



**AT THE HELM**

Ken Ribotsky, founder

**PERFORMANCE**

New clients helped to offset potential losses from mergers and acquisitions

**HIGHLIGHTS**

Won business from cosmaceuticals manufacturer SkinMedica

Expansion of accounts from Prometheus Laboratories included IBS drug Lotromex

Broadened company portfolio in innovative, unique products

**CHALLENGES**

Locating and reeling in A-list talent

For contact details, service offerings and client roster, see Agency A-to-Z, beginning on page 181

**“Everything we’ve added this year has something unique about it”**

—Ken Ribotsky

# Core-Create/ Brandkarma

How mergers and acquisitions can forge stronger client relationships



Client mergers and acquisitions had just finished riding a wave of heavy activity at this time last year, and the three firms housed under the Core Nation banner were catching their breath after having survived them. But even though the company had expected to lose some business amid the shuffle, it came out of the chaos relatively unscathed—and with a learning experience under its belt.

“It’s a momentum-killer at times. To some degree, you have to start over,” admits Core Nation founder Ken Ribotsky. “But you generally come out of it with stronger relationships.”

The Core Nation firms—Core-Create on the east coast, Brandkarma on the west, and medical communications specialty arm Alpha & Omega—got a related headache during the last year. Core-Create client Valeant Pharmaceuticals snapped up another client, Ortho Dermatologics, and reassessed its agency relationships. Perhaps savvy following the merger-rific 2010, Core-Create filled the void in its dermatology portfolio with SkinMedica, a maker of cosmaceuticals (Illuminize Peel, Vitalize Peel, and Rejuvenize Peel) sold through doctors’ offices. “There’s no reimbursement to worry about. That’s a lovely place to be,” Ribotsky deadpans.

Relationships with other post-merger clients, includ-

ing ZymoGenetics (corporate work/Recothrom) and Genzyme (for communications around Pompe Disease), remain strong. They were joined on the Core Nation roster by Bracco Diagnostics (for RSDL, a skin decontamination product designed for first-responders and the military) and Ventus Medical (for a sleep apnea device). Existing client Prometheus Laboratories tapped the company for a pair of new assignments (IBS drug Lotronex and a hush-hush new product that Ribotsky describes as “a game-changer”).

The account wins are a big step forward for the Core Nation agencies—giving Ribotsky and his team something new to work into their pitches. “We used to tell people, jokingly, ‘We are the best at selling things that people are tired of hearing about,’ like the fifth product in an established category,” he says. “But everything we’ve added this year has something unique about it. That’s very invigorating for everybody here.”

Ribotsky singles out the Lotronex work for Prometheus as particularly validating. “It’s a drug with a black box warning, so there were regulatory conditions surrounding the brand,” he explains. “Through all sorts of twists and turns and changes, we were able to break some new ground and do some things we’d never done before.” However, Ribotsky cautions against accepting too many accounts of a similarly challenging ilk: “They’re important because you learn so, so much and have that base of knowledge to build on. But it’s not bad to have some work that’s slightly less complicated.”

On the topic of complications, the Core Nation firms took a novel approach to the most common problem in the business: acquiring A-list talent. Having enjoyed



Among Core Nation’s projects: ads for Recothrom (above left) and Prometheus Laboratories (above)

minimal luck with headhunters and networking, Core Nation hired a full-time, in-house recruiter. “Our talent is ultimately what we’re selling,” Ribotsky says. “If we can’t find enough high-level, quality people, we fall behind.” The recruiter hire has already paid dividends, through the acquisition of a director of client services and a creative director at Brandkarma.

Core Nation will remain active on the hiring front in the months ahead. Headcount currently “hovers in the low 40s,” Ribotsky says, but he expects the firm to push towards its “sweet spot” of 50-55 staffers by the time the year is out. —Larry Dobrow