



AT THE HELM

Meg Columbia-Walsh, managing partner, president consumer and e-business

PERFORMANCE

Doing “extremely well!”

HIGHLIGHTS

Revenue rose in 2006 compared to 2005

Landed new clients Pfizer, Merck, Johnson & Johnson and Novartis

CHALLENGES

Agency underwent restructuring in 2006

Web-based digital media putting pressure on the industry

Securing talent is an ongoing issue

For contact details, service offerings and client roster, see Agency A-to-Z, beginning on page 143

CommonHealth Consumer Group

Columbia-Walsh leads the restructured group to greater scope and expertise

Above: Consumer ad for Organon's NuvaRing

“We’re going to teach consumers to tell a better story in context to healthcare providers”
—Meg Columbia-Walsh

Rounding her first year at the helm, Meg Columbia-Walsh, CommonHealth Consumer Group (CHCG) managing partner, president consumer and e-business, has navigated change. She reports revenue rose compared to 2005, and the agency won more accounts than it lost.

“In an effort to broaden the scope of our work and put a focus around dialogue between patient and physician, we refocused and restructured,” Columbia-Walsh says. “It was a rebuilding year. We did well and are doing extremely well this year.”

Prior to restructuring, expertise was isolated in various agencies, i.e. Quantum did DTC, Exchange had CRM, etc. “I have expertise in every channel,” Columbia-Walsh says. “It’s driven out of higher order insight

and better strategic planning, and then I go execute against it with whatever expertise is required—broadcast, print whatever.”

New clients include Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer, Merck and Novartis. “When I saw the great work [CommonHealth division] MBS/Vox had around dialogue and direct observation, I thought [it could provide] a lot of unique insight for clients,” she says. “[We’ve] built a methodology around the dialogue. We’re going to teach consumers to tell a better story in context to healthcare providers [and] ask providers to be more open-minded in open-ended questions. If you focus on the context of illness and give the patient a chance to explain how the condition affects their whole life, diagnosis is ultimately improved.”

Columbia-Walsh says the agency was a founding DTC shop (1997) because clients that awarded it big AOR accounts, such as Claritin, trusted it to help break into the market. “DTC works,” she notes. “It drives share, but is it just really low hanging fruit? If we did a better job, could we improve adherence, compliance, persistency problems if we built a better relationship and dialogue from the start?”

Staff is increasing, and Columbia-Walsh says “talent is always an issue,” and she believes globalization is key.

Columbia-Walsh believes the challenge for all agencies is “a need to reinvent” and focus on the future. “We’ve chosen to think consumer is still extremely important, but there’s an intersection to work on particularly in the Rx world and even in OTC,” she says. “Consumers are still involved with physicians, and we need to improve overall wellness and prevention.”

She thinks interactive, Web-based digital media is “putting pressure” on the industry. “It’s a challenge, and it’s fascinating,” she says. “You’ll see the same pressure come on cellular. For the next generation, digital is very real. What does that mean to us and how are we going to integrate it? WPP has done an excellent job in acquiring all the services needed to serve our clients in that generation. It’s a fascinating addition to what we do.”

The plan is to continue focus on dialogue and adherence and to further integrate interactive capabilities. Columbia-Walsh thinks attempts at “empowering consumers” have resulted in “information-laden” consumers rather than empowered consumers.

“They’re like first year med students—overconfident and under qualified to make a diagnosis,” she says. “Therefore, we still play a major role. What do we do with these information-laden consumers to make them empowered? When you’re empowered you drive things and make change. Healthcare is getting attention as needing change. How are we going to get consumers to drive decisions, including their own, around healthcare and how it impacts them? I’ve been passionate about that for 21 years. We have a lot more tools now to achieve that goal.” —Tanya Lewis