Can you describe your role as founder and chief media officer?

Tom Hespos: Client success requires continual innovation, so that’s a big part of my role. The link between innovation and success is pronounced, whether we’re talking about the systems we use to execute media programs, the new channels that emerge continuously, or the information and insights that drive decisions concerning how we manage our clients’ investments. My role involves making sure Underscore is continually evaluating new solutions to make sure we’re always bringing something to the table that can drive our clients’ businesses.

As founder and chief media officer of Underscore Marketing, Tom Hespos develops, manages and measures media programs for health and wellness brands. He has been planning and buying digital media since the commercial explosion of the web in 1994. Hespos has held management positions at K2, Blue Marble ACG and Mezzina Brown & Partners. He launched Underscore in 2002.

What are your top business priorities over the next 12 to 18 months?

Hespos: Clients demand efficiency from their agencies, and it’s our mission to continually innovate in the areas of process and workflow systems in order to make it more efficient to work with us the next time.

We also need to be more efficient at delivering intelligence and insight, whether that involves new methods of measuring campaigns or simply being able to give a client the lay of the land in an area where they don’t have experience.
Finally, even with the industrywide mandate to automate as much as possible, we know that there are certain things robots can’t do. Scripts can’t come up with a winning strategy. A project management system isn’t going to illuminate how to beat a better-funded competitor. One of my priorities is showing clients and potential clients what our people are better at doing—and why.

**What are the biggest challenges for your business right now and in the overall digital media landscape?**

**Hespos:** Delivering excellence in abbreviated timeframes. By the time the client calls, they needed the strategy or the plan yesterday. So the challenge is to anticipate demand and be able to do a lot in a short period of time. That’s a huge challenge for the entire digital industry—not just with strategies and tactics, but with tools, technology and market intelligence as well.

Another challenge that’s not specific to our business is the notion of delivering intelligence on emerging channels quickly and efficiently. We frequently receive calls from clients inquiring about the latest social network, app or viral phenomenon, and [they’ll tell us] that somebody in senior management wants to know what to think of it. We have to assess not only the viability, but the size and scale of the opportunity, which can be difficult.

**How does eMarketer help your business meet those challenges? And what do you and your team use eMarketer for?**

**Hespos:** eMarketer is fantastic at pulling together market information on the digital landscape. Whether it’s spending projections, overviews of specific targets or markets, or deep dives on the newest channels, we can get it very quickly from eMarketer and have the utmost confidence in its accuracy.

There have been many instances where a client wants to explore a particular channel within digital, and eMarketer has helped us not only size the opportunity, but also come up with benchmarks we can use for success measurement in that channel.

**What value does eMarketer represent to a business like yours? Why is it important to give everyone at the company access to the eMarketer database?**

**Hespos:** [eMarketer’s] an indispensable resource. The old way of doing things—with dedicated media research people taking days to turn something around—doesn’t work anymore. Pulling together the most important information that’s going to have the greatest impact on a client initiative in the shortest length of time is what we need to do—eMarketer helps us do that.

When we first started with eMarketer, Underscore granted logins to members of the management team only. But we quickly found out that approach didn’t work. When we need to get very smart about something very quickly, everybody needs to have access and not just a select few.

**What makes you excited about this business these days?**

**Hespos:** I’m excited that innovation hasn’t stalled. When the web first hit and digital marketing was beginning to be taken seriously, there was a sense of entrepreneurial spirit, and that hasn’t disappeared from this business. Many industries tend to rest on their laurels once they’ve innovated to the point where they feel like they have a stable business. But digital marketing never stops.

There is always a new challenge to address, a new channel to get smart about or a new way to apply smart thinking to make things more efficient. Every day I come to work with the idea that I could be one of the first to use something new to a successful end for a client, and that is what keeps me excited.

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diankelevich@emarketer.com Direct: 212-763-6037