

By Robin Robinson

Browse a few pharma marketing agency websites and you can learn about the number of awards won, the big name clients, the years in business, the expertise; but where is the link for “Good at Relationships?” One of the most important factors in a successful campaign coming to fruition is how well the client and agency work together. Forging productive relationships is both a learned and an innate skill and “clicking” with your agency partners is one of the most important ingredients to success. Relationship experts say factors involved in successful relationships include trust, honesty, respect, and communication. That must be why these three client/agency duos have hit it off and hit it out of the park in their working relationships. As they outline what has worked for them and how they achieved success working together, it is apparent that these power couples all have something in common: trust, honesty, respect, and great communication skills.



BRAND BONDS

Trust is the glue of agency/client relationships, and communication is the foundation.

► Equal Partners



The Duo:

GREG THOMAS

Marketing and Communications Leader,
ITF Pharma

RONNIE ABEL

VP, Account Director, Calcium

From the very beginning of their partnership, Ronnie Abel and Greg Thomas hit the ground running, working in lockstep to launch a new product called Tiglutik, ITF Pharma’s first NDA, approved in September 2018 for the treatment of ALS. Tiglutik is a liquid oral suspension of an existing drug, riluzole, that has been around in tablet form (brand name Rilutek) for about 20 years. As ALS progresses, it becomes difficult for patients to take medication in pill form, so Tiglutik fills an unmet need in that patient population.

The two men and their teams worked

ITF Pharma, a U.S.-based specialty pharmaceutical company and a subsidiary of Italfarmaco, a privately held European specialty pharmaceutical company, launched Tiglutik, its first U.S. commercial product, last October. Tiglutik is an oral suspension for the treatment of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). It was approved in September 2018 — 10 days ahead of schedule — and launched a month later.

together day in and day out to complete the launch within seven months, start to finish. When the final website properties went live after midnight on a very long Friday in September, Ronnie and Greg texted each other congratulatory messages in the wee hours of the next morning. They made perfect working partners, and soon became friends through the process.

As the launch of Tiglutik neared, Greg’s wife gave birth to their second child, and Ronnie had his back, leading both teams while Greg was out. Both men describe their relationship the same way — as a balanced relationship with a sense of equality on both sides that allows them to trust in one another.

“Success comes from both sides and to build something you can count on, you need a partner who’s going to allow you to run with an idea, trust in you, but also reciprocate, and most certainly, this was that type of joint effort on the launch,” Ronnie says.

Berwyn, Pa.-based ITF Pharma is a small company, with just eight in-house full-time employees and 10 strategic account field managers.

“I am a department of one and when we were really in the throes of the launch, there were just two of us, my colleague and me, and Calcium became a true extension of our marketing team,” Greg adds. “We relied on the agency as heavily as we would any full-time employee in the office.”

Greg says ITF chose Calcium as its agency partner not just for the concepts the team brought to the pitch table, or for the obvious dynamism of the team, but because he could “just tell” these were people he could work well with.

“We knew that we would be working closely every single day for months, and we were looking for the same type of people who we would want to work with in our office, face to face, every day,” he says. “The clear answer

was Calcium, because Ronnie and his team were those people.”

Greg describes the Calcium team as “wildly flexible, understanding and hard-working,” and that’s exactly what was needed to drive the success of this launch.

Ronnie holds the same mutual respect for ITF. “ITF has a solid understanding of its mission, vision, and value and it is a company that puts patients first and puts treatments out in the world and into the marketplace that allow patients to have a better quality of life,” he says. “These are values that we truly can hang our hats on as marketers as well, and we’re only as good as our industry team and the way we work together.”

One initiative from the Calcium team stands out in Greg’s mind: The team wanted to better understand the ALS market, so they spent time shadowing ALS patients getting treatment at a regional ALS clinic. “They spent a whole day at the clinic with the lead neurologist and her team, and to me that just shows the dedication to this brand, to this product because they could have easily just locked themselves away in a room and developed some really nice looking creative and some catchy taglines and nice promo pieces,” he says. “But they went out and entrenched themselves into this world and to me this builds an incredible amount of faith and trust in the team. They put time into their schedule to walk in the shoes of these multidisciplinary ALS team members and that’s pretty amazing,” Greg says.

The immersion was an extremely beneficial exercise for the team, Ronnie says, because it allowed them to connect emotionally with the campaign and humanize the Teglutik brand. In turn, this helped them create the right content, the right artwork, and other elements so that the deliverables made sense to the patients who are impacted by ALS and their caregiver team.

The Challenge

Greg is a firm believer in the importance of digital conversations and channels, so when it was proposed that Teglutik be launched with only a splash landing page, he pushed back, hard. “The conversation that’s happening on digital channels is really, really important,” he says. “We found that when people with ALS lose their voice, the true ability to speak, they find it on social media and online. So they become patient advocates or fundraisers or educators for other people living with ALS and their caregivers. For these reasons, I felt we had to have full websites up on both the HCP and the patient side at launch, especially since this is the first advancement in riluzole therapy in 20-plus years. People with ALS and

Cultivating a Good Business Relationship

Our marketing duos recommend first steps in creating strong bonds for agencies and clients.



RONNIE ABEL

Calcium

The very first thing that needs to be done is to take down all the walls and to be honest with one another. Greg and I just shoot straight and I think that works wonders when it comes to figuring out how far you can trust somebody.

It’s important to take all of the industry jargon and all of the fluff out and just be very real with one another. This allows each of us to say, ‘I like this, I don’t like this, or I appreciate what you’re doing, but we should tweak it.’ This leads to flexibility and being nimble because we can respect the criticism and keep moving.



GREG THOMAS

ITF Pharma

Trust your gut in terms of who you feel comfortable doing business with and the results will certainly show. When your entire business is reliant on a successful launch of a product, it has to be right and if you don’t have that open and honest relationship with your marketing, advertising, or creative partner, you aren’t going to be able to get to where you need to go in the right way. It’s important to be comfortable with who you’re working with. There needs to be honesty and openness.



KYMM BROWN

TerSera Therapeutics

I think the first step is establishing clear expectations. For me this includes making sure everyone assumes the best of intentions. I think this is

huge, and it is important to hold each other to this assumption and then build trust with your agency. This leads to respect, honesty, and partnering, which wraps up into open communication. Trust has to be earned on both sides by establishing clear expectations and making sure that there’s open communication. This is the best way to start to forge a great relationship.

Also, having members of the agency team onsite, being physically present adds to the relationship. One of the things that really developed our relationship early on with closerlook was that Allison Davis was always in a cube somewhere in the building. I didn’t have to text or call; I knew she was down the hall. I think her being in the same workspace was huge in building the relationship too.



ALLISON DAVIS

closerlook

I think the first step is figuring out communication styles and just getting to know each other a bit. Everyone is so different in how they work, how they communicate, and how they handle stress, so it takes time and being together to really understand how to best work together. Knowing each other on a personal level helps too, understanding interests and each other’s life stories helps to build empathy and trust because you are connecting on a human level as well as on the projects and work at hand.

I think with a new relationship the agency needs to be comfortable being direct and asking the client for feedback from the start. What have they liked in the past with other agencies? What have they been frustrated by? Setting a stage that everyone is comfortable with to initiate those discussions is important right from the start.

their caregivers and healthcare professionals and their staffs were going to be very eager to learn more about this product.

“I remember the faces around the table at Calcium when we were talking about timelines for our web launch and I said, ‘we have to have full websites on the HCP and the

patient side ready for launch,” Greg recalls. “You could have heard a pin drop in the room. Our project manager looked over at Ronnie and Ronnie looked at her and said, ‘We’ll get it done.’”

Soon after that, the teams learned that the FDA approved Teglutik 10 days early. Usually

considered a positive result, the early approval did shorten the timeline, requiring the websites to be live in a matter of days, rather than in the originally anticipated two weeks.

Later that week, Ronnie, his team, and Greg were up until after midnight on a Friday getting the websites readied for launch and in play. “We made it happen,” Ronnie says. “That was a heavy task and when there’s a will,

there’s a way — but it has to be a united front, and both Greg and his team and our group at Calcium were able to stick together and really crank it out and get it done. It definitely was a unified team effort.”

Over time, the relationship between the two teams morphed into one big brand family. “We relied on one another,” Greg says. “We celebrated successes together, we reflected on

shortcomings, and together we figured out ways to overcome whatever hurdles we were facing. We always found a way to move past things and I think this is really important. This is a testament to the type of agency that Calcium is, and a testament to the kind of team we are here. We don’t just choose a transactional partner, we want that true relationship, and that’s what Calcium provided us.”

► Just Getting Started



The Duo

ASHLEY WINDUS

Director, Marketing and Corporate Strategy, Edwards Lifesciences

LEE KRAUSS

Managing Director, Client Services, Carling Communications

A new role, a new product, a new relationship gets off to a great start right out of the gate. Lee Krauss and Ashley Windus clicked the very first time they met, not just in terms of personality but also in terms of strategic preferences and communication styles. Their ideas were already aligned before they even met, so it was a natural transition to become agency/client partners and to meld their teams into one.

“The relationship that Ashley and I are building runs parallel to the relationship that Edwards Lifesciences is building,” Lee says. “Ashley recently took on this new role in a new category and created a new team. The agency relationship with Carling is also brand new. But when we came together, right away we had a very meaningful fast start.”

While Ashley is new to Edwards, the world of medical device, and the HCP space, she has worked in many cross-multiple therapeutic areas in biotech, such as for Biogen in hemophilia and MS; for Shire across medical diseases, internal medicine, gastroenterology, oncology, and hemophilia; and in rare genetic diseases.

“It was so important to me to find an agency partner who had depth of experience in healthcare, but also the ability to think differently because this campaign we’re trying to build for Edwards will be very innovative for

Edwards Lifesciences is a provider of patient-focused medical innovations for structural heart disease, such as transcatheter devices. The company is launching a DTC disease awareness campaign within a narrow timeline — four to six months — to educate and activate structural heart disease patients on appropriate treatment. The campaign will extend to HCPs in the future, but the initial focus is on potential patients and on diagnosed patients and their loved ones.

patients and HCPs while being brand new to Edwards,” Ashley says. “We needed to find an agency that was nimble, that could grow with us, and that understood the unique aspects of the situation we’re dealing with.”

Despite having just met and all the newness of the situation, Ashley and Lee found it extremely easy to communicate, perhaps because Ashley set the ground rules right from the start.

“I made it clear I was looking for a team and specifically agency leadership that would be able to communicate openly and honestly from the very beginning,” she says. “I explained that there was a lot at stake. This was not only a new initiative for Edwards, a new initiative for patients in the space, but also something that we needed to move on very quickly because of the significance of under-treatment and lack of awareness for this particular disease and that’s exactly what Lee and his team brought to the table, an ability to communicate quickly and accurately so that we could move forward as effectively as possible.”

The teams are trying to accomplish in four to six months what normally takes up to 18 months: gather insights, build a campaign, get everything launched and out the door — pronto.

Lee didn’t hesitate to take up the charge, and began building a team that would perfectly fit Ashley’s business needs.

“I wanted to create a tailored approach for Ashley and hence, Edwards, which so far has worked,” Lee says. “We built a team very specific to what was going to be needed in the time when it will be needed.”

One of the things that appealed to Ashley about Carling was that they had a deep enough bench that they could put together a customized team for the job, and they had access

to other people throughout their network to bring in additional expertise as needed.

Ashley notes that Lee’s team also shared her sense of urgency to accomplish the things that needed to get done.

“The way we get the work done, and the mission that we’re trying to achieve, all of that together just lends itself well to the relationship that we developed so quickly,” she says.

Lee says Ashley and her team allowed Carling to work fast, by trusting the team early on to do its part.

That trust was empowering and motivating for the Carling team and, therefore, they worked hard to get tasks done quickly and effectively.

“I see a level of confidence and experience that Lee brings to the table, which makes my team feel very comfortable and confident in working with them and truly, they view this as a true partnership,” Ashley says. “We are one team and that’s a different dynamic than I’ve had in previous agency relationships.”

“Ashley’s done a really great job inviting us in,” Lee says. “She has always asked for our opinion and what do we think, and that’s truly let us help form the direction with her and with the team.”

The Challenge

Edwards Lifesciences is 100% on board with creating a disease awareness campaign, but it’s a new concept for the company, and there were many questions and multiple stakeholders involved. The teams together had to determine the type of strategy, the execution plan, and how to deploy something that’s brand new to the organization.

“It’s a new way of thinking for the organization — one that they’re passionate and excited about,” Ashley says. “There’s this huge

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educational opportunity not just externally on the disease state, but internally within Edwards on what this looks like and how we execute something like this.”

The solution was to bring Lee and his team onboard to meet with all the business units involved, such as legal, regulatory, and corporate affairs.

Ashley feels it was important to form relationships to make sure everyone was heard and able to contribute their expertise.

“That’s why from our review committees, to our internal communications department, our PR team, corporate brand team, and stakeholders in the business units that lead sales and marketing for our products, all are considered critical stakeholders as we build a campaign that’s going to support everyone,” she says.

“It’s essential that we build these relationships, and because I view our relationship with Carling as a partnership and the agency

is truly an extension of our team, I wanted to make sure that we gave them the opportunity to meet these stakeholders,” Ashley continues. “Together, we’re bringing Carling’s people into the loop and building this campaign as one team.”

“Making the introductions to those folks so that we could help support them in whatever way possible, and ensuring that everyone is aligned with the approach that we’re taking based on the things that we’re learning in research, has been vitally important to the team,” Lee says.

The relationship extends beyond Ashley and Lee to include how all members on both teams work together. Ashley comments on how open Lee’s creative team has been to receiving feedback from the Edwards’ team, soliciting it almost daily.

“A shining example of how different this partnership is, is the creative team has been so

open in terms of hearing my team’s interpretation of how the interviews in message testing have gone, what resonated with us, how we might want to change the concept,” Ashley says. “Carling opened the door to us being able to see how they’re going through their process so that we can iterate quickly and that lends itself to continuing to build the foundation of trust and confidence that we have.”

Lee says it all stems from a shared passion for the project. Fueling that passion is the proximity of the teams, which enables them to spend time face to face.

The two businesses are located close to each other geographically, so team members can spend time working at either place.

“I think just having that ability to talk whenever we need to, and being aligned has really allowed us to reach some of these milestones that we’re all working toward,” Lee says.

► Growing Together



The Duo

KYMM BROWN

Marketing Director, TerSera Therapeutics

ALLISON DAVIS

Chief Client Officer, closerlook

Kymm Brown and Allison Davis have worked together through many roles, phases, and stages of their careers, from the trenches to the launches. Knowing each other and their individual working styles so well is certainly an advantage for them when working on a project together, but that doesn’t mean that things always go perfectly.

The two have worked together for more than seven years over multiple projects, and both have grown from junior positions to leadership roles, and they have become moms over that time frame. They approach their relationship with a level of honesty to be admired. Using insight communication tools and constructive feedback, they have built an effective working relationship that enables them to tackle any challenge together with a sense of trust and humor.

“We have worked on launches together

TerSera Therapeutics LLC acquires and develops specialty pharmaceutical products with a focus on select therapeutic areas.

and we have been in the trenches and so, Allison has probably seen sides of me that many people have not, and wouldn’t want to,” Kymm quipped.

Like a true friend, Allison will have none of that. “I knew I was going to love Kymm from the start,” she says. “She’s got a great combination of marketing and sales experience, is a confident decision maker, is at times brutally honest, and has a witty and sarcastic sense of humor, which can be a much needed relief when working together on stressful deadlines. I have a ton of respect for her; she was one of my role models as a successful working mom when I first got pregnant with my daughter.”

Kymm credits trust with being the glue for the relationship — specifically in hers and Allison’s but also in any relationship.

“It’s all well and good if a client can say, ‘I’ve launched this many products or I’ve been in marketing for this long’ or on the agency side, ‘look at all the partners we work with and look at all of our awards,’ but trust is personal,” she says.

Part of trusting people is believing in them to do the right thing, or expecting them to do their best, something Kymm calls “assuming the best of intentions.”

“It’s really important to assume the best of intentions of someone and really foster that communication between one another, but it all has to be based on trust,” she says. “When

I first start working with someone, I tell them what I will do and I like them to do that for me, because in the age of digital so many things can get misinterpreted.”

Mutual respect and a true partnership can cultivate an environment where both parties are supporting, empowering, and pushing each other. “There are times the closerlook team will push back on some of the things that I want to do and their suggestions actually make the work better, and there are times where I push on things that they’re doing that I view differently and I think that’s what makes it a partnership and one in which we get the best product,” Kymm says. This is not something that occurs with every agency. “I really respect the team at closerlook because very early on they knew what they were good at and they weren’t afraid to come in and say, ‘we see where you’re coming from but we would recommend this.’ And that was huge for me in building respect for the organization and Allison and the people I worked with.”

Early on in their relationship, Allison learned a valuable lesson from Kymm that she has been able to use throughout all of her business. “Through her direct communication, Kymm let me know that our work wasn’t the only project she was working on at any point in time, so we had to be cognizant of that and not be too aggressive in terms of what we needed from her and we developed empathy

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12 Traits of Excellent Partnering

TGaS Advisors, a benchmarking and advisory services firm, fielded a vendor insights study exploring the meaning, impact, and value of vendor partnerships for its biopharma clients. The study asked biopharma leaders for key traits of successful vendors and ranked the results.

- ▶ **40%** — Customer focus: Good customer service, easy to work with, recognition for a great team or people, going “above and beyond” and strong project management.
- ▶ **32%** — Understand our business and needs: Understands a customer’s business and has a solid grasp on their needs.
- ▶ **31%** — Functional and industry expertise: Skilled in a specific functional area or having a thorough understanding of the pharmaceutical industry.
- ▶ **28%** — Strategic: Providing strategic guidance and vision, proactively bringing forth ideas and recommendations, a thought partner, not an order taker, challenging the customer.
- ▶ **25%** — Accessibility: Accessible and responsive to the customer, dependable, and available to support the customer’s needs.
- ▶ **23%** — High-quality craftsmanship: Providing customers with quality, accurate, and/or thorough solutions and services.
- ▶ **22%** — Agile and flexible: Meeting the customer’s unique and changing project needs and priorities.
- ▶ **21%** — Collaboration: Good collaborative partner, displaying good teamwork, working well with the customer and other vendors.
- ▶ **21%** — Business impact: Providing solutions and services that resulted in a business impact or outcome and driving value for the customer (e.g., cost savings, efficiencies, process improvements, etc.)
- ▶ **21%** — Timely delivery: Prompt with delivery, meeting tight timelines, committing to and achieving deadlines.
- ▶ **20%** — Innovative: Being innovative, delivering innovative, leading edge and creative solutions, staying on top of new trends.
- ▶ **19%** — Communication: Excellent communication skills, frequent and consistent communication, transparency, open and honest discussion, listening to the customer.

Source: TGaS Vendor Insights Best Partner 2018, powered by TGaS Advisors

for the broader context of what was on her plate,” Allison says. “Of course there is a line to walk there, because we are on the hook to help her deliver on the projects we are responsible for, so it is our job to keep things moving but having empathy for what her days were like was a great lesson that we now try to keep in mind for all clients.”

Later on in their relationship, Allison returned the favor, when she honestly let Kymm know that even though she is very busy, she needs to take time to review documents and project briefs carefully, so that she doesn’t approve something that she didn’t mean to approve. “Allison called me on this early on,” Kymm says.

The closerlook team had sent Kymm a four-page project brief, which she skimmed briefly and then approved. But when Kymm saw the end product it wasn’t what she was expecting. Allison recalls reminding Kymm that the project aligned perfectly with the project brief that she reviewed as a word doc-

ument and which she said was right on track. “In full transparency, I didn’t really review the document that closely so therefore it didn’t match what I was thinking,” Kymm says. “So one of the learnings, is to make sure that I prepare, take a step back, and have time to review before approving something that’s misaligned to what I really want.”

Both Allison and Kymm tout the benefits of using the Insight Discovery tool, a 20-year-old psychometric tool built to help people understand themselves, understand others, and make the most of the relationships that affect them in the workplace. The Insights Discovery methodology uses a four-color model to help people understand their style, their strengths, and the value they bring to the team. Kymm was introduced to the tool through one of her brand directors, who used it with agencies to determine working styles and to create a common vernacular.

“This process was really helpful because one of the things that Insights showed us, for

example, is Allison’s very red, which reads ‘be brief, be gone.’ Whereas, I’m usually pretty yellow, which means include me, but then there’s a little bit of blue in me which is, give me the details and I have some red, too. Before Insights, I think I confused the team a bit, because some days I’d be like, ‘let’s go through this line by line’ and other days I’d be like, ‘okay just cut to the chase, what’s the bottom line?’ And it was really helpful to be able to step back and say, ‘okay listen, for this task or this project I’m red, just give me the high level. For this one I need the details.’” That training was at least seven years ago and Kymm and Allison still use it to this day.

“Communication style is always something we have to work on whether it is a new relationship or one with lots of history, and I think with Kymm we work hard to match the pace and level that is most productive for her,” Allison says. “I worked with my team to help them understand how we should present to Kymm. And we still sometimes get it wrong and take too long to get to the point. Having a shared vocabulary and short-hand helps here too — Kymm can say ‘guys, I’m red, I need you to get to it’ and we know what she means and how to adjust.”

The Challenge

Despite everyone’s best efforts to communicate clearly and effectively, and work in total unison moving projects forward, ideas can become misconstrued or go off track. When this happens between Kymm and Allison’s team, they use it as a learning experience, immediately address the problem, and move on.

One such incident they both remember well is when Allison presented a concept internally to Kymm’s organization before she had a chance to review it. Somehow wires got crossed and the presentation wasn’t finished in time for Kymm to review it first. Allison asked for Kymm’s trust to bring the vision forward without a review. The next morning, as the presentation was taking place, Kymm was thinking perhaps there might have been a better approach than the one Allison’s team took.

“One of the toughest things in client services is that you will inevitably disappoint your client,” Allison says. “Something won’t go right and it is crushing when you don’t deliver what they need and expect from you. Over the years, Kymm and I have had those moments, and my approach is to deal with it head on and take ownership, apologize for the miss, and quickly transition to make it right.”

And at the end of the day, everything turned out fine. That experience actually opened up a new dialogue within the organization and helped the agency develop an even better relationship with their client. **PV**

The **July/August issue** of PharmaVOICE features 100 of the most inspiring individuals in the life-sciences industry. Personal accounts that detail how these outstanding individuals throughout the life-sciences industry — executives, peers, colleagues, clients, partners, etc. — inspire and are motivating change in all sectors of healthcare, make this special issue come to life.



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