

Medical communications

Pharmaceutical companies outsource a wide variety of projects to medical communications agencies, which might provide attractive alternative career opportunities for scientists, pharmaceutical executives and health-care professionals. Our interviewees this month discuss the appeal of this field and the skills involved.



Archontoula Stoffel
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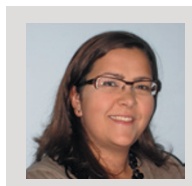
Continuing medical education (CME) activities, intended to enhance the knowledge and skills of health-care providers, are often supported by pharmaceutical companies, with the aim of providing updates on current research in a broad range of therapeutic areas. Given the sensitive nature of such activities, CME providers, which include medical communications agencies, have to meet stringent regulations to achieve CME accreditation.

"The key challenges are to ensure the highest quality of content while tailoring it to different levels of expertise and needs of the distinct audiences," says Tola Stoffel, Vice President Scientific Director at the medical communications firm Imprint Science. There she develops educational concepts and content

for various diseases, primarily focusing on neurology, oncology, HIV and pain disorders.

Communicating scientific concepts to a wide audience is a key skill for this position that Stoffel developed during her research career, which began with a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Chicago, USA, in the Department of Hematology Oncology. "After finishing my Ph.D. at the University of Hamburg," she explains, "I wanted to continue my work in oncology. My husband was then an assistant professor at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, University of Chicago. At the time, the laboratory of genetics/cytogenetics was run by Dr Michelle Le Beau who had an opening for a postdoctoral fellowship. After a short interview, it was clear to me that I wanted to work with her and when she offered me the position, I immediately accepted it."

Stoffel continued her research career as a research associate at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and later as an assistant professor at the laboratory for cancer biology at The Rockefeller University in New York. In early 2006, seeking to "get acquainted with the business aspect of medical sciences," she became a Medical Director



Cathryn Berry
Account Director,
MediTech Media,
Sydney, Australia

The role of an Account Director at medical communications agencies demands the combination of scientific and medical knowledge and marketing training to lead the project management and delivery of a wide range of services. These can include strategic planning, to help product teams understand the current marketplace for their therapy area and to work to develop strategies and tactics to maximize the opportunities presented; medical writing projects such as congress reporting, journal articles and marketing materials; and event organization — from small advisory boards to 2,000-delegate satellite symposia.

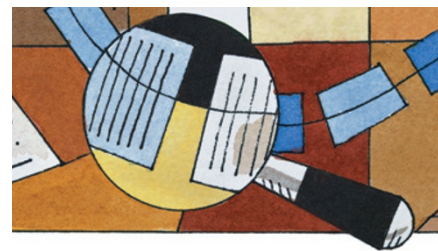
To successfully provide such services, a wide variety of skills are required. "As Account Director I need to balance problem solving, decision making and training of the team, while delivering high quality projects," says Cathryn Berry.

Following her degree in molecular and cellular biochemistry at Merton College, Oxford, UK,

she joined MediTech Media in London as an Account Executive, a role that combines creative, scientific and marketing skills. She progressed quickly through the Client Services department, and demonstration of strong project management skills lead to a transfer to Hong Kong in July 2005 driven by: "a desire to broaden my horizons, both professionally and personally — I wanted the challenge of working in a regional market and on a broad range of therapy areas."

In November 2006, she was appointed Account Director for the Sydney office, which provided her with professional development opportunities in terms of office management, including human resources and training, financial control and budgeting, and seeking out new business opportunities in the Australian market. "I work not only with my colleagues in Sydney, but also across the Asia Pacific region in Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Taipei and Shanghai," she says.

Working in partnerships and collaborations with a diverse group of individuals is, she believes, the most rewarding aspect of her role. "I am lucky to have been involved in such collaborations at a number of different levels — internally we work in collaboration for development of ideas and delivery of projects whereby individuals from different departments — from editorial, design,



at Imprint Science. She says: "it was a great opportunity to translate my academic training and scientific knowledge to qualitative education for a vast number of health-care professionals."

Now VP Scientific Director, Stoffel provides needs assessments for numerous new business efforts in different therapeutic areas, develops overall educational concepts and content within distinct disease states and is promoting a stronger involvement of the medical directors in the business aspects of the projects. She is also working on several projects to improve outcome measurements for medical education initiatives, which will then have an impact on public health costs.

Despite successfully moving into the medical communications industry and progressing quickly, Stoffel warns that: "in my experience, in this industry communication and managerial skills are valued more highly than scientific expertise." She also advises that: "hard work pays off but it is not enough for advancement. One has to keep an open mind, utilize the wisdom and connections of mentors, have a strong team-work spirit and fairly promote one's own work and capabilities."

multimedia through to conferencing — provide expert advice on different aspects of each project. Externally the most rewarding client relationships are those where we are truly seen as strategic partners, where our input is desired and respected as part of brainstorming and decision-making processes."

Medical communications has plenty of challenges, as she recalls trying to find a printer in a foreign city at two in the morning, but she notes that the most challenging projects and aspects of her work are often the most rewarding. "I enjoy the challenge of finding out what really is the key issue in a market with respect to a certain product, or what is truly the customer insight that is driving a certain behaviour, as well as simply learning about a new therapy area."

Experience has taught her that there is always a solution to a problem, even if you have to dig deep to find it. She explains: "taking a moment to pause and consider before making a decision and taking the time to explain the rationale, to peruse a particular route, often means that the long-term solution is far better as a result."

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