

## Agency Executive of the Year

By Ethan Jakob Craft

# Brian Whipple

CEO, Accenture Interactive

It was one of the most talked-about deals of the decade: Last April, multibillion-dollar consultancy Accenture Interactive acquired Droga5, the agency that Ad Age had just named the industry's most creative.

Skeptics questioned the ability of homegrown shops to thrive under the umbrella of large consultancies, while others wondered about the "threat" that stereotypically non-creative consultants posed to agency creatives.

A year later, Accenture Interactive CEO Brian Whipple believes those questions can be put to rest with what he calls a "final end to the tired conversation about agencies versus consultancies, and technology versus creativity."

Having helmed Accenture Interactive since its creation 10 years ago, Whipple makes it clear that the day-to-day operations of the company bear little resemblance to a traditional consultancy. "You'll see guys soldering circuit boards in a makeshift, and ideating about ad campaigns, and all these e-commerce systems and personalized, programmatic media"—and it is that environment in which newly acquired Droga5 has thrived over the past 12 months, he says.

Whipple first worked with David Droga, the founder of his namesake agency, five years ago on a large-scale pitch for the U.S. Census. Although a deal was not in the cards at the time, the two stayed in touch and developed an increasingly cordial professional relationship.

"David is a very hands-on guy, and while he's the leader of Droga5, he is also a personal and creative driver of their product," says Whipple, acknowledging that some clients who now retain Accenture Interactive's services do so with direct access to Droga in mind. "He's what I'd call a magnet for top talent, and top talent wants to work with top talent."

Native Australian Droga founded Droga5 in the U.S. in 2006, growing it from an independent hotshop to a 600-employee-strong agency with a high-profile track record and offices in New York and London. Prior to its acquisition, the adland heavyweight reported an annual profit of \$185 million for 2018 (slightly down from its peak in 2017) while grabbing headlines for campaigns including IHOP's temporary rebranding to "IHOB" to promote burgers.

"[Accenture Interactive] has been so very respectful of who we are and what we stand for," says David Droga, adding that he's welcomed the transition from being "fiercely independent to fantastically interdependent."

At the time of the deal's announcement in April 2019, an Accenture Interactive spokesperson confirmed Droga5 was

the largest agency it had ever acquired when measured by price, revenue and headcount—suggesting its previous record \$283 million deal to take on Chicago-based digital agency Acquity Group in 2013 had been outdone. Droga said only that the actual price was "north" of Ad Age Data-center's estimate of \$475 million.

"Neither one of us had to do this," Whipple says of the acquisition, noting that Accenture Interactive and Droga5 were both registering healthy annual growth as separate entities. "It was a long courtship," he adds, but with a shared vision of "doing bigger things at the intersection of purpose and innovation," Whipple and Droga forged ahead with what they saw as a mutually beneficial partnership.

On one hand, Accenture Interactive, owned by Dublin-based Accenture, could strengthen its brand capabilities in North America, which were somewhat lacking compared to its U.K. footprint. On the other, Droga5 could bolster its digital content capacity via Accenture's existing global network.

While the move to bring Droga5 into the fold dominated industry conversations last year, the landmark deal is just one of Whipple's recent accomplishments.

In 2019, he led Accenture's consulting behemoth through a total of seven acquisitions—including Droga5, its largest—scooping up Spanish agency Shackleton; social media outfit Adaptly; and Latin American design firm INSITUM (recently renamed Fjord), among others. And under Whipple's leadership, last year also saw the fast-growing agency group build out its roster with new clients including Infiniti, Kimberly-Clark, Nestlé and the Louvre Museum.

As Accenture Interactive CEO, Whipple oversees a company that reported more than \$10 billion in annual revenue recently and has been named the world's largest digital agency by Ad Age for four consecutive years.

Whipple has long advocated for the "Experience Agency" model that blends elements of a traditional business consultancy, cutting-edge creative shop and technological powerhouse, outspokenly leading Accenture Interactive with that same emphasis on experiential creative.

Internet-age brands including Airbnb, Spotify and Uber, for example, made a name for themselves and have found success because of how people experience their brands, not because of TV commercials, Whipple says.

"We have catapulted our growth based on this notion that brands are built on reinventing experiences, and [we put that philosophy] on the map." **AA**



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