



PHD Intelligence.
Connected.
GLOBAL

The agency successfully defended \$4 billion in billings while reengineering for an AI-powered future.

By Alison Weissbrot



KEY WINS

David Yurman (Americas and Europe), Firehouse Subs (U.S.), HP (global retention), Priceline (U.S.), Sainsbury's (U.K. retention/expansion), Tim Hortons (Canada), Unilever (DACH, Turkey, GCC retention), Vitasoy (China retention), Volkswagen Group (global retention), and Wayfair (Canada)

LOSSES

Diageo (India), Gap (U.S. TV buying), Lindt (U.S.), Oatly (global), Unilever (Canada, Egypt), Spotlight Retail Group (AUZ), WestJet Airlines (Canada)

STRATEGIC MOVES

PHD launched a new positioning called “Intelligence Connected,” and reengineered its planning process and tools to orchestrate capabilities around specific client needs. Rohan Tambyrajah was promoted to global chief experience officer to oversee a new experience planning capability.

REVENUE

PHD declined to break out global revenues, citing restrictions from parent company Omnicom. Billings grew 11.6% year-over-year.

DEI

PHD does not track racial diversity at the global level. 36% of U.S. staff and 20% of C-suite executives in the country identify as BIPOC, steady with 2023 numbers. Globally, PHD C-suite executives are 48% female, and senior managers are 53% female.

PHD

ADWEEK Media Agency of the Year

PHD Intelligence. Connected. GLOBAL

PHD ENTERED 2024 in a precarious position. After winning ADWEEK's Global Media Agency of the Year title in 2024, 37% of its client base went into review, putting \$4 billion in billings on the line.

Unfortunate timing meant multiple clients—Volkswagen Group, HP, Unilever, Sainsbury's, Singapore Airlines, and Vitasoy—kicked off overlapping reviews, creating a cumulative effect that put PHD on defense for much of the year.

"It's a level of jeopardy that you don't normally experience in your career," said Guy Marks, global CEO of PHD Worldwide. "The scale of it was just unprecedented."

But by the end of 2024, PHD had retained 85% of business in play and topped COMvergence's new business rankings for the year.

It was this story of resilience, as well as a commitment to innovation, that won PHD its second consecutive ADWEEK Global Media Agency of the Year title.

FROM AGENCY TO ORCHESTRATION PARTNER

With so much business on the line, PHD set out to refine its positioning and capabilities around client needs. The pace of technological advancement, as well as ongoing volatility in the world, has CMOs questioning if they are set up for success, said Marks.

"It is on us to bring simplification to the complexity of the industry for our clients in order to service their brands," he said.

PHD addressed that with a new positioning, "Intelligence Connected."

According to PHD Worldwide chief strategy officer Mark Holden, the strategy comes to life through people, platforms, and automation. The first element involves building connections, relationships, and bridges across the agency to work as integrated teams. The second is about collaborating through shared software. The third is about automating workflow with AI.

"That's the engineering we've done over the last 12 months that is allowing us to serve up this orchestration approach in reality," he said.

As part of the new process, PHD launched an experience planning discipline and promoted chief strategy officer Rohan Tambyrajah to oversee it as global chief experience officer.

"We've looked at the multiplier effects on ROI from connecting capabilities that were previously siloed into more singular experiences that unlock a seamless articulation of the brand across the consumer journey," he said.

Marks added that as clients continue to evolve agency models, "it is about bringing that constellation and putting it together in the right way."

A FLEXIBLE APPROACH

For Mike Solomon, CEO of PHD USA, this new approach has allowed the agency to help clients rebalance their media investments between brand and performance objectives.

"While efficiency is still very important for our clients, some were a little over their skis in terms of an over-focus of lower funnel," he said. "Showing a connected brand and demand strategy, when I look at pitches like Priceline and Firehouse Subs, that was language that really started to resonate."

It also resonated for Marie Lee, vp of media and digital performance marketing at Princess Cruises, who overhauled the company's media strategy when she joined in 2022.

"Historically, we had been a very lower funnel, performance-focused brand," she said. "I wanted to find the balance between brand building and performance, and to identify new audiences and find new places to introduce Princess Cruises."

PHD's work reorienting Princess's media strategy around full-funnel plans dedicated to its priority markets has led to strong results, she noted.

The agency has also created environments for clients within Omnicom Media Group's Omni platform that are "truly bespoke," Marks said. That's critical to PHD's differentiation, as more technology, data, and centers of excellence sit at the OMG level. "We get to put our own spin on a consistent foundation," he said.

Lee added that this balance has provided a foundation for Princess's media plan while building in enough flexibility to pivot quickly.

"The cruise industry is so dynamic. As the business changes, we're constantly making those adjustments, and PHD is with us lockstep the whole way," she said.

THE YEAR OF RETENTION

For Susanne Grundmann, who was promoted from global lead on Volkswagen to run PHD EMEA this year, the power of the new positioning came into play in its retention of the automaker's account.

Volkswagen put its global media account up for review in 2023, a process that concluded a year later with PHD retaining the \$2 billion-plus business.

"We started to understand what 'Intelligence Connected' means for us, but also [how we can] deliver that day-to-day," she said.

Because Volkswagen comprises eight very different brands, ranging from Skoda to Porsche, being able to orchestrate different capabilities for each while balancing the need for brand building with efficiency was key.

"Reviews have evolved from being [about] 'Who is going to give me the smartest planner and the best pricing?' to 'Who will get under the skin of my business, understand the audience dynamics, and craft short- and long-term strategies for my brands to succeed?'" Mark said.

In the U.S., this deeper understanding led to organic growth with clients like Restaurant Brands International.

RETAINING CLIENTS TO RETAIN STAFF

PHD's strong client relationships are a draw for staff: Last year, the agency's retention rate was 75%. Still, PHD's leadership is aware that the landscape is changing and talent must be brought along for the ride. The agency launched a thought leadership forum called Ascension that aims to educate staff on generative AI's impacts on the industry and how marketers can adapt.

PHD's AI thought leadership focuses on what's possible in the short term. "We're not stargazing, and I think that's important because as an industry we spend too much time talking about things that haven't happened yet," Marks said.

Another retention tool for talent is PHD's commitment to its own brand, as media networks continue to consolidate. "It gives our people something to believe in," Marks said.

"It's the tip of the spear in terms of how we get to the best work. The best innovation happens closest to the clients' problems."

ALISON WEISSBROT is the executive editor at ADWEEK.

Media Agency of the Year

KEY CAMPAIGNS



INFINITY GAMING

Infinity wanted to position itself as the place where brands can reach gamers. To bridge that gap, in partnership with Costa Rican television network Repretel, PHD developed an eight-episode TV series built around the popular video game Just Dance, with a goal of reaching both young gamers and their parents.

Prior to launch, PHD built anticipation with social media teasers, influencer endorsements, and gaming forums that encouraged registrations on a digital platform. The series was supported by user-generated content, livestreams, and digital voting.

The campaign reached more than 80% of Costa Rica's gamers, surpassing a goal of 75%. The TV series drove 800 minutes (roughly 13.5 hours) of gameplay for Just Dance during the broadcast, which drew an average TV rating that was 20% higher than the network's typical performance in that slot.

The digital platform generated 200,000 interactions, with 50,000 participants engaging. Social media impressions surpassed 3 million (in a country of 5 million people), with organic engagement from the gamer community, families, and influencers.

7-ELEVEN

7-Eleven wanted to dispel misconceptions about the quality of convenience store food and support its 7-Select ready-to-eat menu in Hong Kong. PHD launched "7-Select Foodieverse," a video that used AI and computer-generated imagery to create five distinct "foodie-verses" to showcase top-selling food categories, set to music from Error boy band member Dee Gor.

PHD used big data to identify and target key audiences, garnering 14 million views upon launch and 1.3 million social impressions. The agency followed up with a gamified experience offering free trials and discount coupons, driving millions of plays within a week.

Next, PHD helped 7-Eleven roll out combo pricing and an exclusive tote bag with each purchase, which was redeemed 50,000 times during the promo period and sold out upon launch.

The campaign led to double-digit sales growth during the promo period and drove increases in brand favorability metrics such as top-of-mind awareness (81%), brand liking (83%), purchase intent (76%), and visit frequency (75%).

VOLKSWAGEN

To retain Volkswagen, PHD developed a connected capability to supercharge personalized marketing efforts and consumer relationships across the automaker's eight brands.

Using Omni and its Studio planning system, PHD built an AI-powered operating model around three pillars: synchronizing marketing activities across Volkswagen's brands; simplifying complex workflows; and adapting proactively and quickly to business needs.

PHD set up a Data, Tech and Operations (DTO) Hub to bring the model to life by orchestrating data, technology, and analytics too. The DTO Hub is powered by specialized service centers for each Volkswagen brand and comprises analytics, personalization, and biddable media experts; a global data and tech infrastructure; and a global operations and delivery center that automates and centralizes repeatable tasks.

Supported by AI, regional hubs tap into the DTO Hub to plan, optimize, and activate across multiple markets quickly. Local planners are supported by digital assistants that can tap into local market intelligence quickly.

The new operating model led PHD to retain Volkswagen's \$2.2 billion global media business after a lengthy pitch, extending the relationship into its eighth year.

PHD