

Millage sails through Victoza launch

Novo Nordisk has built a dizzyingly successful business on insulin sales (34 quarters of double-digit growth and counting), but when the company got into the GLP-1 scrum with the approval, a year ago, of Victoza for type 2 diabetes, it was on terra incognita.

“It’s been a new therapeutic class for us to promote,” says Heather Millage, head of marketing on the brand. “We have a lot of experience with injectible products but we really compete with a lot of the orals,” like Januvia, Onglyza and Actos, not to mention rival GLP-1 drugs Byetta and maybe someday Bydureon.

Millage has experience exploring uncharted territory and plying choppy waters. In 1999, after logging more than a decade at California biotechs Syntax Laboratories and Scios, she and her husband decided to pull up the stakes and move to the East Coast. The dot com boom was warping Northern California and beyond Genentech, the future lay back east with Big Pharma. But first, having saved up, they took their 37-foot sailboat for a year-long spin around Florida and the Caribbean. “It really teaches you to be self-reliant and independent,” says Millage, noting that this was the dialup internet age, and cell phone coverage was much more patchy.

Millage’s specialty is prelaunch marketing. At Scios, she worked on heart failure drug Natrecor. Her sailing days over, she did a stint at Atlanta ad shop Adair Greene, where she worked on the launch of the Emsam depression patch (now marketed by BMS). She was then recruited to Aventis to work on new product development for respiratory therapeutics. When Sanofi bought Aventis, she joined Johnson & Johnson’s Ortho Biotech,

“For some patients, Victoza is their first experience with an injectable. We wanted to make that as positive as possible”

Heather Millage

Associate VP, Victoza

2006-2010

Senior director, marketing, Victoza launch, Novo Nordisk

2004-2006

Director, new product development, Ortho Biotech

2001-2004

Senior mgr., new product commercialization, Sanofi-Aventis

scouting new indications and markets for anemia treatment Procrit.

Then, four years ago, she was courted by a small insulin company called Novo Nordisk to work on liraglutide, an experimental compound. She’d scarcely heard of the firm but she came away from a meeting with chief medical officer Alan Moses impressed and signed on. It was late in the development cycle—he product was already in phase III clinical trials, and while the company had put together a solid program of six head-to-head clinical trials, no premarket work had been done in the US.

“Globally, they had invested in commercialization, so we had quite an extensive plan in place for publications, phase IIIb studies, the needed market support and shaping for the product,” says Millage. “But for the scope of the US market, it was a bit of a late start.”

Despite hitting a speed bump at FDA, the drug won approval in January 2010 and launched a year ago. Partly due to the late start, Millage’s team put a lot of effort into designing a relationship marketing program, Victoza Cares. “It is an injectible, and for some patients, it’s their first experience with an injectible. We wanted to make sure they had the tools and resources to make that first experience as positive as possible.”

Victoza also launched the company’s first product-specific DTC campaign, with print ads touting the brand’s unique promise of lower blood sugar and potential weight loss (trials for an obesity indication are in phase III).

For the first six months, the company had its entire 2,000-person sales force focused on detailing Victoza. They’ve since dialed that back, with half on Victoza and half on the insulin analogs, but the firm recently hired reps and is bringing on a group of diabetes educators.

As for Millage, she and her husband sold the boat. “We’re full-time dirt dwellers now,” she cracks, but after a nonstop launch year, she’s researching catamarans and monohulls, ready to get back in the water.

—Matthew Arnold



PHOTO: DAN DERRICO