



Ashfield In2Focus: a fresh take on contract sales

New National Health Service decision-makers, cost-containment policies and shifts in purchasing authority have forced companies to take a hard look at how they approach their customer base. There is growing demand for value-added products and services, yet at the same time closer scrutiny of promotional activities.

Contract sales organisations may regard these trends as either a threat or a challenge. One player happy to embrace change is the newly merged Ashfield In2Focus. "We are the market leading CSO, supplying 76 teams and over 1,200 people to the UK's pharmaceutical industry," says Managing Director Chris Corbin. With the size, flexibility and financial backing to tackle a more complex market head-on, the company is poised to capitalise on new opportunities both at home and abroad. In a contracting CSO sector, Ashfield In2Focus has bucked the trend by "keeping things fresh", adds Chris.

Bringing together the two companies that worked side-by-side under the umbrella of Dublin-based healthcare services group United Drug – Ashfield Healthcare, acquired by United in May 2000, and In2Focus, added in June 2005 – has blended complementary resources and capabilities that can be leveraged to the benefit of both the merged company and its clients; "two excellent CSOs offering slightly different platforms", as Corbin puts it.

The core of Ashfield In2Focus is shared expertise in the provision of quality sales and nurse advisory services to the pharmaceutical industry. Ashfield brings to the table a CSO business that has grown rapidly since its formation in 1997, bolstered by the acquisition

Salesforce dynamics are changing rapidly in the UK. The drive to downsize being considered by many companies has thrown a number of issues into sharp focus, as pharma reviews how it targets the customer

of rival Ventiv UK in October 2002. Syndicated and dedicated sales teams, NHS clinical services, vacancy management resources and training and development programmes are backed up by 100 skilled head office personnel, which includes an in-house medical and legal compliance team.

Ashfield's state-of-the-art training and business centre, with its cutting-edge technologies such as touch-screen displays and streaming video, occupies around 14,000

the Irish market and a developing presence in the US, the SFE business is a distinctly global proposition, delivered in 21 countries and 13 languages.

All of this adds up to "augmented capabilities that each customer can take advantage of", notes Julian Tompkins, Co-Founder of In2Focus and now Business Unit Director for the merged company. It also allows for economies of scale in back-office functions and supplier relationships, and

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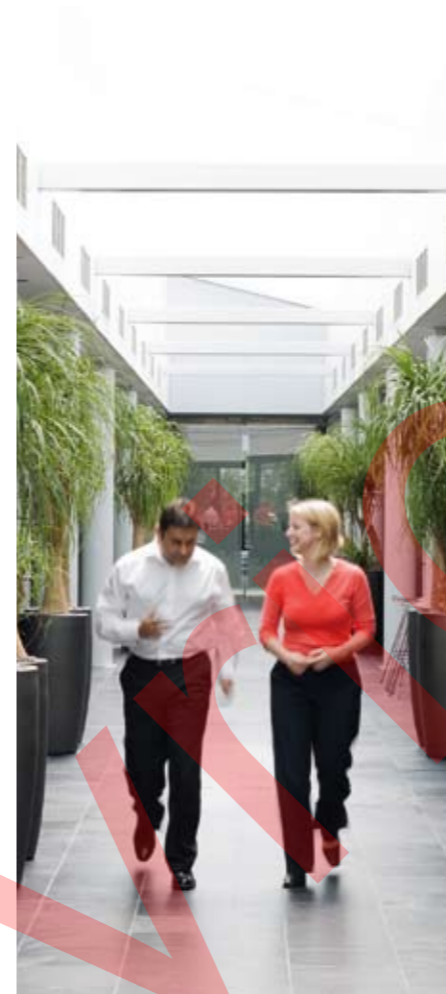
square foot of the merged company's 30,000 square foot headquarters in Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leicestershire. Visiting clients have been "absolutely blown away", says Head of Training and Development Jane Edwards.

These capabilities are enriched by the more niche-oriented approach of In2Focus – in particular, its Sales Force Effectiveness and Business Research and Consultancy units, both maintained intact at the streamlined In2Focus head office in Cookham, Berkshire. While Ashfield already had a firm foothold in

enhanced purchasing power that will feed through into cost savings for clients.

Size is not everything. But in an environment where clients increasingly regard the fieldforce less as a fixed cost and more as an interim, outsourced service, it provides vital critical mass. "Just about everyone is looking to lay off risk," Tompkins comments. "Customers want flexibility, and you can only get that from a provider who has a lot of people."

With pharmaceutical companies having





remote recording of field visits and key message delivery right down to personal appraisals. As Killington observes, these efforts also benefit the company's external training services. "We're very much diagnostic in what we do," he comments. "We are now in a position to help with the treatment as well."

If the new constraints in the NHS are a spur to creativity in salesforce planning and deployment, Ashfield In2Focus is also well aware of the accompanying pitfalls. The NHS, Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry are all on the lookout for questionable practices. Recently nurse advisors have been a focus of attention.

So, while the company is capitalising on growing interest in nurse-led initiatives, such as service redesign programmes or implementation of NICE guidance, it is also careful to ensure these are fully ABPI-compliant. "The Code is the Code is the Code; we have devised and delivered a whole range of innovative programmes which are fully compliant and meet our clients' business objectives. Our customers benefit from the breadth of our experience," comments Medical Director Ian Rubin. On top of this, he adds, programmes "have to have real value to the NHS". If they offer value, the NHS "will engage".

In the meantime, Ashfield In2Focus has some ambitious plans for the months ahead. They include further broadening its combined offering in the UK, almost exclusively through acquisition, notes Corbin, who says Ashfield In2Focus is "actively in discussions" with potential targets. There are also opportunities for expansion in Ireland, where the company has a market share of more than 50%. In the US, Corbin expects "substantial growth" in the market over the next year, with some acquisition activity within the next six months.

As he points out, Ashfield In2Focus is blessed with an "acquisitive parent" in United Drug, one that has also consistently ploughed money into its CSO business. In marked contrast to the rest of the market, United Drug has invested £30-£40 million in its UK CSO operations – including infrastructure, technology and acquisitions – over the past six or so years.

The immediate impact of the merger has been to "win seven major pieces of business, adding 250 heads", Corbin notes. And the consolidated CSO is getting "nothing but good feedback" from clients. *By Peter Mansell*

company". Taken together with systems for back-office functions, such as travel and expenses, "we can process information, monitor, control and report on just about any aspect of the business," notes IT Director Andy Sheppard.

online reports and by viewing role-playing sessions streamed directly over the internet.

The consolidated IT capability is being applied to the well-established In-Call Quality system for benchmarking salesforce performance. Driving these technological

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'Hotspot' sales teams thrive on detailed analyses of territories and populations. This is also where the SFE and business research capabilities developed at In2Focus come into their own. Ashfield has imported its own web-based SFE system from the US that allows the client to "see what's happening as it's happening", adds Sheppard, by accessing

innovations in an industry increasingly preoccupied with optimising return on investment means mapping out precisely where sales value is coming from, and "you can't get that just from sales data", notes Gary Killington, Business Unit Director for SFE.

The wider goal is a system that will track individual and team performance, from