

The Power of Brand Positioning

The inside story on how one marketing team worked with its advertising agency to build the powerhouse Mucinex brand name using smart positioning, effective media planning and the Mr. Mucus icon.

BY MARK TOSH

» Did anyone really expect the green, slimy Mr. Mucus character to capture the average consumer's fancy with such an overwhelmingly positive response?

Well, yes, a few people at Adams Respiratory Therapeutics had this intuition back in the middle of the decade as they prepared to launch a \$25 million ad campaign for the newly approved OTC product Mucinex. One of those was chief operating officer Bob Casale, who had joined the company in March 2004 as Adams (now part of Reckitt Benckiser after a \$2.3 billion acquisition in late 2007) was about to move ahead with the biggest launch in its history.

"There was a strategy with the concept of mucus that was very differentiating for our product," recalls Casale. While initial white-board quantitative testing of the concept produced below-average results, Casale says the brand team was convinced that the ground-breaking concept had merit and could touch consumers in a way that they had not seen before in the upper-respiratory category. "We were determined and we just kept working to fine tune this 'mucus' strategy," he says. "We figured out that there was something missing in the execution that needed to really bring it home and make it OK for consumers to think about and talk about mucus. No one really had talked about mucus in the OTC upper respiratory aisle before."

But this is getting a little bit ahead of the story behind the creation of Mr. Mucus and the marketing of an almost \$400 million line of Mucinex products. First, a little background on Mucinex, extended-release guaifenesin and the FDA review process.

It was early this decade when the previous management of Adams Laboratories went to the FDA seeking approval for 600 and 1200-mg Mucinex long-acting guaifenesin tablets as a prescription-only product. After reviewing the data, including the ingredient monograph, the FDA granted approval, but allowed Mucinex to be sold as an over-the-counter drug. This caught the Adams management by surprise, but it also opened an opportunity for the brand to grab a big chunk of the OTC cough/cold/allergy market. The original plan was to get Mucinex approved Rx, and to have the unapproved guaifenesin products removed from the market, leaving an exclusive market position for Mucinex as an approved Rx product.

"That all worked perfectly, except the FDA said since you bridged to the OTC monograph for safety, this is an OTC product," Casale recalls. Adams moved ahead with Mucinex (with guaifenesin), putting the prod-



Bob Casale, CEO of Scerene Healthcare

uct on the shelf in box that was much smaller than the current packaging. A patient taking a script to the pharmacy would be told by the pharmacist that extended-release guaifenesin was no longer an Rx product, but rather an OTC item known as Mucinex. If all of the Rx business was switched to OTC at Mucinex pricing, the market would have been worth roughly \$120 million. And the company was successful converting about one-half of the Rx business

before launching any advertising, or just by having Mucinex on the shelf and promoting the product to professionals.

However, when Casale, a former VP of marketing at Warner-Lambert, and a team of new marketers (including Marylou Arnett, also formerly of Warner-Lambert) arrived at Adams, the strategy shifted dramatically from the \$120 million previous Rx-only business. “The growth opportunity for Mucinex was really to break into the \$3 billion upper-respiratory OTC market. That’s what we decided we wanted to go after, this much bigger market,” he says. [Note also that Mucinex also intended to continue targeting the \$120 million former Rx market by retaining a team of sales reps detailing Mucinex in front of doctors.]

Casale was certainly familiar with the upper-respiratory market, one of the markets he oversaw during his time at Warner-Lambert with brands such as Sudafed and Benadryl. Following Warner-Lambert’s acquisition by Pfizer Inc., he served as vice president, strategic planning and business development for the Consumer Healthcare Division. Casale currently is CEO of the start-up OTC venture Scerene Healthcare and also serves as non-executive chairman of Topaz Pharmaceuticals, a pediatric specialty pharmaceutical company.

He also was not alone on the team that drove the Mucinex family of products to such sales success. “There were many people involved with creating the strategy and driving the brand,” he explains. There was a strong brand team assembled headed by M’lou Arnett, an in-house advertising agency headed by Steve Graff and Matt Leung, a professional sales force headed by John Thievon

and a trade sales team headed by Bill Fogarty. The success of Mucinex had many mothers and fathers.

A CONFUSING CATEGORY

A review of the cough/cold category at this time revealed a confusing array of products and symptoms. Consumers talk about colds, stuffy noses, flu-like and even allergy symptoms when they have a respiratory problem. On the shelf, most of the treatments are similar in makeup with the same ingredients just mixed differently. “People really don’t know what they have,” Casale explains. “Do I have a sinus infection, do I have a cold, do I have an allergy or a runny nose,” he asks rhetorically. “No one knows what they have. What we wanted to do is to simplify the choice for them and to put the focus on mucus, because mucus is the common symptom to all of these ailments.”

It’s important to note, also, that the Mucinex brand name was developed before the “Mucinex in, mucus out” positioning. But the two worked “hand-in-hand,” Casale says. “One of the indications is that Mucinex thins and loosens mucus, so there was a root for the brand name.... We were not so brilliant that we said, ‘What a positioning, here’s the brand name.’ The brand name came first, and then we developed the positioning.”

In the focus-group testing around the word “mucus,” however, the results were not promising. The marketers knew they had to develop a single-minded concept of mucus that was highly memorable and which would present “mucus” in an engaging way. They were not ready to give up on this idea, and so they pitched the account with this mucus concept to three advertising agen-

cies. One of the agencies – Torre Lazur McCann – came up with the execution of creating the Mr. Mucus character to carry the “mucus” message. The first execution was quite different than the Mr. Mucus character today, but the seed of this idea was there. The brand team tested the concept animatics and found that consumers were very irritated by the mucus idea but the recall was off the charts.

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“Active engagement was very high, and the consumers were using active words to describe the commercial,” Casale says. “So the challenge post-animatic testing was to make the character likable, but not so likable that when he got ejected you had any feelings for him. We used Jackie Gleason from The Honey-mooners as the model.”

There were other elements of the Mucinex positioning, as well. Among the objectives of the advertising was to educate consumers that mucus is the “root cause” of upper respiratory problems, while also positioning Mucinex as the only 12-hour FDA-approved expectorant that relieves chest congestion while making coughs more productive by thinning and loosening mucus. The core of the ads were single-mindedly focused on mucus and downplayed the specific symptoms, simplifying what consumers found to be a confusing category.

At the same time, the Mucinex team maintained a 125-person detail force to keep the brand's name in front of physicians, primarily to ensure that just because the product moved to OTC status that doctors were still aware of it. The ideal Mucinex consumer would be one who saw the Mr. Mucus television ad and when he/she went to the doctor with respiratory problems mentioned the brand – and the “thins mucus” message – to the physician. “By this time, the doctor has been detailed and tells the patient Mucinex is a great product. That’s the best endorsement you can have, the professional endorsement, and we were off to the races from there because the product performed well and consumer satisfaction was very high,” Casale says.

‘DIFFERENTIATED POSITIONING’

The initial advertising campaign with Mr. Mucus and the “Mucinex in, mucus out” positioning debuted in November 2004, including spots on the surprise hit TV show of that season, “Desperate Housewives.” (Women, who make the majority of drugstore purchases and oversee the health-related issues of most families, were the target audience for Mucinex.) The results were astonishing, with sales increasing roughly four-fold in the three-month period that followed the advertising launch. “We started working on the positioning and advertising in April and the first commercial aired Nov. 15. We spent about \$25 million that season through mid-March, with the bulk spent on television,” Casale notes.

The key to Mucinex’s fast-paced success, according to Casale, was its “smart, differentiated positioning” that was supported with a sufficient advertising budget, while the brand team remained “true” to the positioning it had established. “If you don’t have that solid positioning and a way to communicate it, all of the effort deciding where to place media dollars is just noise,” he says. “It’s just stuff around the edges of being efficient.”

Yet, Casale acknowledges that there are more efficient media options for reaching consumers today than there were five years ago, but he still believes “the media mix is a carrier and not a driver” and that a less than optimal positioning is almost impossible to fix. He adds, “When launching a product, marketers should spend the bulk of their time getting the positioning right the first time. No media mix will save it if it the message is not single-minded, differentiated and compelling.”

One of the many lessons Casale has learned in his distinguished marketing career is the confidence to rely on his – and his team’s – judgment. “Marketers sometimes rely on market research too much, and sometimes it’s used as a crutch. We asked consumers about ‘mucus’ and it wasn’t something they were going to talk about.... There’s a lot to be said for brainstorming with smart people and coming up with ideas that you can probe with consumers. But too often today marketers rely on testing as a substitute for judgment and prudent risk taking. On Mucinex, we had to move fast and we had the luxury to rely on good judgment, largely because we were a small company with a lot of good experienced people.” <<

BUILDING A MEDIA PLAN

Once a product’s positioning is developed, tested and perfected, the next step in a well-crafted marketing plan is to fully address the media plan. Different products require a different mix of media channels, of course, but no product should under-estimate the importance of the old-standby television in a media plan, according to Robert Casale, chief executive of Scerene Healthcare Inc. and a former lead marketer on the Mucinex line for Adams Respiratory (now part of Reckitt Benckiser).

“If I was launching a product today that had national distribution and good copy,” he says, “I would still spend the bulk of my money on TV. It’s the best way to reach a big audience fast.” Television is quick and efficient, he adds, “albeit an expensive choice for some OTC/healthcare products.”

Casale also believes there’s a role for print, particularly early in the launch phase “when you are trying to get more depth of message” and to reach a specific target, such as women in the 25-54 age range (which was the Mucinex target). “There is a role for magazine advertising.... I wouldn’t rely on it as my sole source, but I think it is a good adjunct to a media plan, which is heavy on TV advertising.”

Among the new media options, Casale says he believes OTC products should be active in online reach and search marketing. However, he is generally not in favor of banner and pop-up ads for OTC products. For example, for most OTC products, the amount of people a marketer needs to reach would make these online options “on the margin at best,” he says. “For low-price, high-volume products, you are inevitably going to waste some money, but you have to reach the masses.”