

The DTC devotee behind Gilenya

Dagmar Rosa-Bjorkeson leads the MS business unit at Novartis, which three years ago this month launched the first of a new wave of MS capsules, Gilenya. This year marked the start of a consumer campaign marked by brazen, head-turning ads showing patients sticking their tongues out at the disease, accentuated by the tagline, “Hey MS, Take This!”

Far from being the first pharma campaign to make an emotional connection with an audience, “Take This!” nevertheless ratcheted up the spunkiness level of its disease state after debuting in April.

“The best campaigns, whether they’re for a medicine or not, really connect with [the individual’s] sense of aspiration and desire,” says Rosa-Bjorkeson. “We went after the aspiration of MS patients.” The once-daily drug can slow the progression of the disease and reduce the frequency and severity of its symptoms. “Certainly in MS, being able to have better control over your life...is important and that’s why [the campaign] resonates.”

Rosa-Bjorkeson recognized her own ambition for DTC advertising early in her career. Not only has she worked in “basically every therapeutic area that Novartis covers.” She trained as a chemist before studying business, and logged valuable experience on some seminal campaigns. She was an account supervisor at the agency that launched Claritin’s “Blue Skies” effort for Schering-Plough. Later, while at Forest Labs, she helped design outreach aimed at women on behalf of Forest’s Climara estrogen patch.

“I’ve been honing a skill and an interest in consumer approaches,” she says.

Back then, the marketer was limited to print, broadcast and direct mail. Now, Rosa-Bjorkeson

“We went after the aspiration of MS patients”

Dagmar Rosa-Bjorkeson

VP/head, US general medicines MS business unit, Novartis

2008–2009

Head BD&L N. America, Novartis

2007–2008

Franchise head of respiratory, Novartis

makes use of the newer channels at her disposal. Patients post messages and personal stories online; a Facebook wall boasts more than 50,000 likes, 16,000 shares and 148,000 unique visitors; and Gilenya’s branded Twitter handle—@GilenyaGoUSOnly, which the firm says was the industry’s first—has about 2,900 followers. In addition to print ads, the brand has also dabbled in digital TV, sponsoring programming viewed by its target audience of younger females aged 25–45.

New patients need to be monitored for a decrease in heart rate. Early on, Gilenya also encountered some safety issues after a few patient deaths, and Novartis told health authorities this past July of a case of the brain infection PML. (The company said several features of the case make it “unlikely to be attributable to Gilenya.”)

Still, Gilenya went blockbuster last year, with \$1.2 billion in global sales. Even as Sanofi’s Aubagio and Biogen Idec’s Tecfidera orals reached market in 2012 and 2013, respectively, Gilenya sales have still climbed, with first-half 2013 revenues of \$889 million, up 68% over the prior year’s first six months.

Rosa-Bjorkeson says the rate of people switching from the older injectables to newer orals has passed a tipping point and is accelerating. Gilenya has been used in 71,000 patients worldwide. “At the

end of the day, the efficacy of Gilenya is where our core positioning is,” she says.

Rosa-Bjorkeson grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico, before her father, a hotel executive, moved the family to the Northeastern US, then to Caracas,

Venezuela. “I was very lucky in that wherever we moved to, we ended up living in that hotel until we found ourselves located.”

A grad school internship brought her to pharma, which lets her combine her passion for science and people, “which I think comes from all the traveling in my early years.”

While the international focus continues—her husband is Swedish—she is a mother of three and often finds herself on the soccer field. “I’m an aficionado; we watch it and love it... I am the epitome of a soccer mom!” — Marc Iskowitz



PHOTO: DAN DERRICO