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Riney Inks Research Deal as Part of Rebound Effort

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-Gregory Solman

LOS ANGELES Publicis & Hal Riney has formed a strategic partnership with Peacock Nine for exclusive agency access to the market intelligence boutique's BuzzSponge online community of 30,000 consumers in an effort to gain unique insights for its clients and an edge in new business pitches.

Despite heartening wins of U.S. Cellular (\$75 million, per Nielsen Monitor-Plus), Altoids (\$15 million) and Pinnacle Foods (\$10 million) this year, agency president and CEO Jamie King is still developing a revival strategy to bring it back from the near-death experience of double-barrel blows, losing HP and Sprint Nextel, its two largest clients.

According to president Brad Peacock, the BuzzSponge online "consumer cabinet," which the Chicago and Shanghai company has developed over the last six years, allows Riney "infinite learning and continuous, turnkey insight" into consumers not possible from commissioning one-off studies or panels.

Though it ultimately lost to Y&R in its bid to win the Jenny Craig review last month, Riney's use of BuzzSponge demonstrated to both King and director of brand strategy Tim Maleeny the necessity and utility of the tool for rapid research.

Currently the San Francisco shop is using BuzzSponge to "discreetly segment and converse with thousands of wireless users" for U.S. Cellular, King said. He maintains that there is a significant distinction between one-off jobs with third-party researchers and the partnership's "unfettered, real-time access to a conversation with consumers" that can be "dynamic and fluid, rather than static."

King said the goal is to "change the dynamics of entire categories" by gleaning consumer insight throughout the client problem-solving process. "Clients have been spending money on idea validation instead of idea integration," he said. "We've been moving away from traditional research methods. It's not that we won't ever hold a focus group again. But new technology allows us to be very granular and combine quantitative and qualitative analysis in real time."

"Everyone is in on the joke that research and testing are more and more a part of the creative process," said Maleeny, "yet almost no one, client or agency, says that it has made the work better or more creative. This partnership is about being smarter up front, so that the work becomes self-evident and everyone agrees. Research is typically

qualitative and intimate or quantitative and removed from human insight. This is the best of both worlds."

Nick Bartle, director of behavioral planning for BBDO North America, said he knows of no similar alliance in the ad industry. "From a general perspective, the idea of an exclusive relationship with a research company would be unlikely for us, as we're always looking for best-in-class research partners," he said. "We want the freedom to be able to access the best in the market at any given time."

"More and more agencies are using online research tools for strategic purposes and to validate ideas," said Catherine Bension, CEO of Select Resources International, Santa Monica, Calif., lauding the agency's plans. But she added that the value of the relationship depends upon the agency's ability to convert the learning into insight.

Arthur Anderson, principal, Morgan Anderson Consulting, New York, said his only concern about the partnership would arise if the BuzzSponge online community provided "no content but just talk. But Riney's a great agency with great planners, so I doubt that."