One of the most challenging aspects of developing a strong and successful pharmaceutical brand is creating effective, original and controlled, brand-directed communications.

Healthcare marketers face a constant battle in trying to establish clear, motivating associations for their brands and products among healthcare professionals, patients and other target audiences across many different touchpoints, media channels, countries and cultures.

This is primarily due to media fragmentation and the emergence of new digital technologies, as well as the fact that business professionals and patients have the ability to exert more control over the communication channels they choose to interact with, and hence the messages they see or hear.

However, creating inspirational brand communications is often the major influence on the attitudes people form towards brands, and whether or not they decide to prescribe or use them.

Brand-directed communication can take a myriad of forms across many different channels. In the world of pharmaceutical marketing, it can include sales promotion, traditional forms of advertising (such as journal ads), sponsorship at conferences and seminars, as well as newer channels of communication, such as via the mobile, blogs, search and online social networks.

Sales representatives are of course still a key channel of communication, and are often the linking force between pharma companies and physicians. The way the representatives present the product in terms of professionalism, knowledge, tone of voice and interpersonal skills will have a major impact on brand perceptions.

In addition to having a short-term effect on prescribing decisions, all forms of brand communication have the potential to create, amend or refresh existing brand associations for longer-term benefit.

This article highlights 10 practical ways to ensure the development of inspirational communications for brands, find the right communication channels with which to engage different target audiences, and identify a creative approach that will work well across multiple touchpoints.
1. ARE YOU MOTIVATING YOUR AUDIENCE?

Inspiration means creating a ‘feeling within the body of elevated energy and enthusiasm’. To be ‘inspirational’, communications need to be motivating enough to change or trigger new attitudes and behaviours among different target audience mindsets. This is increasingly so in pharmaceutical marketing, where brands are often ‘evolutionary’ rather than revolutionary, and where communication has to create interest, intrigue, desire and persuasion.

To be truly motivating, communications need to appeal to and align with core values and beliefs at several levels, including: the physician as a normal person; the physician in their specific discipline; the physician as the unique individual they are, and the physician treating a particular patient.

Therefore, starting by establishing - who are my customers? - is a pre-requisite when developing any communication. An understanding of your customers throughout the product life cycle (ideally from phase 2A), is key if you are to develop a brand essence and brand proposition that reflect what matters to them.

Inspirational communication lives with the brand, and the brand evolves over its life cycle. Hence the story (ie, brand essence and values) should remain the same, but the perspective from which the communication addresses customers will need to vary, so that the spotlight is on issues or needs that may emerge.

2. CREATE SOMETHING MEMORABLE

Physicians first and foremost help their patients. This, and not a wish to prescribe specific brands or products, is their primary goal and motivation.

Creative content that is different, emotionally engaging and relevant is at the heart of effective brand communication. Communication will have very little effect unless it captures the attention, the imagination and a place in the minds of your target audience. Unfortunately, there are many examples of communication that are dull and go by largely unnoticed, and this can explain why brands do not grow or strengthen as expected.

The most effective communication is either compelling in the product proposition presented, or is distinctive/emotionally engaging as a result of both the original creative idea and the way that it is executed. Either way, it captures and expresses the brand essence in such a way as to attract attention immediately and to generate connection with the brand name.

There are no rules as to what constitutes creativity. There is no single formula or magic ingredient for success. Whatever can bring the particular idea or brand to life for the target audience will be effective. What is crucial is that it establishes a positive memory.

Developing engaging creative is surprisingly tough, which is why it is so highly valued. This makes it one of the biggest variables in marketing success, and one of the most crucial areas to get right.

3. STAY LOYAL TO THE BRAND ESSENCE

One of the most frequent comments in any conversation about communication is: “It was a great piece of communication, but what brand was it for?” This inability to connect the brand to what is memorable in the campaign is a significant failing of a great deal of communication, regardless of its media channel.

In a well-branded piece of communication, the brand essence is integrated seamlessly into the execution. The mechanics of accomplishing this vary according to the media: in video advertising, the brand must be essential to the overall story, while in print, the brand must be either well integrated or well positioned in relation to the reader’s eye flow.

Good branding has little to do with focusing on the pack, the logo or the product. It has everything to do with the brand essence being at the heart of the creative idea.

The concept of strong branding seems hugely undervalued in pharmaceutical campaigns compared to consumer campaigns, with relatively few examples of campaigns creatively integrating the brand essence. Given the same communications task, any communications campaign that combines good branding with strong engagement will sell more than a campaign that does poorly on these two variables.

The anti-cancer drug, Velcade, for example, has cleverly integrated the brand name into the headline, and uses strong colours and visuals, consistently, to help strengthen branding in its advertising.

4. EMOTIONS ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT AND THE BRAND EXPERIENCE

Communication that creates a strong emotional response with its target audience is likely to do so because:

1. By associating a brand with strong, positive emotions, people are more likely to be predisposed to the brand when they encounter it, and therefore more likely to prescribe it, recommend it to others, and have a positive experience as a result.

2. Based on psychological learning, emotions are a central part of getting people to pay attention to any brand communication and for it to leave a lasting impression in the brain.

Pharma companies have tended to focus on communicating the rational benefits of a drug, such as mode of action, efficacy, safety, tolerability and convenience - at the expense of other drivers. But, like consumers, physicians make decisions for emotional reasons, not just rational ones. Neuroscience has helped to develop a number of new research techniques to measure emotional response to brand communications, such as brain scanning, facial coding and eye-tracking.

Critical to the world of pharmaceutical marketing is the finding that people use ‘representations’ (they can be both emotional and rational) to understand something, to make decisions, and to
interact with the world around them. The greater the strength and clarity of the representation, the more likely it is to take priority in the ‘mental workspace’, the brain system that integrates ideas into long-term memory and allows them to be used in decision-making.

While we often tend to think of marketing in terms of visual and verbal communication, this new insight makes it clear that it is the total sensory experience that matters. Memories of a positive brand experience can be reinforced directly through exposure to the relevant sensory experience, or indirectly, through communication designed to remind people of that experience.

5. MAKE IT HAVE IMPACT

There are two ways that communications can support sales. First, information that is new, relevant and credible can be very powerful in the short term, creating immediate desire or persuasion. An extreme example would be an effective, proven vaccine for AIDS. Secondly, communications that create strong, positive associations and memories for the brand and that stay in the mind can have both a short-term and longer-term influence on sales.

As persuasion and memorable impact are addictive, the best likelihood of communications selling your brands and products are a combination of both. The best communications campaigns are often 10 times more sales-effective than the worst, for the same marketing investment.

Pharma companies are learning from the world of packaged goods’ companies, as the role of the brand becomes increasingly important, and hence the role for communication becomes paramount.

6. SHORT-TERM SUCCESS DEPENDS ON ‘NEWS’

New ‘news’ is vital if you are going to drive sales growth. If there is no compelling news then your brand will almost inevitably fail to meet its sales objectives. If marketing communication is to have a positive impact on sales, it must have a powerful, relevant, new and credible message - it could be something about the therapy area or for example the launch of a different product.

Communication channels such as direct mail, email and search marketing are often used to stimulate immediate sales uplifts by using a direct call to action. While these channels and activities rarely seek to influence the long-term trajectory of the brand, they do have the power to reinforce or even undermine existing brand perceptions, particularly if they bear no resemblance to brand-focused communication, or are poorly executed.

However in reality, most of the time, many established brands do not have anything new to say, and hence equity building communications, as described in ways 1-5, have a crucial role to play over the longer term.

7. CONSISTENCY LIES AT THE HEART OF LONG-TERM SUCCESS

The world’s most successful pharma brands have a well-defined set of distinctive and relevant brand associations. They stand for something clearly in physicians’ or patients’ minds. A brand that triggers a clear set of relevant associations will be more attractive than a brand with muddled associations or very few associations at all when the HCP, patient or consumer is weighing up their decision.

A crucial aspect of brand clarity is consistency in the communications over a period of time, across channels, geographies and cultures. Some of the most successful campaigns have been running for many years, helping to create a memorable brand image in the minds of physicians or patients.

Despite the benefits of consistency, the temptation for change often seems too great for marketing teams to resist. Frequently changing the communications strategy is a guaranteed recipe for failure.

Our learning has shown that too many messages may damage or dilute the brand, and changing strategy every one or two years confuses audiences to the point where they may strike your brand off.

The award-winning campaigns for Xenical and Reductil, both prescription weight-loss drugs, are good examples of how a consistent approach has been used to convey the danger of fat in strong visual terms and how this messaging has been developed into a unique branding identity.

8. COMMIT INVESTMENT AHEAD OF YOUR BRAND SHARE

Having a realistic marketing budget is crucial to make sure any communication is effective, but how much is needed to be truly impactful, grow sales/share and develop brand leadership credentials?

Analysis of many consumer brands shows that it is not so dependent on how much you spend, but how much you spend relative to your direct competitors. So in order to grow brand share, share of voice (SoV) has to be higher than your current market share (SoM) or projected market share.

For consumer markets, recent analysis by the IPA (Institute of Practitioners in Advertising) shows that, on average, having a SoV 10 per cent higher than your SoM equates to a 1 per cent rise in market share. This thinking has yet to be widely applied for healthcare brands, although the principles are highly valid.

Level of communications spend is only one factor however; channel choice is equally important...

9. INVEST IN THE RIGHT CHANNELS TO MAXIMISE ROI

With numerous channels now available, how you decide which to invest in? How much do you invest, say, in digital vs. traditional channels?

In today’s multimedia world, where healthcare professionals and their patients control their own media agendas and manage their interaction with brands, the most powerful media plans are those that combine a creative mix of more traditional and digital channels.
For brand owners, their agencies and media owners, this choice offers huge opportunities, but also presents many challenges. How can you be certain that all the elements of multifaceted media campaigns have worked to deliver your communications objectives?

10. RESEARCH SHOULD LEAD YOUR COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING
Expanding media choices, together with increasing use of technology, make measuring the effectiveness of different communications both more challenging and more important. Research can help reduce risk in making important decisions about any communication plan or its execution - a fundamental necessity for today’s healthcare marketers, where maximising RoI is a pre-requisite.

Qualitative research is the best tool to help you develop the brand story before you craft your communications. Techniques such as semiotics help to understand people's values and beliefs as they are shaped by a cultural context. The dominant and emerging discourses around Alzheimer’s disease, both in society and among learned medical organisations, is just one example.

Our values and beliefs cannot help but be shaped by contextual norms and in turn our response to them. Other qualitative tools include observation and questioning based on neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) to help define existing values and beliefs, and to understand how and what we need to communicate for our audience to form different ones.

Research can be used to understand how target audiences process communication; which messages will resonate the most, motivate, and ultimately influence attitudes and behaviours. It also establishes which channels your target audience will be most receptive to, which will provide the best reach and which will have the most impact per contact.

So in summary, if used appropriately and sensitively, both qualitative and quantitative research can be used to help guide creativity and ultimately, help create truly inspirational brand communications.

CLOSING COMMENTS
It is often said that ‘pharma is different’ when it comes to developing effective communications. But the same can be said of many product categories: automotive is different, finance is different, telecommunications is different, technology is different.

An engaging, creative campaign with strong branded impact will help pharmaceutical companies to communicate a compelling message that will stick in the mind of the physician or patient.

By following the 10 principles in this article, it is possible to create inspirational communications in any category, for any therapy area, for any brand and for any target audience.

Author
Nick Bull is a senior director at Millward Brown Healthcare and can be contacted on +44 (0) 1926 826700 or at nick.bull@millwardbrown.com

Inspiring the world of brand-building

One of the most challenging aspects in developing a strong and successful pharmaceutical brand is creating effective brand-directed communications.

However, creating original, memorable and strongly-branded communication is surprisingly tough for healthcare marketers, which is why it is so highly valued.

At Millward Brown Healthcare – we know what it takes to create truly inspirational brand communications.

To learn more please call Nick Bull on +44 (0) 1926 826700 or email nick.bull@millwardbrown.com