

BY CHRISTA TIEFENBACHER-HUDSON

Introducing Medical Products in International Markets: Communication Challenges and Solutions



It is no secret that international markets are critical for the long-term health of medical companies, since they can represent 50% or more of a company's annual sales. Furthermore, many medical products are approved and marketed outside the US before being released domestically, which not only adds to the revenue stream but also provides valuable clinical data. Therefore, a strategic approach to international markets can make a difference to a company's success.

With more than 376 million consumers, the European Union accounts for 24% of all global medical device consumption. While the EU is a highly competitive environment and requires substantial investments in product marketing and advertising, the investment is rewarding because once a product has regulatory approval in one EU nation, it can be distributed in all of the 15 EU Member States. For the US, Europe represents the largest export market for medical product companies, accounting for 44% of all medical device exports.

Other foreign markets also offer great opportunities to increase a company's global market share. Japan, for example, is an early adopter of new medical technologies and one of the single largest importers of medical products. Indian medical centers, with their US and European trained medical staffs, are attracting patients from

all of Southeast Asia and the Middle East and consequently, imports of medical devices have increased. The healthcare system in China is successfully blending traditional treatment methods with Western medical technology and China represents a growing US export market.

It may take years to establish a US brand in foreign markets, and many medical manufacturers work with local distributors until they have gained enough market share to justify direct distribution. It is critical for companies to maintain a strong corporate and product identity during that time, so they don't have to start over in building brand awareness and preference when they eventually decide to market directly to their customers. By maintaining control of product advertising and marketing communications, companies can accomplish this goal.

A company's **brand** is at the core of all communication efforts. A strong brand identity provides the differentiation needed in a competitive environment and helps sell product. While a strong product brand is important for medical companies, a strong corporate brand is absolutely vital for developing lasting business relationships. It is the corporate brand that has longevity, generates trust and credibility, and becomes the guarantor of quality.

Branding is not just a function of advertising—rather every interaction with a cus-

tomers is a branding experience. That's why it is so important that all members of an organization understand and share the corporate brand vision, from the clinical consultant who works on the front lines to the customer service representative filling the orders.

Of course, branding starts with a name. A good brand name has to be memorable, easy to pronounce, reflect essential attributes of the brand and transcend them. It needs to possess universal appeal and avoid negative connotations in all the key market languages. For that reason, **naming** a product should be the responsibility of marketing rather than engineering. Also, many US products are named with an American rather than an international audience in mind, resulting in names that are irrelevant or even inappropriate in other languages. Any meaningful naming or ideation process has to incorporate careful consideration of the linguistic and cultural differences in all the target markets to ensure worldwide acceptance and appeal.

When crossing borders, it is also important that the brand identity be culturally relevant, yet always consistent. You can change your clothes and the language you speak, but you cannot change who you are. Conflicting messages about core brand attributes and values will hurt a company's credibility.

However, maintaining a consistent

brand message does not mean that a company cannot express itself differently or reposition products for different markets. On the contrary, effectively **positioning** a product involves careful consideration of the competitive market environments: A product positioned as "innovative" in the US may be just one of many similar products in Japan; what may be a "high performance" device here, may be considered simply "reliable" in Europe because of other, higher performing products already on the market. The product literature and advertising definitely have to reflect these differences in product positioning.

There are strict requirements governing medical **communication materials**. Although regulatory standards for what can and cannot be said, what claims can be made, and what kind of information needs to be provided are getting more and more harmonized across international markets, differences in content may still be determined by differences in healthcare practices, medical procedures or hospital protocols, attitudes toward a medical treatment, and other cultural sensitivities or taboos. Field representatives in international markets can provide valuable advice in this respect.

Careful consideration also must be given to the **creative expression** used in advertising and promotional materials. These materials need to appeal to audi-

ences with very different creative preferences, both visual and verbal. To address this challenge, marketing communication agencies must possess multicultural communication expertise and a multicultural design vocabulary, not to mention the ability to speak many different languages.

In the EU, packaging and labeling and other advertising materials intended for the consumer must be provided in all 11 official languages. However, for advertising and communication materials for professional medical audiences, the required languages are determined by the medium (e.g., a national versus pan-European journal) and/or by the respective national regulatory bodies. With the trend in the marketplace towards more, not less, languages medical companies and inexperienced agencies can become overwhelmed by the design and production challenges. (Having to accommodate information in 11 or more languages makes a 2 x 5 x 12-inch device package suddenly seem very small.)

Large multinational corporations tend to decentralize and assign the responsibility for marketing communications to regional offices. Smaller companies on the other hand may not have this option, due to limited staffing and financial resources. Decentralization is also typically not an option for product labeling because of logistical and inventory management reasons. Nevertheless, there are cost-effective

approaches to developing and executing international communication strategies that maximize resources and deliver results. For example, at CREO International we use a methodology that enables us to understand a company's brand and its origin, determine the brand positioning, research the most effective media channels, and develop creative expressions that appeal to global audiences in the languages they speak. At the same time, our technical translation division works with the company to produce multilingual packaging and labeling that meet international regulatory requirements.

No matter what approach a company uses to address all the variable international marketing communication challenges, it needs to be part of the overall business strategy, with clear objectives and appropriate funding. While it may take longer than in the domestic market to see a return on investment, it pays off in the long term.



Christa Tiefenbacher-Hudson is the co-founder and managing director of CREO International, a leading multilingual, multicultural communications agency in Minneapolis.