



**Dear all,**

I'm sitting down to write this having just returned from the DIA Euro meeting in Amsterdam. As always, it was a busy and successful meeting, with many 'themes' of presentations being given at once.

However, this year there were many presentations given around the theme of writing for patients and the lay audience; how risk and benefit should best be communicated to them, and even a whole session about how poorly the information sent to doctors and put inside package leaflets is written. I assumed that these sessions would be tucked away in a broom cupboard somewhere, and that the single other attendee and myself would have a pretty dull time of it, but I was delighted that not only were some of the sessions scheduled for the main auditorium, but that they were extremely well attended and generated lively debates following the presentations. It showed me that there is a real acceptance in the industry that we need to 'do more, better' for patients and prescribers, and that Pharma is very keen to do so. As medical communications

writers, this is music to our ears (and not a new story), but I've returned hopeful and enthusiastic about the future of patient information.

This edition's article, by Jean-Louis Carsol, is a fascinating and brutally honest view of what it's like to make the transition from an academic background (in Jean-Louis' case from a PhD) into the hectic and highly stressed environment of a medical communications agency. Jean-Louis' background and transition is very similar to my own, and although I didn't go straight into an agency, many of his experiences are echoed by my own in the medical communications world of pharmaceutical companies. Jean-Louis has also 'stepped outside' of himself and offers an assessment of the many skills and attributes of someone with a PhD, and how they might equip someone for the world of agency writing. If you've never considered this type of writing before, Jean-Louis' article might help you to decide if it's 'for you' or not.

I hope that you enjoy the section and Jean-Louis' article, and as always, I'd love to hear your thoughts and comments.

Lisa

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## The story of a reboot: from bench to healthcare communications

What can motivate someone with a PhD to become a copywriter in a healthcare communications agency? I think that there are many reasons.

I came across copywriting by accident. I have always been interested in writing, but basic research was my first passion. So I did medical research in academic laboratories and biotech companies for a while. However, as all good things must come to an end, I found myself at that stage in my life where (like many others), I needed to look for a new position, but one that still included science. I already knew that I could not have been a scientific writer in its strictest meaning, the proximity to basic research being too frustrating.

I had joined a regulatory consulting company that assisted in the design and implementation of regulatory strategies for the development and registration of new healthcare products. While working on a project, I could not help thinking about what the biotech's researchers could have done or could do to answer the questions they had raised. I could not help my mind wandering to research.

I needed a smooth transition from research to writing, but at the same time to something not too closely connected to basic research.

The outlines of my new career were blurry, and it was a headhunter who helped me to clarify my horizon. She explained that there was a job that combined science, more precisely medicine, and writing: healthcare communications agency copywriter!

Arriving in the world of healthcare communications agencies was like discovering a New World. First, my coworkers were the Director of (International) Medical Strategies, Art Directors, Creative Executives, Digital Specialists, Account Directors, Account Management Executives and so on. All people and jobs I had never heard of before, and people from different backgrounds, experience, and expertise. Finally, and most importantly, I also now had a responsibility to provide services to a Client: the pharmaceutical company.

## **A new biotope: the healthcare communications agency**

Healthcare communications agencies are strategic communication partners with pharmaceutical companies. They provide advertising, promotion, and strategic guidance for the pharmaceutical industry; their targets are healthcare professionals and patients.

Another definition is that healthcare communications agencies 'provide consultancy services to the pharmaceutical industry to help raise awareness of medicines via education and promotion'.<sup>1</sup> There are various 'services'. In addition to 'traditional' advertising, they can include medical education, events, and public relations (PR), market research, and digital communications.

With the development of the World Wide Web and devices such as smart phones and tablets, more and more agencies have integrated digital channels into the heart of their offerings. They implement their digital strategy with a multichannel approach: web, mobile, tablet, videos, digital television ... and this means that the writer has to be able to work with all of these formats.

Agencies can be differentiated in several ways. Some focus on specific services (for example, PR and medical education), while others can offer a full range of services.<sup>1</sup> Many agencies are part of a global group offering several services, while others are small independent agencies.

Another way to differentiate agencies is to consider the client. When the agency partners with a pharmaceutical company and works on international accounts, it is called a 'global agency'; if the partnership is with a local subsidiary company, it is called a 'local agency'. In the first case, all of the communication will be in English and delivery is on a global scale. The global agency is responsible for global communication, and in contrast, the local agency follows the global communications strategy and takes ownership of the national communication campaign only.

Why do pharmaceutical companies need an external agency? It may be that extra capacity is needed to supplement internal resources for a short period, or to cover skills that are not going to be used often enough to warrant developing internally.<sup>2</sup>

By working with external agencies, the client can expect to get an objective viewpoint because agencies are free from internal politics, are often more creative at idea generation, and can bring something fresh and different to the project.<sup>2</sup> But before winning a contract from a pharmaceutical company and being paid for the work done, agencies have to 'pitch' or compete for the work. Ideally, the client writes a concise but thorough brief for the pitching agencies. The request can be for a strategic proposal alone (i.e. only strategic thinking is involved), a proposal for some creative concepts (i.e. only creative work is presented), or even for a strategic and creative pitch (i.e. the most complete pitch: the agencies will undertake to understand the market, identify the target group, plan a media strategy, generate ideas, and produce a final creative presentation).<sup>3,4</sup> From the client's perspective, the goal is to select the most suitable proposal and to end up with an agency that is going to add significant value to their brand.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of their individual characteristics, agencies all have one thing in common in the dynamic and fast-paced field of healthcare communications, they all must be creative.

That is where 'people' come into the picture. Terminology may slightly vary between agencies, but the typical agency includes roles of Client Service Director, Account Manager, Medical Director, Director of Medical Strategies, Art Director, Creative Executive, and Medical Copywriter.

Client Service Directors are responsible for coordination of delivery timelines and overall financial management. They negotiate with clients; they can be involved in looking for new business opportunities and promoting the agency to potential clients.<sup>1,5</sup>

Account Managers are in charge of managing individual budgets and timely delivery of specific projects. They prepare cost estimates, coordinate agency activity, and liaise with internal team members and external suppliers.<sup>1,5</sup>

Medical Directors lead the medical writing team. Their responsibilities are for medical, scientific, and regulatory oversight. Similar to the 'Director of Medical Strategies', their duties can also encompass strategic support for the pharmaceutical company. Medical Directors are also involved in

new business pitches and have frequent consultation with global key opinion leaders and community healthcare professionals.

Creative Executives are responsible for the creative work produced for accounts, and the art director is the overall lead for all creative elements.<sup>5</sup>

Copywriters, along with art directors and creative executives, are considered part of the creative team.

### **Are people with a PhD up to the task?**

In other words, are the research skills that PhD holders have developed useful for healthcare communications? I think so – at least, in part.

Having gained a university education, we have learned to study by ourselves. We can easily adapt to new fields. As former researchers, we usually have a knack for grasping biotechnology-derived drugs. So scientists are certainly better equipped to understand ‘personalised medicine’ – the future of medicine.

However, although we have excellent research skills, we are usually unprepared for the marketing side of communications. We are accustomed to evaluating scientific information, knowing that science is not black and white, but sometimes grey. In healthcare communications, greyness is not ideal! However, we are able to produce evidence-based arguments based on clinical data, and as part of the team in the agency, the scientific or medical data we pick out can help to strengthen and add credibility to the brand strategy. This makes all the difference! Data are presented in a way that communicates more effectively – in a way that differentiates the client’s drug from its competitors. This does not mean that, for example, safety concerns associated with a drug are disguised or hidden. However, it does mean that ‘a copywriter is a salesperson behind a computer’.<sup>5</sup>

Another important aspect of our work at the agency is that it is deadline driven and often involves work on several projects at a time. We have to be able to put concentrated effort and considerable energy into our work. In my opinion, as former researchers, we are usually prepared for such tasks. We are used to conducting several research projects in parallel, working hard, and coping with work-related stress. Nevertheless, there may be some differences between research and agency-generated stress. The obvious difference is the fact that the stresses we endure in the lab are often generated by ourselves. In the agency, deadlines primarily come from the client. We **have** to deliver on time – a kind of stress which I find more manageable.

Agency copywriters must also be flexible – open to experimentation, new ideas, and external evaluation. We have to be curious, investigative, reflective, and examine things from several angles. All these characteristics feature quite readily in most scientists.

Building relationships with clients and external experts is a part of the copywriter’s life. And this can be a real challenge sometimes. As previously mentioned, the agency copywriter is also a salesperson. The way you tell a story is therefore crucial. Empathising with healthcare professionals or patients, their needs, and the world in which they live is key.<sup>5,6</sup> The goal is to encourage them to try the drug or the service, and to give them sound reasons to do so. For that, the writer needs to write as if they are the target audience, ‘being in the prospect’s shoes’.<sup>6</sup> This ability to create ‘a dialogue with an other, and implied reader’<sup>6</sup> is certainly essential in writing – and more generally in communication.

That empathy is gained through time and is usually not in our backpack when we, PhDs, step into this New World.

### **What is the copywriter’s job at the agency?**

What strikes you first at the agency is the wide range of materials you may be required to produce. You will encounter them gradually throughout your career, so it takes time to cover the diversity of copywriting assignments.

They can include communication documents such as slide kits for key opinion leaders, monographs, brochures, details aids, posters, direct mail, symposium materials, and occasionally press releases – all materials that require the writer to cite references and to be scientifically accurate.

By contrast, brand books (also called brand guidelines) are typical of ‘global materials’ specifically designed for the pharmaceutical company’s employees to help them understand and ‘buy into’ the brand. The content is less scientific. It essentially explains what the brand stands for, how it is expressed, and how the creative elements fit together in all communications.

With the appearance of digital communications, you may be more and more involved in creating content for videos and websites, tools that can have a big impact on marketing.

Although uncommon, producing peer-reviewed articles is also possible. They may be in the form of so-called ‘white papers’, which allow the pharmaceutical company to present data and verifiable

sources that support whatever claims they are making.

Every piece of work has a preferred writing style. So knowing some basic rules or techniques about writing effective copy is pertinent. In the end, whatever the material, it has to be as effective as possible, which means that definition of the target reader has to be very specific. Becoming familiar with your target audience is essential: knowing their habits, behaviours, likes, and dislikes. Focusing on them, and not you, is the secret to gaining their attention and trust. It is the secret to achieving your brand marketing goals.

Besides writing, the copywriter is also involved in other activities. In fact, producing communication materials is possible only if a brand and communications strategy has already been developed. Materials are written in a way consistent with the pharmaceutical company's image and the brand strategy. Part of a copywriter's job is to build this communications strategy with the Client Service Directors, Medical Directors, and Director of Medical Strategies at the agency. The copywriter brings medical and scientific knowledge into brainstorming sessions. Once the product positioning is defined, key messages can be developed and will be used for all marketing communications. In this way, the copywriter helps to develop the communication and brand strategy, and the publication plan.

These activities aim to ensure that new and improved drugs are added to 'a doctor's mental formula'.<sup>1</sup> A copywriter's job is to keep an eye on developments in any given scientific field, to recognise the 'big players' (or major competitors) in the therapeutic area, to assess the strategies used by the client's competitors, and to identify opportunities that will allow communication of the client's information.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, one of the most thrilling and sometimes uncomfortable experiences a copywriter has to face is participating in a pitch; especially when the pitch is for new business, as this is the way that

agencies win most of their business. Why is this a thrill? Certainly because participating in a pitch allows you to experience the thrill of competition, but also because the thrill of a pitch is in its preparation and presentation. And the copywriter is involved in both stages.

## The sweet switch?

I was surprised to see how my scientific skills were transferable and useful to life as an agency copywriter. Besides the glamorous image, it is important to note that agency life is hectic. There are numerous and various projects to handle at once, and deadlines are always tight. Becoming an agency copywriter is maybe not an ideal fit for all PhDs, but it is definitively an option you should consider.

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