

Broader, stronger Brand(x) takes the message to Europe



From the Brand(x) team (l-r): Sean Cush, Mike Young, Maria Parnham, Tom Gordon and Ila Garner-Patel

Branding is increasingly a global phenomenon, and pharmaceutical advertising and marketing are following suit, limiting the options for healthcare agencies that rely principally on a local presence. One determinedly brand-centred communications agency that has decided to think bigger is Brand(x)

A unique brand-centred offering from Brand(x) has sustained four years of exceptional growth in an increasingly challenging environment for healthcare marketing and communications.

In its new incarnation as the European hub agency for Lowe Healthcare Worldwide, Brand(x) now has the dimensions and expertise to leverage its success more aggressively into an EU-wide and even global arena. Freed from the restraints of operating as a UK-based independent, Brand(x) has the geographical presence to match that of any other networked agency, and can now provide a real extension to client marketing teams, says Ila Garner-Patel, Managing Director of Brand(x).

The agency's recent acquisition by parent company Interpublic Group, one of the world's largest advertising and marketing services companies, brings Brand(x) under the Lowe Healthcare Worldwide umbrella and adds to it Lowe's existing UK healthcare agencies, Lowe Azure, Lowe Fusion and ICC Europe. This gives Brand(x) a broader and stronger platform to pursue the brand-led vision and underlying philosophy of exceptional expertise that won it the *PharmaTimes* Marketing Communications Agency Team of the Year award last December.

Reinforcing this platform are Lowe's various consumer and partner agencies in Europe, all of which have the capacity to support our healthcare offering, notes Brand(x)

Chairman Mike Young. The agency is already taking a growing interest in consumer healthcare accounts, particularly where these involve crossover influence from healthcare professionals (eg. dentists with GlaxoSmithKline's Sensodyne toothpaste).

In geographical terms, teaming up with Lowe Healthcare Worldwide reflects a growing trend to formulate advertising and marketing strategies at global/regional level and then adapt them to local guidelines. On the supply side this has clear advantages in terms of coherence and costs.

A globalised environment

But the centralisation also responds to a more globalised environment in which doctors and other customers from different countries are attending the same conferences and seeing the same brands, Mike points out. Increasing use of consumer branding techniques in the healthcare sector is driving strategy in the same direction.

Lowe Healthcare's US agencies provide Brand(x) with an introduction to the global marketplace. "We can compete on a par with a global team, whether as a UK-based service with support from our sister agencies in New Jersey or as an adjunct to US-driven accounts," Mike comments.

Globalised strategies may seem at odds with a healthcare environment in which marketers must cope not only with the 'fourth hurdle' of cost-effectiveness evaluations but with a proliferation of

decision-makers and purchasers at the local level. Nonetheless what is good value is open to interpretation, Mike observes. The function of branding is to "create the emotional background against which decisions are made by different customer groups".

Where a number of products are making a similar offering, there is either going to be a price war or a perception war, Mike adds. "Emphasising rational differences alone doesn't get you very far, so the challenge is to create a feeling around the brand that guides the purchasing decision according to the most relevant customer needs, both rationally and emotionally," he says.

Traditionally, pharmaceutical companies started with the product rather than the brand, but now the sector is far more customer-focused and includes patients' needs, Mike says, although in European terms this is unlikely to extend to direct-to-consumer advertising.

Corporate branding also comes into play as competitors jockey to add value and position themselves as preferred suppliers, Ila points out. For example, its commitment to support services such as nurse supply earned Allen & Hanburys the mantle of 'the respiratory company that cares', with pull-through benefits for its product range. Today, the demand for relevant support services is higher than it has ever been. Not that a brand-driven approach means an easy sell. "The big primary care blockbuster seems to have died a death," Ila comments. Instead, »



Ila Garner-Patel and Mike Young

there is a marked shift to secondary care, involving more complex niche marketing and support structures. As a relatively young business with a fresh approach, Brand(x) feels better equipped to address these changes than agencies that, as Mike puts it, have “grown fat on blockbusters”.

The ability to work successfully in both secondary and primary care has also been accompanied by an expansion in the agency’s communications offering to include both medical education and public relations, a move which has resulted in an increasing number of clients utilising all the services the agency offers. That the brand is paramount in any initiative goes without saying. Everything starts with the question: “What could, or should, your brand stand for in the customer’s mind?”

More recently, Mike notes, Brand(x) has been incorporating elements of the brand experience both externally and internally in an effort to “bring the brand to life”. Understanding, for example, what it means emotionally to have a disease and how a particular drug affects that experience not only engages customers, including opinion leaders, but motivates the client company’s own staff so that they really live the brand, he points out.

Complete communications package

The Brand(x) proposition is a complete communications package that spans all these elements and, increasingly, all the available channels through which they are conveyed. This includes digital media, an area in which Brand(x) is already active and to which Lowe Healthcare will contribute its own “exceptional, state-of-the-art thinking”, Ila notes.

In creative terms, the gold standard is “relevant and unexpected”, Mike adds. While producing something you haven’t seen or thought of before is a key differentiator, it has to enhance the brand, he stresses. Otherwise, there is a risk of squandering creative energy on a concept that has superficial impact but does not actually tell the audience why they should choose that particular brand. What Brand(x) asks itself every single day, Mike says, is “how do you evaluate an idea in terms other than pure relevance or pure originality?”

Underpinning the offering is Brand(x)’ own brand essence, the commitment to exceptional expertise against which all outputs and internal standards are measured. Ila describes this as an ongoing process of self-questioning that seeks to “keep our saw sharp” by ensuring everything from staff

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recruitment to finished work is looked at with a fresh pair of eyes and with a mind to improvement.

The acquisition by Lowe will preserve these distinct approaches while allowing Brand(x) to apply them on a more ambitious scale. “This enables us to expand geographically, offer our clients more and embrace the challenge of the future while remaining true to the essence, core values and personality which have underpinned our success to date,” Ila says.