



An interview with Steven Walker

Founder, director, and co-owner of London- and Berlin-based medical communications agency Stgilesmedical



As the sun beats down on another glorious London afternoon, you decide to take a step away from the hustle and bustle of the Oxford Street throngs, and into the leafy courtyard of St Giles-in-the-Fields Church. And, as you stroll past the cool shadow of the towering Palladian edifice, where the dappled sunlight dances between the leaves of the courtyard trees and glints off the stained-glass windows soaring above, you come to the historic Vestry House, built in 1733. Housed within its wood-panelled rooms is Stgilesmedical, a niche agency founded in 2014 by Yvonne Anderson and Steven Walker, and we've come here to hear his story.

MEW: Hi Steven, thanks so much for agreeing to talk to us. First things first, how did you come to found a company in a vestry?

(SW): When Yvonne and I started our new company, calling it after St Giles seemed appropriate. He is the patron saint of cancer, mental health, disability, and epilepsy, all issues close to our heart. And, yes, we did want to be different. We needed a new office in central

London, so one day while sitting in the garden of St Giles-in-the-Fields Church, Covent Garden, I met the rector and cheekily asked whether he might have space available. After some reflection, he agreed to rent out his old office in the Vestry House. So now we are Stgilesmedical, St Giles-in-the-Fields Church, 60 St Giles High Street. It was meant to be!

MEW: In the past 15 years, you've founded two successful communications agencies, Bioscript and Stgilesmedical. What guidance would you give to an entrepreneur looking to found a small company in today's marketplace?

(SW): Well, firstly I'm flattered to be considered as having something worthwhile to say on the issue – it is difficult to judge how successful your business is when you are in the thick of running it! – but here are a few thoughts which might be helpful:

- It helps knowing what you want to achieve. You need to be single-minded and to believe that you can get there. A streak of madness is

also beneficial: life as an employee or a freelancer is much less stressful than being in charge!

- You need experience of the industry, some money behind you and a least one project to start off with. Be prepared to work all hours, worry about stuff in between times, and pay your team but not yourself.
- I've found it invaluable to have an energetic business partner with complementary skills, to provide support when you are lost or flagging.
- Never miss an opportunity. Build a network of useful contacts and reach out to them regularly. Projects usually come from contacts rather than marketing, and doing a good job often brings more work. So far, none of the many emails I have sent to procurement teams and publication managers have ever brought anything of value.
- Finding the right staff is extremely difficult. When you start out, you may need to hire a team of less experienced colleagues and develop them yourself, rather than hiring in experts from Day 1. Don't underestimate the time and energy this requires, and be prepared to cope with unexpected time off and personal crises.
- Get your name known by writing articles, attending meetings, and supporting educational activities. EMWA and ISMPP meetings are a great way to network and raise your profile.
- Graham Shelton of Oxford PharmaGenesis gave me the following pieces of advice: "Follow the money" and "Listen to the business". By these, I think he meant to seek out projects where there is current need or investment, be prepared to adapt as circumstances change, and avoid pushing in one direction when circumstances are taking you somewhere else.
- Oh, and most importantly, make some time for yourself and your family, and have some fun with your team along the way!

MEW: You describe Stgilesmedical as a “niche” agency – others use the term “boutique” agency. What do you see as the advantages of and disadvantages of managing a smaller agency?

(SW): I think that we are more “niche” because our team of medics, scientists, writers, educators, and patient representatives understand the needs of industry as well as healthcare professionals and those on the receiving end. We are great at delivering unusual and challenging projects and working alongside our clients to share their load. Supporting good medicine is what drives us. All of this you can do if you are small and privately-owned; once accountants, marketers, and multiple account directors become involved then the ethos changes.

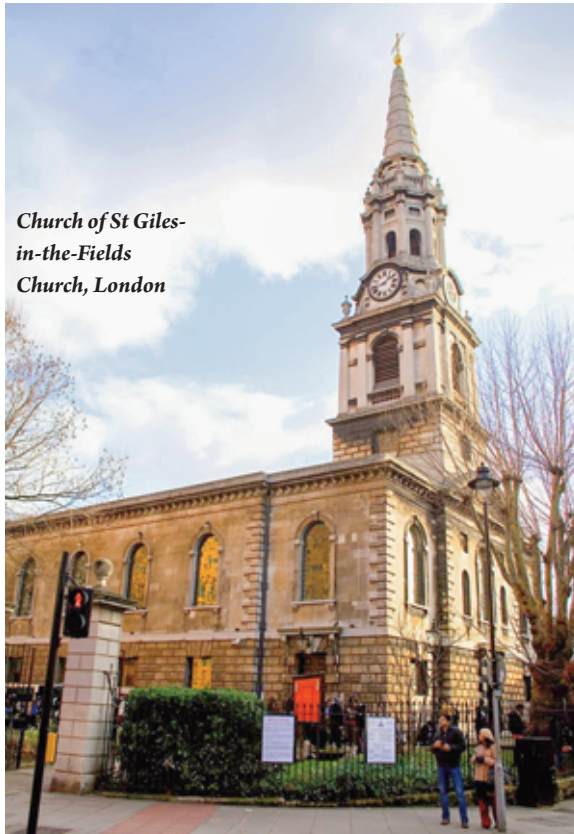
MEW: Tell us a bit about what you’ve been up to recently.

(SW): 2017 has been a mad year. I have never worked so hard or felt so satisfied by what we have achieved. It all started with our successful ‘Learning Room’ session for new members of the profession at the ISMPP European meeting in London. Then there was *Bionnale* in Berlin, followed by the Expert Symposium at EMWA in Birmingham. We have also run three educational MedComms events in Germany.

Several projects have proven challenging: for example, making sense of a European multicentre cardiovascular project, supporting a paper on behalf of the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine, and delivering a series of CSRs reporting the early results of an exciting orphan drug. A new area for us is proving to be medical devices and aesthetics.

On a lighter note, Giles the Mouse, our company mascot, has just completed a week-long, 2,000-mile trip for Hospice UK. He travelled from Nordkapp in the very north of Norway to Bergen in the south, accompanied by myself and my colleague, Tony Docker. There is more about our adventures at www.stgmed.com/giles-goes-to-norway.

MEW: A mouse hopping across the fjords! I’m sure that there are plenty of our readers who’d love to do something charitable and altruistic like that – how



Church of St Giles-in-the-Fields Church, London

Photo by Prioryman, is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. The image is available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Giles_in_the_Fields-/media/File:St_Giles_in_the_Fields_January_2012.jpg.

can others in the industry make a positive contribution like you’ve managed to?

(SW): Just do it! Having our own business allows us to do quirky things for no or very little money. These have included supporting the MSc in Scientific Communication course at Manchester Metropolitan University and working with one of our new medical schools on a programme to develop reflection, resilience, and mindfulness. We’re also particularly proud of our research project in support of Hospice UK which looks at ways to reduce unnecessary hospital admissions at the end of life. Our visits to numerous units around England have gone well, while analysing and writing up the mass of quantitative and qualitative data is proving a challenge.

Events are also a good way to raise awareness for a particular issue. A few months ago, we supported the “Art of being a patient” exhibition, where Tony Pickering – who is an artist, a patient, and a carer – talked us through his powerful images and artwork, accompanied by jazz, champagne, and canapes. See www.stgmed.com/tony-pickering for more details.

MEW: You also recently registered Stgilesmedical GmbH, and are opening up offices in Berlin. What led you to

develop a presence in Germany?

(SW): Our new Berlin office was opened on 1st October at the Charlottenburg Innovation Center, with a small team from Germany and the UK. I will be travelling between our two offices. The reasons behind this move are Brexit, a personal connection with Germany, and the fact that many of our clients are based in the DACH countries (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) so our being on-site will help us to look after them better.

MEW: What impact, if any, do you think Brexit might have on British healthcare agencies with European offices?

(SW): Only time will tell. I am sure agencies in the UK will continue to survive, especially as staff costs here are generally

lower. On the other hand, when faced with two similar choices, it is human nature for a European client to choose the more local supplier.

And finally, some quick-fire questions:

Theatre or boxset?

Theatre

Cook or be cooked for?

Cook

Early start or late finish?

Late finish – I am not good first thing in the morning.

Classic rock or classical baroque?

I like all music except country. Highlights for this year are regular attendance at Holland Park Opera, the Camden Rock Festival, Lollapalooza Berlin, and working as a steward at Weyfest.

English bitter or German pilsner?

German wheat beer with a slice of lemon, whilst listening to loud music in the summer, and a pint of real ale by the fire in an English country pub in the winter.

Contact Information

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