

Pumping up your visibility

When it comes time to take the next step in expansion, getting professional marketing advice can make all the difference for a young company

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After starting their business by servicing a single client, partners Denise Deakin and Andree Marceau grew Scimega Research into a 15-person firm with a roster of big corporate customers.

The women are convinced their product - helping pharmaceuticals and biotechs conduct clinical drug trials - is top-notch. Now, they want more people to know about them.

"We offer an excellent service, but a weakness for Scimega is our visibility as a company," Deakin said.

To get to the next level, the women hooked up with a marketing consultant.

From building a brand to beefing up the company Web site and taking a corporate presentation on the road, Scimega is ramping up its public relations efforts.

Entrepreneurs usually start off doing marketing themselves, growing a business through improvised business development initiatives. But when it comes time to take the next step in expansion, getting professional marketing advice can make all the difference.

Scimega, known in the business as a contract research organization or CRO, makes its home in a small office building in Laval. It started eight years ago in Marceau's basement.

"We had two desks, telephones, a fax, computers," Marceau said of the company's modest beginnings. "And a suitcase!"

"We were travelling a lot," Deakin explained.

Both women worked as nurses before becoming research associates with the same pharmaceutical company.

During their dealings with customers, they realized there was a niche serving drug development companies that wanted to outsource the management of clinical research trials.



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Marketing consultant Scott Broady meets with Denise Deakin (left) and business partner Andree Marceau, co-founders of Scimega Research, in their Laval offices. The company manages clinical trials for pharmaceuticals and biotechs.

In 1998, the women incorporated a company and got to work managing trials for a U.S. biotech firm.

The women did their own marketing at first, sending email alerts to potential clients, mailing out brochures, cold calling and attending trade shows.

Those efforts landed Scimega some big name clients, especially among pharmaceutical companies. (Confidentiality clauses prevent them from naming clients.) But this year, the women decided to diversify their revenue sources by bringing on board more biotech clients.

To boost their visibility, Marceau and Deakin recently hired marketing consultant Scott Broady of Keystone Marketing in Montreal.

With Broady's help, the women have revamped their corporate brochure and Web site, fleshed out their brand identity, taken on more speaking engagements and are setting up meetings with biotech companies in U.S. cities, starting this month in Boston.

They are also developing a data base with statistics to demonstrate the quality of their trial data relative to other CROs.

But the marketing effort is not just directed outward, Marceau explained. "We are communicating a lot with employees about our brand," she said. "Client service is a key; we are working a lot on building relationships with clients."

"The more clear a vision we have as an organization, the easier it is to attract people," Deakin added in reference to the marketing exercise.

The marketing effort is also about defining a niche, said Broady, who has been working with Scimega since September.

"What are their strengths, their weaknesses and who are their competitors?" Broady said, of some key questions he's asked the women to answer.

"The challenge is to maintain the enthusiasm, the small-company culture," Broady said of Scimega as it contemplates growth. "We want to avoid hierarchies, (and) keep the team work and unity."

Broady has also advised Marceau and Deakin to replace some kinds of marketing activities with others.

"In the past, they went to trade shows and handed out brochures, but that really was not a good return on their investment," he said.

Cuts in corporate travel budgets mean new tools like Web seminars are growing in popularity, Broady said.

He is advising Scimega to turn its Web site into more of an educational tool and invest in focused meetings with clients, like the coming one in Boston.

Broady is also trying to get Scimega more editorial exposure in trade magazines and newspapers.

Bakr Ibrahim, a small-business expert, said companies like Scimega should think

about marketing right from the get-go, making it part of their initial business plan.

Ibrahim is director of the Centre for Small Business and Entrepreneurial Studies and associate dean at Concordia University's John Molson School of Business. The Centre offers consulting and mentoring services to entrepreneurs.

"A niche strategy is most appropriate," Ibrahim said of start-up and small businesses.

"That allows them to be more focused on a specific area in the market and put all their advantages and capabilities in that area."

Marceau and Deakin's chosen niche is oncology trials. They hope that specialization will help them withstand competition from the slew of CROs in the Montreal area. (According to Industry Canada, Montreal has the largest number of CROs of any city in North America.)

Scimega has also made the cost advantages of doing trials in Canada instead of the U.S. part of their marketing message.

But Ibrahim warns small-business owners to be wary of marketing their product on price alone. "You shouldn't differentiate yourself on price but on quality," he said.

Entrepreneurs should also avoid the pitfall of "overstating what a product can do for a customer," Ibrahim said.

He recommends brainstorming with customers about exactly what they want. "Sit with people who are the target for the product and get feedback from them," he said.

Broady agrees too many firms communicate an "inward-focused" message in their marketing. "It's all about the company," he said in reference to this mistake. "It should be about what you can do to benefit the client."

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