



**Recognising the true
value of specialist
healthcare creativity**

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The purpose-driven nature of healthcare communications, alongside advances in technology and deeper levels of human insight, are raising creative standards in specialist healthcare agencies to unprecedented levels.



Introduction

Audience awareness of health issues has reached new highs. In part, that's due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, but also the effectiveness of the healthcare industry and its communication partners in disseminating essential information and messaging.

It's a sector that's growing in scale and impact. The EMEA healthcare marketing and communications market [is projected to grow at a CAGR of 19.86% to reach \\$4,613.86 million by 2027](#). This growth is driven, in part, by demand for better patient experience and communication, and also investment from governments and corporations looking to achieve higher standards of patient care, disease awareness and education.

This growth highlights the issue of who is responsible for driving greater awareness and education. Specialist health agencies are facing higher levels of competition from generalist consumer businesses that are leveraging the high standards of their purpose-based work in other categories to make a play for pharma and healthcare clients.

It's clear that generalists are having some success — at times, benefiting from a perception that standards of creativity are lower in specialist healthcare due to the necessary rigour and scientific accuracy that are features of work in this field.

However, far from being a restriction on creative standards, it's easy to identify cases where the regulations faced by healthcare agencies have helped them to thrive, creating outstanding work that makes a massive difference to people's lives.

The evidence shows that standards of creativity in specialist healthcare communications have risen rapidly over the past decade. In 2014, the Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity launched the Pharma Lions category as a reflection of growing creativity in the sector. In 2023, the festival moved to make a clearer distinction between creative covered under Pharma and work in Health & Wellness, which tends to be covered by regulations and restrictions.

Recognising the true value of specialist healthcare creativity

“In the past 10 years, the calibre and quality of the work has been improving because more and more clients from the health space are being exposed to world-class creativity and craft,” said Pharma 2023 Jury President, Joshua Prince, CEO, Professional Group, Omnicom Health Group, Global.

Meanwhile, Mel Routhier, Health and Wellness Jury President in 2023, and VMLY&R Chicago CCO, commented on the high levels of craft in entries to the category. She added: “It was incredible to see the diversity of work that was in the mix. From pharma products to make-up, the category encompasses all mediums and channels, making choosing a winner an exhausting process.”

In 2023, the Health & Wellness Lions, honouring creativity for personal well-being, received 1,297 entries, and 37 Lions were awarded, including 6 Gold, 13 Silver and 17 Bronze. In the Pharma Lions, from 354 entries, 13 Lions were awarded, including 2 Gold, 4 Silver and 6 Bronze.

Cannes isn't alone in celebrating the high standards of creativity within healthcare communications. Clio Health was founded in 2009 as an extension of the Clio Awards competition. Effie Europe has since added a Health & Wellness category to its awards programme.

Wider recognition is also being achieved by specialists in the field. This includes the standout achievement of healthcare agency AREA 23 being named as the most-awarded agency in the US and the world in The Drum's 2023 World Creative Rankings – the first healthcare agency to achieve such an accolade.

This type of achievement reflects the vibrancy of creative solutions in healthcare agencies and the potential for those across Europe to reach new heights. The multi-faceted role of these businesses is impressive in terms of targeting varied audiences, and also in the vast array of expertise and knowledge that exists within their walls.

With this in mind, it's worth taking the time to consider the emerging nature of purpose-based work in advertising. Putting this within the context of the high standards of creativity, combined with rigour that exists within healthcare agencies, and their role in helping clients towards new frontiers through tech-enabled creative solutions.

The importance of purpose

The best work from healthcare agencies combines innovation, creative bravery and a sense of humanity to make a powerful creative and business impact. Standards in this regard are being driven higher as these specialist agencies attract ever-more talented creative people, strategists and medical professionals.

default in their core since all their products are made to improve life quality and, for some, they are literally lifesaving.”

Healthcare agencies have all the resources necessary to deliver this important work for brands. David Prater and Jamie MacCarthy-Morrogh are the EVPs, Executive Creative Directors Europe, FCB Europe. Both have extensive experience in the specialist healthcare field, but Prater worked in consumer advertising for 10 years beforehand.

Prater says: “You do have consumer agencies jumping in on purpose-driven work, but you have to be a specialist healthcare agency to do specialist drug stuff. You need that infrastructure – medical writers, strategic thinkers, and it has to be bang on accurate. Consumer agencies can dip their toe into purpose-driven work, but to do specific things, you need that entire infrastructure.”

John McPartland, Executive Creative Director at Ogilvy Health UK, argues that the purpose-driven nature of healthcare advertising helps to contribute to the potential for higher standards of creativity because “you’re always starting off with a point of difference or with a purpose baked into it. You’re not trying to look for it. You can focus on creativity to tell the story in a really compelling way.”

“Healthcare is one of the most exciting fronts in the creative industry right now”

Alex Okada, Chief Creative Officer at Havas Lynx

A key element to this attraction is linked to the fact that all work from healthcare agencies is purpose-driven and creative people welcome briefs with this emphasis the most.

At the same time, the industry has seen generalist, consumer agencies become more interested in this focus, with “purpose-based work” becoming a catchphrase and calling card to attract clients from a whole range of sectors.

Alex Okada, Chief Creative Officer at Havas Lynx, says: “Healthcare is one of the most exciting fronts in the creative industry right now. Currently, the best work produced is always purposeful and, while consumer brands need to find a purpose, healthcare brands have it by

Rising creative standards

Building on this sense of purpose, the technical knowledge and appreciation of regulations that underpin healthcare communications can be an asset rather than a hindrance. Prater says he's never seen regulations stop a creative idea and the perception that these are a barrier to great creative work is misconceived, it's just that, in healthcare communications, "you can't say anything you can't prove."

they never thought they could do again. And we use our creativity to develop communications that provide novel ways for people to learn about these new breakthroughs. Creativity is at the core of it all."

That creativity is vital due to the sheer range involved in healthcare communications. The task for agencies is often about wider communications and education programmes as much as specific campaigns. Work that's difficult for non-healthcare agencies to generate in terms of pulling together all the essential insights and expertise.

Ogilvy Health's John McPartland says there is a distinction between "hardcore" pharma creative work and more "light touch" healthcare and wellness campaigns due to different levels of regulation. He adds that this may prove a hindrance to non-specialist healthcare agencies, but that the tough pharma briefs are creatively attractive to agencies such as his own.

"We've got years and years of insight into therapy areas, disease areas, and into what it's like for someone to live with a condition," says McPartland. "I've spent 10 years working in dermatology and you get an understanding and feeling of what it's like to live with a serious skin condition...that's where the great work happens because it taps into human truth. That only happens because of experience and access to all of the insights and data."

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John McPartland, Executive Creative Director at Ogilvy Health UK

Specialist agencies tend to have not only creatives within the building, but also brand strategists with detailed knowledge and specific medical qualifications, alongside medical writers with similar credentials. "Accuracy and rigour are at the heart of the work. They don't limit the work, they provide support," says David Prater.

Creative thinking in specialist healthcare agencies, and their clients, tends to exist throughout organisations rather than being confined to a specific department. Rich Levy, Chief Creative Officer at specialist agency Klick Health, says: "Scientists think creatively to develop new molecules that become life-saving therapies. Engineers think creatively to develop medical devices that allow people to do things

Rising creative standards

The potential for work in pharma to be highly creative is emphasised by Rich Levy. He says: "People who use regulations as an excuse tend to do mediocre creative work. I find exactly the opposite to be true. Tight regulations force you to think more creatively. I love that we have to work harder to be creative."

Levy adds: "At Klick, we're at our best when we have an impossible challenge to overcome. Not only because we're being our most creative selves, but because our work is making a significant difference in patients' lives."

"Tight regulations force you to think more creatively. I love that we have to work harder to be creative"

Rich Levy, Chief Creative Officer at Klick Health

Creative rigour is also important due to the nature of the brands and marketers that exist within the healthcare sector. They're not looking for "creative for the sake of being creative" says Jamie MacCarthy-Morrogh. "Our clients are highly scientific, they are working in a hugely technical field...our job is to marry that technical understanding with deep human insight," he adds.

As an example, he talks about a campaign that FCB Health created for Novartis: "Is Your Pain Relief Triggering Your Migraine?" Based on the knowledge that overuse of painkillers can make migraines worse, the pharma company wanted to highlight this surprising paradox and encourage patients to obtain alternative support to manage their migraines more effectively.

In response, the agency created a series of bold, vibrant ads that showed the painkiller pill as a catalyst to make the sufferer's migraine even worse. Running on social media and in print, the pan-European campaign was built on a clear insight backed by creative executions that brought the issue to life. Visualising painkillers as a pair of drum sticks, for instance, juxtaposed with a drum kit inside the sufferer's head.

MacCarthy-Morrogh says the campaign contained a "very human, real message that makes a real difference to patients." He adds: "Like all creative, it has to cut through...it has to engage."

Rising creative standards

Ogilvy Health UK also used strong insights to deliver a powerful creative solution in order to tackle a serious health issue in a campaign for NABS, the advertising charity. Its “Throwaway Comments: Lifelong Hurt” work sought to raise awareness of the lasting psychological and physiological impact of microaggressions in the workplace.

The Ogilvy Health solution included an illustrated book that contains 35 anonymised stories sensitively curated and brought to life by a diverse set of illustrators from within the communities most likely to be subjected to microaggressions.

Alongside the book, the agency added a powerful creative twist in the shape of indestructible posters printed on tear-proof paper to represent the lasting impact that throwaway comments can have.

Meanwhile, in Germany, Serviceplan is among the most creatively-awarded agencies, and has celebrated recent award wins at Cannes Lions, ADC Germany and Clio Health.

“You have to be driven to create unique ways to communicate. To enjoy breaking new ground and aim to be where the air naturally gets thinner”

Mike Rogers, Managing Director of Creation at Serviceplan Health & Life Munich

“It’s not enough to know what challenges our clients face every day and to know the dynamics of the markets. You also have to be driven to create unique ways to communicate. To enjoy breaking new ground and aim to be where the air naturally gets thinner – namely, at the very top,” comments Mike Rogers, Managing Director of Creation at Serviceplan Health & Life Munich.

This sense of breaking new ground, of doing something different in healthcare creative, is echoed by Klick Health’s Rich Levy. He says that he’s “baffled” when brands put work into the marketplace that merely blends in with other brands because it has tested well: “I would much rather put work out into the world that people notice, want to share, want to be a part of – work that ultimately allows people to make a meaningful difference in their lives. That’s the ROI I like to be a part of.”

The tech frontier

The appetite to explore new territory is common to many healthcare agencies. Due to the nature of the client companies they partner with, it's also the case that communications in the health sector tends to evolve at a faster pace than those around it. These are companies that have a strong belief in science and technology as an enabler to improve people's lives and therefore invest constantly in innovation and new technology.

This spirit of innovation has a clear impact on specialist agencies and the work produced, in that they tend to be forward-thinking and embrace the latest new technology, such as artificial intelligence, in their work.

last year in Cannes were partnerships between pharma and tech companies, and new advances with gene therapy and medical devices will only enhance this tendency. I'd say that the 'big wave' of creative healthcare is already here, and I see opportunities everywhere...that was my main motivation to move from consumer advertising."

One prominent example is Serviceplan Berlin's "[Saved Memories](#)" campaign, created in co-operation with German NGOs Transklar e.V., Trans-Ident e.V. and Rosa Strippe e.V. The activity used AI to transform the childhood photos of trans people, and was designed to address the issue that many trans people report, which is that they cannot look at their childhood photos after a successful transition. Serviceplan in Germany also developed Dot Go – the first object interaction app for the visually impaired.

Klick Heath has also deployed AI in its work, including the development of an AI-powered radio station, "[Lifesaving Radio](#)," which is designed to improve surgical outcomes by providing a personalised, performance-enhancing, audio experience.

"We believe that responsibly used AI, combined with human professionals, will lead to the best outcomes for clients."

Alfred Whitehead, Executive Vice President Executive Vice President Applied Sciences at Klick Health

Alex Okada at Havas Lynx speaks of the strong opportunity available when it comes to combining pharma and healthcare communications with technology. He says: "Most of the big award winners in healthcare

The tech frontier

Launched at the NextMed Health conference, it was based on a German clinical study showing that hard rock music – namely AC/DC – improved surgical accuracy and efficiency. The user experience is guided by AI Angus, the first AI DJ, which is trained to optimise surgical performance through personalised content based on the team performing the surgery, in addition to the surgery type and length.

Broader agency initiatives to supplement client knowledge include Ogilvy Health’s [“Ever Heard of TikTok?”](#) publication – a report designed to present, in a balanced way, opportunities the social video platform offers for the healthcare industry. Additionally, it looks to answer the question, “How can pharma use the platform, which is often seen as an entertainment platform for twenty-something year-olds?”

“We are privileged to work in an industry that can move at pace. Innovation is its literal lifeblood”

David Prater, Executive Creative Director at FCB Health Europe

This space at the cutting edge of creative is one in which healthcare agencies are comfortable. FCB Health’s David Prater says: “Our pharma clients are always trying to find the next high-tech treatment...we are privileged to work in an industry that can move at pace. Innovation is its literal lifeblood.”

More broadly, Klick Health is looking at the creative potential of AI across its entire business and all campaigns. Alfred Whitehead, Executive Vice President, Applied Sciences at Klick Health, says: “I think the focus you’ve seen on AI from our industry up to this point has been on higher precision targeting. That’s valuable, but it really underestimates just how important AI will be on the future of work in the future.”

The forward-thinking, highly creative nature of specialist healthcare agencies keeps them at the forefront of communications as they deploy a sense of restless energy to provide deep insights and award-winning creative solutions to their clients.

Whitehead adds: “We believe that responsibly used AI, combined with human professionals, will lead to the best outcomes for clients.”

Showcase – how specialist healthcare agencies are making a creative impact

There are some stunning examples of creativity from specialist healthcare agencies in Europe, targeting a range of audiences across disciplines and channels in impactful ways.



FCB Health Europe: “Picture the Days Ahead”

Client: Sandoz, a Novartis division.

<https://ipghealth.com/our-work/cannes-2023>

The agency created a campaign to communicate with patients that a diagnosis of myeloma doesn't have to mean the end, and to send a message of hope beyond the fear. A series of art works were created using date stamps of all the days ahead. These spanned 5 years, which is the average length of survival for people receiving treatment for myeloma – much longer than many expected when first hearing their diagnosis.

These works became print ads targeting newly-diagnosed patients, and were also compiled into a print book to help people imagine a life beyond diagnosis. The campaign won a Bronze Lion award at the 2023 Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity.

Havas Lynx Group: “Healing the Healers”

Client: Healing the Healers

(an initiative backed by major pharma companies and healthcare charities).

<https://havaslynx.com/thought-leadership/healing-the-healers/>

The global campaign was developed to explore the decline in healthcare professionals' well-being and the critical impact that this could have on global healthcare systems if ignored.

Havas Lynx worked to develop a podcast series (available on Spotify and Apple), hosted by its own medical director, Dr Tapas Mukherjee, and featuring industry experts to explore what can be done about the issue.

Then, supported by its own data solution, the agency provided one of the most comprehensive global views of healthcare professionals' attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and influences to enable more powerful strategies and experiences.

Showcase – how specialist healthcare agencies are making a creative impact

Serviceplan Health & Life, Germany: “Dyslexia Unetided”

Client: The Felix Burda Foundation.

<https://www.house-of-communication.com/de/en/newsroom/2022/05/adc-germany-2022.html>

One in five people is dyslexic and “Dyslexia Unetided” is an initiative for greater acceptance of the condition. Kai West Schlosser, Art Director at Serviceplan and a dyslexic, wanted to change negative perceptions. Stern magazine published an uncorrected article written by Schlosser on Dyslexia Day in 2021 to highlight the issue.

The campaign generated more than 37 million impressions and over 500 messages from supporters. It won a coveted Grand Prix at the 2022 Art Directors Club Germany Awards.

VMLY&R Health: “Paintings of Hope”

Client: Gilead Sciences.

<https://www.vmlyr.com/work/paintings-hope>

VMLY&R Health and Gilead created the “Paintings of Hope” exhibition to demonstrate that there’s still life ahead for patients diagnosed with metastatic triple-negative breast cancer.

“Paintings of Hope” was created using AI technology and creativity that brought the feelings and hopes of patients to the attention of the authorities in Spain and the health community at large.

Three patients with metastatic triple-negative breast cancer were invited to give their own personal accounts of the realities of living with the disease. VMLY&R Health and Gilead then used AI and sound analytics to convert the interviews into sound waves. These waves were interpreted by a specially trained AI robot, which reproduced them on canvases as paintings.

The exhibition has travelled to major hospitals and congresses in Spain and Europe, and has reached over 45,000 healthcare professionals. The idea was recognised with two 2023 Silver Clio Health Awards.

Showcase – how specialist healthcare agencies are making a creative impact

Weber Shandwick Paris: “The Uncover”

Client: Frida.

<https://webershandwick.com/work/the-uncover>

The campaign sought to normalise breastfeeding in public in France on behalf of Frida, a brand of maternity wear. It achieved this with a simple but powerful creative solution – a cover that made breastfeeding as normal as reading a magazine.

This created an optical illusion to transform any person reading in public spaces into a breastfeeding mother. It was designed to fit over magazines because they can be read anywhere – at the beach, on the subway, in the library or in a park.

The campaign also delivered testimonies of parents and health professionals, with additional videos accessible by scanning a QR code. As a result, more than 43,000 people signed a petition to legally protect breastfeeding in public. It was recognised at awards including Eurobest and Clio Health.

Ogilvy Health UK: “Throwaway Comments: Lifelong Hurt”

Client: NABs.

<https://www.ogilvy.com/uk/work/throwaway-comments>

Four in 10 people experience microaggressions at work related to their identity. This figure rises to six in 10 for marginalized communities. Microaggressions can have a lasting health impact, including depression, trauma, anxiety, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

This campaign was based on a collection of 35 real-life stories of workplace microaggressions. Each story was brought to life by a unique illustration, representing the underlying emotion.

The stories were produced as a book and poster set, printed on tearproof paper that is impossible to ‘destroy’, highlighting the lasting impact. They were sent to employees and business, talent and E,D&I leaders to encourage them to educate and eradicate microaggressions from their workplace. It received many awards including, Gold at LIAs and Clio Health.

Showcase – how specialist healthcare agencies are making a creative impact

**Langland (Publicis Health),
London: “If This Speaks to You”
Client:** Mind.

<https://www.dandad.org/awards/professional/2023/236587/if-this-speaks-to-you/>

One in four people face mental health issues yearly, yet many feel disconnected from current communications, especially those in poverty, racialized communities, and young trauma survivors. To bridge this gap, this public-awareness campaign connected culturally and contextually with our target audiences by sharing authentic and relatable stories. The campaign featured spoken word poems co-created by mental health sufferers and emerging Universal Music Artists, fostering relatable “that sounds like me” moments. The tagline “If this speaks to you, speak to us” encouraged engagement with Mind.

The campaign included hero films released in cinema and TV, OOH using passages from the poems displayed over the London transport network and social media cutdowns. This approach led to an eight-fold increase in Mind’s monthly website traffic in London. Launched during Mental Health Awareness

Week in May 2022, it won the ‘Marketing for Good’ award at the Digital Cinema Media Awards and secured further investment for a second phase during World Mental Health Day in October. The campaign was also a D&AD, Cannes Lions and Clio Award winner in 2023 and 2024.

Opinion: Why a senior creative made the move from consumer advertising to health

Paul Kinsella's story highlights the levels of ambition and innovation in healthcare communications.

One sentence helped me make the switch from consumer advertising to health.

"We're glad you don't like the work we do in healthcare, because we like the work you do." But that was 2015.

And I feel incredibly lucky to have been in the right place at the right time to hear that sentence because it led to the conversation that changed my working life forever and for the better.

It's not lost on me how my slight arrogance and unfair opinion was met with elegance and ambition. It's not lost on me the creative opportunities and growth I have been lucky enough to experience for the last 8 or 9 years since leaving consumer advertising.

When I started in health, I could see the ambition to be as creative as consumer agencies, but now I see consumer agencies wanting to be more like health agencies. And you only have to look at the work to see why. Award shows are driven by purpose and innovation. In the health industry, we don't have to manufacture these opportunities – we are built on them.

I love the work done by consumer agencies and I love the work done by health agencies. The more I learn, and the more I work in this industry, the more I understand that the lines are blurring. That creatives get out of bed every morning to solve problems. Personally, I feel privileged to apply my creativity to the world of health where I get to try and use it as a cure.

Opinion: Why a senior creative made the move from consumer advertising to health

The levels of craft have amplified year on year, but I try to look past just craft to see the concept, the story telling, the innovation and originality, and this is where healthcare is really excelling.

I hope I don't get "found out," as the future of creativity in health really excites me.

The shift from cure to prevention. The fact that information and knowledge can help people live healthier and happier lives, how culturally we have never been more invested in our own health. Technology and data are driving the industry and society forward, and there are so many opportunities to do life-changing work. I hope to work in health for the rest of my career. I hope I develop and grow at the speed and rate of ambition within the industry because I am surrounded by people I respect and admire.

I've learnt how creative health really is and how creative it really can be. There is so much talent and potential that when I think back to that one sentence that changed everything for me, I feel it's only fair to admit how wrong I was. Being a creative in health has changed my life and now I want to change that sentence.

"I don't like the work we do in healthcare, I love it and I think you would too."

Paul Kinsella is CCO Havas Health and YOU in Europe.

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