

# **Interview: Ivelisse Casillas â?? President, PharMaCon Inc., Puerto Rico**

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*Ivelisse Casillas, founder of*

*PharMaCon, Inc. talks about the challenges of marketing and advertising pharmaceuticals products in Puerto Rico. She founded the company in 2000 to provide advertising, legal and medical expertise to the sector.*

**What are the main advertising challenges that your clients face with which you can help them?**

The biggest challenge for my clients is having their campaign approved by their medical and legal departments. From a legal point of view, in terms of medical obligations you cannot say that a medicine does something without having the medical studies to prove that it is specifically for that. In that sense, it is challenging for them to have a campaign approved in an effective period of time for the company. Additionally, many companies are unaware of all the steps they need to take, so we frequently own the process and guide our clients by suggesting how to proceed. Of course, there are other agencies working with the pharmaceutical sector but it sometimes takes these agencies 18 to 36 months to get a campaign approved. There is not much point in having a campaign if you have to wait for over a year and a half for approval!

Many of our clients choose to use our services for their campaigns because, while they may not have the necessary time and resources, PharMaCon has the experts and we can complete their projects in the most efficient way possible. Even if a company has an entire team of physicians and lawyers in the medical and legal departments, working on an advertising campaign distracts their attention from the main focus which is running the product.

**As well as commercial campaigns, you also have clients in the manufacturing sector. What kind of message do pharmaceutical companies in Puerto Rico usually want to send in terms of their manufacturing process?**

There are many state-of-the-art manufacturing facilities here. Nevertheless, their advertising campaigns are focused more on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and their contribution to the country through community and educational programs. Internal communication is another area in which they hire us to work with them. PharMaCon has strengthened its expertise in this area because keeping their employees motivated, well-informed and placing them in a position where they can be more productive is very important.

**Do you find that the needs of your clients differ depending on the country in which you are operating?**

Latin American countries are different and language is the only thing they have in common. You need to customize strategies based on each country, and identify any similarities. For example, pharmaceutical companies in all countries need the tools to launch products effectively and that is common to everyone. In terms of differences, you cannot have campaigns in Latin America that are

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directed to patients, so our communications in that region are medically and technically focused. On the other hand, PharMaCon's work is an upgrade from similar services of agencies in Latin America because we are used to working with the FDA and thus we have other tools and an upgraded communication level. So the service we can provide these companies is quite different.

Having FDA regulatory expertise is a competitive advantage for us in the Latin American market. For example, the Sunshine Act was implemented in the US a few years ago to increase transparency of financial transactions between pharmaceutical companies and healthcare providers by making records public; this law is now being replicated in Latin America. I have met with companies there where no one knows how to deal with that, so we are a step ahead.

**What is your internationalization strategy for PharMaCon? You are already in Florida so do you plan to expand to other parts of the US or Latin America?**

For us, the next step is regionalization and in five years' time I would like to have at least two or three offices in Latin America. We are actually providing services to various countries in Latin America from our Florida offices but we are in the process of moving specifically to different countries and providing services to our clients there to respond to specific needs. From our office in San Juan we also export services to south Florida, for example, when a specific service might be required. We are working as supporting services and sharing our knowledge which makes the team very rich in terms of experience and capability.

**What do our readers need to know about PharMaCon?**

I am very proud to be part of the Puerto Rican ecosystem. We have the local talent to allow us to do whatever we want. Sometimes I found myself doing a presentation in a multinational pharmaceutical company and asking myself how this is possible, but it is possible because we have the talent to do that! Some people think that we have a very difficult time on the island, but the first step to moving forward is resilience and to keep doing what we are doing and doing it well. In our case, for example, we are exporting our services and looking to new markets and, at the end of the day, the outcome will be beneficial for everyone.

**How did you build up the reputation of PharMaCon when you were competing with companies which already had a longstanding presence serving the industry?**

Most advertising agencies for the pharmaceutical industry were only able to offer advertising. However, with my knowledge and understanding of the pharmaceutical industry, I realized that a key success factor was integrating all audiences. I have the knowledge and experience to be able to go into a physician's office and establish a program to educate patients or produce a technical press release in a newsworthy way, for example. Having all of this integrated into the services which we offer makes a difference. I have been fortunate enough to have excellent clients that have been referring me to other companies, physicians and associations. Knowing the needs of the product manager, the legal department and being able to formulate a proposal that is liked by the product manager but at the same time approvable from the legal point of view is paramount.

**What was the motivation behind the foundation of PharMaCon?**

The professional motivation was through my work for 13 years in two pharmaceutical companies in different positions and in my final position at GlaxoSmithKline I ran the marketing department. This gave me the opportunity to work with many advertising agencies that offered their services. I realized that these agencies lacked knowledge of the industry, including regulations and also diseases and products. In order to market a product, you need to know its exact function; Puerto Rico is an FDA-regulated market which requires sophisticated communications and marketing. I therefore saw an

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opportunity to start providing that service to the pharmaceutical industry knowing that we have both: manufacturing plants and commercial operations. I was aware that there was no advertising company at that time which was focused on healthcare or pharmaceuticals so I saw a huge opportunity for the Puerto Rican market.

On the personal side, I founded PharMaCon as a result of handling the demands of my position at the time and the responsibility I had as a young mother with an autistic child. There are not many people with the same level of expertise, so I decided to start my own company in order to get the best of both worlds: having flexibility while continuing to do what I know. I originally started as a consultant, but ultimately the implementation was not what I expected and I knew the companies would not be satisfied with that level of implementation. Therefore, I chose to establish a full service agency on my own.

**There is a lot of change taking place in Puerto Rico these days affecting the pharmaceutical industry to some degree. Bearing this in mind, what is your assessment of the industry's progression over the next few years?**

The industry is evolving, indeed. In the past, one product like a top mega-seller for chronic disease, like hypertension, could be used by all physicians and a huge sales force would market that product. Nowadays, the industry is much more focused on specialty products targeted to smaller market with fewer sales reps. Other trend is generics and how the industry is evolving around them. Orphan drugs are hard to market, but these developments are an opportunity for us because PharMaCon has the expertise to know who to reach and how to do it.

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