



AT THE HELM

David Nakamura and Allan Trent, founding partners

PERFORMANCE

Expecting 20% growth

HIGHLIGHTS

Revenue hit \$14 million in 2008

Wins from EKR Therapeutics, CSL Behring and Ferring Pharmaceuticals

Hired CEO Ed Shankman

Headcount up 10 to 55

CHALLENGES

Hiring "efficient" staff

Completing a company branding project around "greenhouse concept"

For contact details, service offerings and client roster, see Agency A-to-Z, beginning on page 175

Natrel Communications

Small guys find a way to compete with Big Pharma for business



To hear co-founding partners David Nakamura and Allan Trent tell it, the recent successes of Natrel Communications were partially borne out of frustration. In years past, the small-ish firm had shot high, attempting to compete for big accounts from the biggest of Big Pharma players. It didn't succeed as often as it would've liked.

"Many times, a holding company locks up all the business from those companies, so we couldn't get in," Trent recalls. "The category-one agencies were locking up those accounts. We decided to look elsewhere."

The strategy proved a savvy one. Since orienting its focus toward specialty pharma products and companies, Natrel has seen business boom. It has even enjoyed some attention from the bigger organizations who once spurned all such advances. "Now a lot of the larger companies have products geared toward specialty audiences. We've been able to help them with specific messaging," Nakamura explains.

Adds Trent: "I get calls from prospective clients: 'Hey, I understand you guys can do a lot more with a smaller budget.' We're hearing that from a lot of

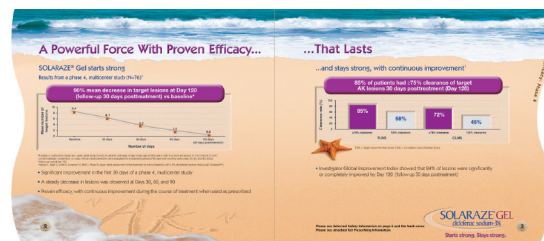
people, even Big Pharma. They don't have the big budgets they had in previous years."

Natrel's roll started at the very beginning of 2008, when the firm landed PharmaDerm's corporate account and the six major brands that came with it. While Nakamura underplays the effect that such an early-year booster shot had on the company's fortunes, he does admit: "That started the momentum going forward."

Wins from EKR Therapeutics (for Cardene I.V.) and CSL Behring (for IgPro20, one of the company's immunoglobulins) followed, as did a high-profile assignment from Ferring Pharmaceuticals (for Firmagon, a treatment for prostate cancer). Trent says Natrel didn't lose or otherwise shed any clients during the last 12 months.

To accommodate the growth, Nakamura and Trent knew they had to upgrade the firm's offerings, and they believe they did so with the 2008 hire of chief creative officer Ed Shankman. The co-founders credit Shankman with having revolutionized Natrel's work, not to mention streamlining the creative process. "We've never been this good before," Trent crows. "Instead of two or three rounds of concepts, we get it in one. That's helping us win pitches, too."

As for the future, Natrel anticipates more interest in what Nakamura calls "non-personal promotion," a trend fueled by the flagging economy. "Companies are trying to expand their business without expanding headcount in terms of the number of reps. We think we can do the non-personal promotions that will let them reduce the size of their sales force."



Above: A professional ad for Solaraze Gel; Left: Part of a scratch 'n' win promotion for Cutivate Lotion

Meanwhile, Natrel is contending with the same it's-darn-near-impossible-to-find-good-people-and-hire-'em frustrations as everybody else. "If you have a lot of junior people, things tend to be less efficient. There are more revisions and those cost more money," Nakamura says. Headcount currently sits at 55, up from 45 at the same time last year. Revenues hit \$14 million in 2008 and the co-founders expect 20% growth in 2009.

Also, look for Natrel to complete a long-in-gestation branding project for a different type of client: itself. The company has been slowly rolling out its new branding/positioning in the early months of 2009, with the full-out debut slated for September. Everything from the corporate website to business cards will be rebranded around a "greenhouse" concept. "It's not a campaign for a client or anything like that, but we're proud of it all the same," says Trent. — Larry Dobrow

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