

Ivelisse Casillas CEO, PharMaCon



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PharMaCon is a marketing, communications and advertising agency specialized in the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry for the Latin American and Hispanic US market. CEO and founder, Ivelisse Casillas, explains the advantages of being a pharma and healthcare-focused company, and their strategy to conquer the US Hispanic market.

Why should pharma companies come to PharMaCon to design their marketing campaigns?

First of all, we are specialized in healthcare and life sciences. This year we are celebrating our 20th anniversary, which means that we have over two decades developing that expertise, creating campaigns from scratch or adaptations from other languages and regions. The approval process of such campaigns is critical for advertisers and something that agencies not specialized in healthcare have a hard time doing. Without the experience, you could end up waiting up to three years to have a campaign approved. PharMaCon has the expertise and people that know how to navigate the medical, legal and compliance aspects. We know how to develop and create effective strategies and messages; one of the fundamental aspects in this industry is not that you have to be always creative, but that you always have to be compliant while being creative. Clients are sometimes too focused on the tactics and can get lost in what they need, we guide them in the right strategic direction. It is a complex market at the end of the day.

You mentioned that you can significantly reduce the time to get approval for a campaign, how do you do it?

We can reduce the time to a few months. It is a long process because you have to present and get approval from different committees. In our case, we not only have to get approval from the Puerto Rican group but also from compliance, medical and legal departments in the United States. Then it has to be approved by public relations and communications. Coordinating that process and implementing the changes is not an easy task.

Pharma Health Group describes itself as an integrated healthcare communications agency. What does that mean and why is it important?

I think is one of the industries within communications that need integration the most. Most of the time, we are talking to the patients because they are, at the end of the day, the most important audience of our campaigns. The tricky part is that the patient is not alone in the process, he is in what we call the patient journey. That means that the patient has interactions with a physician, the pharmacist, the healthcare insurance, the caregiver at home and the family. Our campaigns try to talk to all of them, integrate them, in a sense. We have to make sure that the message is complete and that we have fair balance.

What is the role of technology in implementing an integrated communications strategy?

The digital landscape has changed, but pharmaceuticals are still dependent on traditional media because a good proportion of the target audience is still consuming it. The digital platforms for pharma are still in development because it works mostly one way: from the company to patients. That is because regulations limit the ways that pharma companies can contact patients and consumers. PharMaCon is present with some products and limitations at the moment. Awareness campaigns, for example, are more flexible and do take advantage of digitalization, but branded messages have to adhere to high standards. Most of the companies are more rigorous than the FDA itself just to make sure that everything is in line. As you can see, compliance is critical to our business.

What have been the key trends in pharmaceutical marketing?

We have been moving from primary care to specialized products. We are also moving into niches where the picture is completely different. The distribution channel is through specialized pharmacies and most of the time there is another player like a nurse or a health educator in the middle; they are smaller markets with more expensive products, and it is a whole different ballgame. Specialized products are advertising big right now. Since they have more indications, they do a different advertisement for each one. One interesting aspect in pharma advertising is that people shown have to be real patients and not just actors, and if they do, they have to explicitly say so.

Hispanics are no longer just a sub-segment of the economy but represent a significant and profitable market across many industries, including healthcare. How are you helping your clients reach out to this population?

We are doing it in two ways. We have an office in Florida that serves the US market. In Puerto Rico we have the experience of creating campaigns for the local market that are then applied to the US mainland Hispanic market. Being present in the US has been a great opportunity for PharMaCon because we carry a competitive edge, we know the FDA regulations, our native language is Spanish, and we are used to working in English. It is a smooth journey for us.

What differentiates the Hispanic healthcare consumer?

The first thing to know about the Hispanic population is that they are not a homogeneous group. It really depends on the region. For example, California, Texas and Arizona are more Mexican and the same ads will probably not work in South Florida where there is a mix of Venezuelans, Cubans, Colombians and Puerto Ricans. We can segment the US Hispanic market in five submarkets. It is a growing demographic segment that will only continue to gain the attention of the pharmaceutical industry.

How successful have you been in your internationalization efforts?

It has not been easy. The markets are very diverse and the campaigns do not always translate. At the moment we are working on a campaign for Latin America and it has taken a lot of time to get everybody on the same page. The needs of the healthcare systems are different. We have opened an office in Colombia, one of the most developed pharma markets in Latin America. I can tell you that they perceive Puerto Ricans as Americans, so we have to gather local talent. In most of Latin America you cannot speak with patients directly but rather reach them through associations or physicians.

What is your plan to position PharMaCon as the leading marketing, communications and advertising agency specialized in the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry for the Latin American and Hispanic US markets?

PharMaCon will be expanding even more to the US Hispanic market in the near future by exporting campaigns. We are also making an effort to enter the consultancy area. I used to be a consultant and I know the industry from the inside. After Hurricane Maria, we have seen a large number of clients calling us to put together reports and presentations. They want our expertise of the local market.

What is the relationship between PharMaCon and Pharma Health Group?

PharMaCon is the original company started in Puerto Rico in 1999; the name stands for Pharmaceutical Marketing Consultants. We began as consultants and moved to become a full-service agency. In 2011 I founded Pharma Health Group in Florida, which focuses more on health than pharma. Pharma Health Group acts as the parent company and comprises both areas, health

and pharma.

What motivated you to start both companies?

I love it. I started because of a personal reason and I used to work for Merck and Glaxo and needed more time to spend with my son. To do it, I started my own business. I am very passionate about the work we do.

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