



Getting back to grass roots was what prompted Kate Hawker and her business partner Charlotte Florence to quit Fleishman Hillard and set up Medea Communications in September 2009. “We felt we were moving away from the customer,” Hawker explains. “So we wanted to start again and work much more closely with our clients, to change the emphasis towards really understanding their business as opposed to managing a business that delivered for them.”

That customer-facing ethos has lasted through the agency’s absorption into contract services provider Ashfield In2Focus, which acquired Medea’s majority shareholder, healthcare communications company, the InforMed group, in August.

Hawker founded medical communications agency The Remedy in 2000 and sold it to Fleishman Hillard, where she worked with Florence – now a Medea director while Hawker is managing director. Whereas in larger organisations the remit often shifts towards management and financial planning, at Medea the advantage for clients is a genuinely director-led service, rather than a ‘bait-and-switch’ strategy that trades down to less senior representation once an account is in the bag. “We are the directors but we are also the people who will work with you on your programmes,” Hawker comments.

But being part of InforMed also enables Medea to combine the hands-on, high-level servicing of a boutique agency with what it calls “the bandwidth support of a major communications group”. This means Medea can address a multi-stakeholder marketplace by drawing on the support, infrastructure and expertise both of InforMed and Ashfield In2Focus, to tap into

Roots and new shoots: Medea Communications

Peter Mansell talks to Kate Hawker, managing director of Medea Communications, about the difference between managing a client's business, and really understanding it *Photo by Magnus Rew*

forward-thinking customer insights that will help companies in the UK prepare for the radical overhaul of their customer base envisaged in the new government's NHS White Paper.

While InforMed provides the scientific backbone, Ashfield In2Focus' experience with pioneering approaches to customer relations adds a new edge to Medea's core stakeholder mapping activities. "Ashfield In2Focus has primary and speciality care sales teams calling regularly on key stakeholders, so it tracks evolving needs as we move towards 2013," Hawker says.

Stakeholder mapping addresses the influences and processes that shape decision-making across different localities when a new product enters the market or an existing brand needs a makeover. "We analyse the market dynamics, then talk to key stakeholders to understand the value proposition required for successful commercialisation," Hawker explains.

"We can then deliver a set of recommendations identifying how pharma needs to prepare for the market,

the challenges, the funding streams, the incentives, the evaluation criteria and assessment methods. We look at all the products in the therapeutic area that have been restricted or rejected and scope out the investment required to deliver against national and local health priorities including efficiency savings and health outcomes."

It helps in this context to have on board a consultant who was recently joint head of a large UK hospital's drug and therapeutics committee. That input has also helped Medea engage with digital media through downloadable podcasts showing consultants how they can put their case to formulary meetings and answer questions on cost-effectiveness and value. "This enables greater understanding of the business case requirements, rather than just downloading pdfs of clinical papers," Hawker comments.

Another step into the digital realm has been online customer webcasts and advisory boards. While companies rightly value face-to-face time with

opinion leaders, there may be times – such as National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence submissions – when they urgently require feedback from stakeholders at very short notice, Hawker points out.

An online advisory board meeting can also generate a better spread of opinion by using interactive questions with scaled responses, she adds. Companies "get more objective feedback this way because it's monitored very closely and you're asking opinion leaders to vote on a particular issue rather than just an expressed opinion".

Doctors "are increasingly open to online communications and don't necessarily feel it's a good use of their time to spend a day at a meeting", Hawker believes. "And of course it's a very cost-effective channel as you save on the costs associated with face-to-face meetings."

New technology and fresh insights into customer motivation will be all the more critical as the NHS customer base reconstitutes itself around the government's proposed GP consortia. Medea intends to be in the front line of those changes, staying close to its clients while making the most of new synergies available from its connection with Ashfield In2Focus.

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