

With budgets under pressure and sales jobs on the line, there's a desire to stick with the marketing devil you know. But now an e-marketing collaboration between Doctors.net.uk and Boehringer Ingelheim looks set to change these perceptions.

Proving that e-marketing really works

Attend any pharmaceutical sales and marketing meeting, flick through the pages of any trade magazine, listen to almost any agency pitch and e-marketing soon emerges as the trend everyone expects to be the wave of the future. However, pharmaceutical companies have been reluctant to surf this wave: with budgets under increasing pressure and sales jobs being shed across the sector, there is an understandable desire to stick with the marketing devil you know. This, combined with pharma's innate conservatism, make e-marketing a nice idea that few were willing to try, beyond setting up a website.

Part of the problem stemmed from the dearth of hard evidence that e-marketing worked. Several companies dipped their toes into the e-marketing ocean, but did the increase in sales arise from the e-marketing or from some other aspect of the marketing mix? E-marketing became pharmaceutical marketing's Catch 22: you needed to run a campaign to prove return on investment, but you needed to prove return on investment to run a campaign.

Resolving the paradox

Now a collaboration between Boehringer Ingelheim and Doctors.net.uk could be on the verge of resolving the paradox. Over the next year, Boehringer Ingelheim will promote the combination antiplatelet Asasantin Retard (aspirin and dipyridamole extended-release) solely using e-marketing delivered by Doctors.net.uk, unsupported by public relations, medical sales representatives or advertising. "At the end of the campaign, we'll be able to determine the cost-effectiveness of e-marketing," says John Pugh, New Media Manager at Boehringer Ingelheim. "For the first time, we'll be able to see the return on investment offered by e-marketing, which will offer us important insights that we can apply to other brands. It's a real opportunity!"

Asasantin Retard is an ideal test for e-marketing. It is clinically important, supported by compelling evidence and National

Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines recommend it as a first-line treatment. In addition, Asasantin Retard has few direct competitors, so there's little chance of a 'spill over' from promotion of its rivals, which would compromise the return on investment analysis.

"Asasantin Retard generates valuable sales and the 'safe' option would be to let it tick over," says Neil Hardy, Project Manager for Marketing and Sales Effectiveness at Boehringer Ingelheim. "But we feel there is more potential in the brand that we can release. We're not content with letting it tick over; we want to grow the product. So we're investing considerable effort in the e-marketing of Asasantin Retard."

So, while Asasantin Retard is a mature product, Boehringer Ingelheim remains committed to the brand. For example, the ongoing PRoFESS study, which involves over 20,000 patients from more than 700 sites worldwide, is the largest trial ever conducted in secondary stroke prevention. In part, PRoFESS will evaluate whether or not Asasantin Retard is superior to its main competitor. The results will generate considerable interest across both primary and secondary care.

"It is expensive to bring representatives on and off stream rapidly to make the most of opportunities, such as positive NICE guidance and the ESPRIT study [which supports the prescribing of Asasantin Retard in patients who have had an ischaemic stroke or transient ischaemic attack]," says Neil Hardy at Boehringer Ingelheim. "With a healthy product portfolio and a promising pipeline, salesforce resource is at a premium, so until PRoFESS reports in 2008, we need a channel that will get our message out efficiently and cost-effectively. We also wanted to test the viability of e-marketing on a national scale, without any noise from other channels, to guide future campaigns."

The e-marketing campaign encompasses several elements, including e-detailing, continuing medical education courses,

webcasts and e-bulletins tailored to the customer. The first element, an educational bulletin to raise disease awareness, is already with doctors and generated some 8,000 unique doctor interactions – which the team regards as a very promising start. "We worked with Doctors.net.uk to produce a campaign that we will roll out in seven or eight waves with a lot of variety," Pugh comments. "It's going to be the Rolls Royce of internet campaigns."

When choosing its partner, the Boehringer Ingelheim team's wish list included access to as diverse and comprehensive an audience as possible. "Asasantin Retard is prescribed in both primary and secondary care," Dr Toby Shephard, Team Leader of Medical Affairs at Boehringer Ingelheim remarks. "Furthermore, adherence with medicines used in this therapy area tends to be poor. After about six months, only 30% of users still take their drugs. We therefore wanted to reinforce the need to ensure compliance with as broad a constituency of physicians as possible."

The need to reach a large audience made Doctors.net.uk the logical partner. "Doctors.net.uk is host to the largest online medical community of doctors in the UK," says Managing Director Peter Ward. Over 141,000 General Medical Council-registered doctors,



Doctors.net.uk's Managing Director Peter Ward



The Boehringer Ingelheim team (left to right): Neil Hardy, Toby Sheppard, John Pugh



The Doctors.net.uk team (left to right): Katy McPherson (Account Manager), Rupert Potter (Business Development Manager), Peter Ward (Managing Director), Chris Hawker (Designer)



Peter Ward



BI's Neil Hardy (left) and John Pugh

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profiled when they sign up to the community, are members – equivalent to more than 85% of the active doctor population. "Doctors.net.uk provides collaboration, education, information, and communicates on behalf of third party organisations to over 41,000 GPs and 100,000 secondary care physicians," Ward comments. "Through rigorous editorial control, and by maintaining our independence, we've developed trust with our users."

"Doctors.net.uk is now one of the leading providers of online sales, marketing and accredited educational campaigns to both the pharmaceutical industry and the Department of Health," Ward adds. "In response to our growing success in this sector, we established a specialist pharmaceutical sales and marketing division last year, focused on providing the pharmaceutical industry with powerful and effective e-marketing solutions. The team consists of experienced pharmaceutical marketers, medical writers, account managers and leading-edge design, production and programming capabilities. This allows us to make the most of the opportunities offered by this exciting new promotional route to benefit our clients and our users."

Kindred spirits

The Boehringer Ingelheim team also recognised kindred spirits at Doctors.net.uk, another factor that swung the contract towards the Oxford-based company. "Boehringer Ingelheim is a privately-owned, innovation-driven company with a vision statement of Value Through Innovation," Pugh comments. "As a company, we are dedicated to identifying new opportunities and making the most of them. We felt Doctors.net.uk had a similar ethos and philosophy." Ward agrees: "We strive to be in the vanguard of new technology. The fit between ourselves and Boehringer Ingelheim was perfect. It's an exciting time for both of us."

"The traditional approach to pharmaceutical marketing is under pressure," concludes Hardy. "It's wrong to see e-marketing as an alternative to the traditional approaches. Usually, e-marketing will be complementary to the traditional approach, although in some cases it may be the optimum channel. We've taken a calculated risk promoting Asasantin Retard by e-marketing alone. Nevertheless, the combination of Asasantin Retard and Doctors.net.uk offers us an unprecedented opportunity to obtain some clean data and characterise the return on investment presented by e-marketing compared to other channels. It was too good an opportunity to miss." **By PT Chief Writer Mark Greener**

