales rep relationship that fuels the professional side of the business.

“It is still where most of the information is exchanged. That’s going to be important for a long time to come,” he says.

“We have worked hard to build a strong interactive group and a strong DTC group but, despite that, the rep is still going to be the key way drugs go to market on the professional side of the business,” Taylor says. “Our business is built on an understanding of that particular strange process of the professional sales representatives delivering sales messages to doctors. That’s still where most of the information is exchanged. That’s going to be important for a long time to come.”

—Stephen McGuire