

Going Hollywood:

GSK Supports a Documentary Film

In what some see as an unlikely pairing, GlaxoSmithKline has partnered with the Creative Coalition to develop a documentary about obesity.

BY AMANDA EHRLICH

» In early 2010, GlaxoSmithKline announced an unlikely partnership – the pharmaceutical giant shared its plans to partner with the Creative Coalition, a non-profit public advocacy group, to develop a documentary about the obesity crisis in America.

The pairing quickly grabbed media attention, from an article in *The New York Times* to widespread notice among bloggers and pharmaceutical marketers. Many lauded the pharmaceutical company for directing focus to a major health concern in the United States, while others expressed outrage by the effort, noting that the involvement in the obesity film project by a so-called “Big Pharma” firm (and one with a weight-loss product on the OTC market) was likely not much more than a veiled attempt at a slick marketing campaign for the over-the-counter drug *alli*.

In an interview with *OTC Perspectives*, however, GSK vice president of marketing for *alli*, Rachel Ferdinando, noted that the partnership between *alli* and the Creative Coalition is purely for the sake of social education. Ferdinando said the purpose of the partnership is to “raise awareness of the obesity crisis” and to examine the causes of overeating, which is leading to this serious health issue. Another goal of the project is to “drive an educational voice” and to use this education to “bring aware-



ness that then brings about behavior change,” she said.

CREATIVE CONTROL

Ferdinando also noted that GSK is not expected to play a role in the development of the documentary. If *alli* is portrayed in the film, whether positively or negatively, GSK will accept the outcome. “The Creative Coalition will have full creative control of the project,” she added. As for the questions raised about whether this documentary will serve as a marketing campaign for *alli*, Ferdinando denied these claims, but she said she “welcomes the negative attention” because the attention “gets the debate going.” She also noted that any revenue generated from the film (with respect to GSK’s share) will be donated to charity, a fact often omit-

ted from blogger’s posts about the project.

As for the unconventional strategy, Ferdinando herself noted the unprecedented nature of the pairing. “It’s a first step towards something very unique in the sense that we are partnering with an advocacy group and focusing on a social issue,” she explained. “This a breakthrough initiative.”

Other health care marketers seem to agree. Jim Joseph, president and partner of Lippe Taylor Brand Communications, told *OTC Perspectives* that he believes the *alli*-Creative Coalition partnership is a step in the right direction. “Consumers have grown increasingly skeptical of institutions, healthcare, and brands,” he said. Thus, Joseph maintained, “an authentic, altruistic move to make

an unbranded, moving piece about people who struggle with their weight is right in line with consumer sentiment. Don't push products. Don't talk about how great you are as a brand. But instead immerse yourself in people's lives and add value. Join the struggle and then maybe you can offer a solution."

SALES SUPPORT

As a solution for the over-weight population, alli has not quite lived up to pre-launch expectations. The drug was launched in the U.S. market in 2007 with a \$150 million ad campaign. GSK partnered with country singer Winona Judd, utilizing her as a spokeswoman for the brand. In January of 2010, around the time of the Creative Coalition announcement, alli unveiled a new string of advertisements with the tagline "Eat Healthier, Live Happier" from Arnold. This latest campaign represents the last creative work from Arnold, which lost the brand as a client to TBWA last year. The ad budget for alli is among the largest in the OTC sector, with TNS data showing Q1-Q3 2009 spending of \$65 million. Global sales of alli in 2009 totaled 203 million Euros, or about \$270 million. In the U.S. market, alli sales totaled just under 96 million Euros or \$125 million.

NAMING A DIRECTOR

To give the documentary a solid footing, the Creative Coalition selected acclaimed director Barry Levinson, of Rain Main and Wag the Dog fame, to "explore America's burgeoning obesity crisis in a new documentary." It will join a series of films in the organization's "The Spotlight Initiative, a series of independent films with messages that make a positive difference in the

world." In a news release, Levinson said, "The evolution of the obesity crisis in America is a fascinating and compelling human story. It's the hidden enemy within our borders that no one talks about."

A few lines later in the statement, the Coalition noted that GSK would fully fund the effort, but complete creative control remained with Levinson. This statement was enough to cause concern among some in the media. In a New York Times article, Theodore Braun, an associate professor at the University of Southern California, said he was "skeptical that this won't be an infomercial disguised as an independent documentary. I can't imagine that a

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company as legally and rhetorically sophisticated as GlaxoSmithKline is going to leave its interests unprotected." Similarly, *Los Angeles Times* blogger Jeannine Stein expressed her skepticism over the project, saying her "enthusiasm quickly dimmed" when she "saw who was funding the project: GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare."

OVERCOMING MISTRUST

Stu Klein, a managing director and

executive vice president at advertising agency Draft FCB, noted that perhaps one reason for the skepticism is that, in general, pharma marketing techniques have left consumers with a sense of mistrust. Klein said he believes the idea of partnering with a social advocacy group might just be the next step in communication for pharma marketers: "In the current regulatory environment, where branded messages are increasingly counter-balanced with lengthening litanies of fair balance, marketers and their communications agencies will be challenged to seek alternate methods to motivate prospective patients to take action," he noted. "As pharma has become increasingly conservative in its approach to CME by distancing themselves from educational grants, the idea of translating this approach to patient education seems wise."

Debbie Treise, PhD, associate dean of graduate studies and professor of advertising at the University of Florida, is more cautious in evaluating GSK's motives. "There is no question in my mind that this is anything but a marketing tactic." However, she contended, that's not necessarily a bad thing if done correctly. "If it's a blatant product placement then [it's not a step in the right direction]. If it's ostensibly aimed at other things people can do in addition to alli then maybe. This will be a tricky one for them."

What will this pairing mean for the alli brand? Whether or not the documentary will bring in added sales for alli remains to be seen, though public opinion of the brand has the potential to see gains if the film is done right. <<