

Medicus Life Brands

Agency places big bet on social media but sees some budgets cut



“At the end of the day, the HCP still has significant impact on patients’ receptivity to fill an Rx”

—Lisa Ebert

Medicus Life Brands, newly united with sister agency BrandPharm, as of last year, has enjoyed some sizable business wins and multiple brand launches.

Staff size has increased 15% to service the new business, which includes early 2009’s Gilead Sciences assignment for hepatitis B product Viread. Requiring a robust multi-channel campaign, the Viread work set this Publicis Healthcare Communications Group (PHCG) shop on a positive course.

Existing clients, though, had other plans. “We’ve experienced growth, we’ve had new wins,” explains Lisa Ebert, Medicus Life Brands president, “but for many of our existing clients, with the recession... they had to cut expenses and thus their promotional dollars were cut.”

Compounding the difficulty of those floundering budgets, Medicus Life Brands was asked to achieve the same marketing goals.

“Our challenge was to be more innovative in how we spent the dollars,” Ebert says.

While the agency’s convention and travel budget

has suffered during this lean period, staff morale and culture has not. Ebert has been determined to ensure that her troops grow from the experience. She says she has continued to invest in new talent and the expertise needed to reclaim momentum, including putting a “focused effort” behind multi-channel.

“I’m really proud of the substantial growth we have achieved in the interactive and social media space,” she says.

She reports double-digit growth in that space, gravy on a year when other work contributed revenue for the agency. Another assignment, from Pfizer, involved a professional closed-loop marketing program for CNS drug Effexor XR. Schering-Plough (now Merck) also awarded Ebert’s crew branding and marketing preparation responsibilities for two unnamed cardiovascular compounds in Phase III development.

Launches during the year included Sanofi-Aventis’ Multaq, for atrial fibrillation, and LungRx’s Tyvaso, for an orphan disease, pulmonary arterial hypertension. For Procter & Gamble, the agency handled two OTC introductions to dental professionals—the Oral B Pulsonic power brush and the ProHealth System.

One launch did not pan out. GTx had retained the agency for pre-launch work as it sought to add a prostate cancer indication to its already marketed breast cancer therapeutic toremifene citrate, but the 80-milligram version failed to show a significant benefit in a phase III prostate cancer trial. The FDA had asked GTx last fall to provide additional data on toremifene for use in reducing the risk of fractures in men with prostate cancer.

On the interactive media technology front, Medicus Life Brands handled a multi-channel disease awareness campaign integrating outdoor advertising on the Jumbotron in NYC’s Times Square. The campaign, for Auxilium’s Testim (a gel for improving testosterone levels), also featured mobile communication (SMS

Product	Percentage of patients achieving a reduction in pain score to 0-2* of normal (0-100 mm VAS) at 15 minutes (N=1000)
XIFLEX	64%
Placebo	20%
Other Product	44%

Above: A professional ad for Auxilium’s Xiflex; Top: Part of a journal ad for Oral B’s Pro-Health System

and WAP survey), web and e-mail marketing.

Ebert wants to continue elevating her agency’s digital offering. To do so, the agency is launching The Bakery—a center of excellence based within the agency, which is focused on social media and is designed to facilitate its ability to bring novel ideas to clients.

Long-time Medicus employee Mark Reichman will spearhead the group.

A key priority for The Bakery will be helping clients “break new ground in bringing social media to pharma,” says Ebert. “The focus is to help them navigate through the uncharted waters and customize audience-specific ‘recipes’ for generating meaningful customer engagement.”

Doing so while remaining compliant can be tricky in the absence of regulatory guidelines. “We’re navigating and finding our way,” Ebert notes, adding that for digital assignments, teams work closely with client-side legal and regulatory departments to ensure they understand the parameters for playing in the space. “We want to participate and be there in a way that falls within accepted principles that are still being formulated.”

The regulatory uncertainty hasn’t stopped the agency from accepting social media assignments. Currently, Medicus Life Brands is working on behalf of an unnamed healthcare client leveraging Facebook for physician practice-building. “We are using Facebook to chart the dialogue between healthcare professionals and patients,” Ebert notes. “Ultimately the better that dialogue is, the better the patient care is.”

VuMedi, a surgeon-only video-sharing site, is being leveraged on the professional side. Such technology helps clients optimize conversations with target audiences by speaking with them in ways that are most relevant, Ebert explains, adding, “We’re making a long-term commitment with our audiences through these new vehicles. We’re now able to learn from them, thanks to opportunities to listen to customers’ preferences and build our story.”

Her bet on social media makes even more sense when you consider the potential for this type of work to gel with the rest of Medicus Life Brands’ roster. Key accounts range from OTC products marketed by P&G and Mead Johnson, to those of small biotechs like Auxilium and of large pharmas like Sanofi-Aventis and AstraZeneca. Pre-launch preparatory work accounts for 30% of business.

Social media can also complement the agency’s mission. In Ebert’s words, her shop specializes in a “multi-channel focus on the healthcare provider,” with the core mission to make the dialogue between provider and patient—so critical to the success or failure of a product—“as productive as possible.”

And, one could say, no matter who initiates that dialogue or how it occurs. “If patients’ healthcare professional has given them a good reason why one brand is better than another, that does seem to be very influential. But the trend has been that their peers and people communicating in the social-media space have also become influential,” Ebert observes.

Yet, she says, “At the end of the day, the HCP still has significant impact on patients’ receptivity to purchase and fill an Rx.” Which is why Medicus Life Brands sees as its main job the need to put forth the “clinical story,” or the medical rationale supporting a doctor’s potential preference. The physician has seen no dulling

of his or her influence on patient care or adherence to therapy.

In order to extend its deepening understanding of social media and other channels to clients throughout North America, Medicus Life Brands has brought its Toronto and New York offices under one umbrella, with Ebert overseeing both. Now the Canadian office has access to its US counterpart’s digital strategy, scientific affairs and strategic planning teams.

By the same token, BrandPharm has become part of Medicus Life Brands, with the aim of bringing a more robust portfolio of services to customers. All accounts formerly serviced by BrandPharm have shifted to the Medicus Life Brands roster—including Shionogi (launch of a product in the ADHD category), Shire (VPRIV for type 1 Gaucher disease) and King

Above: A journal ad for LungRx’s Tyvaso, indicated for the treatment of pulmonary arterial hypertension

(Thrombin-JMI, a hemostatic agent)—with most of the employees having moved over as well or having been absorbed by other agencies within PHCG. The BrandPharm merger comes a year after Medicus joined with Life Brands, a combination intended to benefit clients.

As a function of its growth, the agency is in hiring mode. One aspect of Medicus Life Brands that’s not changing, though, is its three-year-old branding, “the enviable agency experience.” Ebert says staffers remain committed to delivering on that mission. “It reinforces. We have traction on it,” she says. “It gives us benchmarks in terms of how we interact with clients and becomes part of employee performance assessments... When we articulate it to clients, it’s a measure for them to say, ‘These are things you should be looking for.’” — Marc Iskowicz



AT THE HELM

Lisa Ebert, managing director

PERFORMANCE

Business with existing clients suffered but there was “substantial growth” in interactive and social media space

HIGHLIGHTS

United with sister agency BrandPharm, with the aim to offer robust portfolio of services to customers

Launching The Bakery, a digital offering designed to facilitate its ability to bring novel ideas to clients

Working on behalf of unnamed client to leverage Facebook for physician practice-building

Handled multi-channel disease awareness campaign for Auxilium, with outdoor advertising in Times Square and mobile communication aspect

Looking to beef up staff to accommodate new growth

CHALLENGES

Being more innovative with how dollars are spent

Launch of GTx failed after phase III trials didn’t show significant benefit

For contact details, service offerings and client roster, see Agency A-to-Z, beginning on page 171