Traditionally, product advertising and medical education have been regarded as poles apart. Agencies specializing in one of these disciplines are often ignorant of the other’s efforts, but does this have to be so? Can more be achieved if these two key functions are brought closer together? Many pharmaceutical companies now think so and the growing number of integrated agencies is a testimony to this belief. In fact, provision of integrated communication services has been largely achieved through acquisition. WPP, for instance, have acquired Ogilvy & Mather, CommonHealth and Healthworld; McCann-Erickson and The Lowe partnership now operate under Interpublic. Omnicom and Publicis have also recently acquired well-known advertising agencies.

Anna Porter, European marketing director of Genzyme Biosurgery, believes that combining the creative approach of advertising with the therapeutic knowledge and clinical insights of medical education is invaluable to their business. “Medical education provides rational persuasion and creative advertising builds emotional attachment and brand loyalty,” says Porter. “These two disciplines are a key part of the communication mix and are more easily and successfully implemented using a sole agency.”

**Compare and contrast**

There are marked contrasts in the styles and aims of these two disciplines. The prime function of medical education could be defined as the development of core product messages from the clinical evidence base to establish a persuasive, rational proposition for product adoption to prescribers. An advertising agency’s role, however, is to reach the more emotive elements of the prescriber’s psyche, through creative campaigns that build brand awareness and ultimately translate into brand usage. Both approaches are valid. Physicians, who are asked to empathise with their patients whilst applying their hard-won knowledge and years of experience, must function on both levels; they will need to be convinced of both.
These two functions — one creative and one knowledge-based — encapsulate what a successful communications programme should achieve: a whole that is infinitely greater than its parts if developed in a fully integrated manner. After all, as any Olympic competitor will tell you, performance improves if all parts of the body pull in the same direction.

Boosting synergy levels
Under the best conditions, these separate aspects of a communications programme can be brought together in a synergistic manner to maximize brand uptake in the customer base. But can these two very different beasts be brought to heel and taught to walk side by side? Actually, for those who have tried, the answer is ‘yes, and surprisingly easily.’ Those who are not used to the integrated approach will be amazed at the degree of similarity in the processes that the two types of agency engage in. Both begin with the clinical knowledge base, using it to underpin the development of product messages and, ultimately, the product positioning reflected in advertising campaigns. After all, a brand’s attributes are what it delivers, and these are derived from the data.

There are strong parallels in the way the evidence base is utilized in both medical education and advertising, despite the markedly different aims, skill sets, knowledge and expertise that are applied. Sometimes the language used by each can obscure the similarities of the approaches, but stripped down to their basics these elements become evident. An examination of the proprietary tools used by each type of agency show a surprisingly consistent approach (see Figure 1).

The combined approach
One area in which the integrated agency approach can be most beneficial is in the overall positioning of products — what their core messages are and what their appeal is — which plays to the strengths of each approach. A combined offer is now seen as more robust than either approach on its own and, increasingly, expectations are beginning to reflect this. Consistency of communication to the stakeholders is key to the message being adopted and this is more readily achieved through the integrated offer of medical education, advertising and public relations. Agencies that remain rooted in their traditional, isolated functions run the risk of missing out on invitations to work on key brands.

An integrated joint offer benefits everyone working in the team. The synergy occurring between the rational and non-rational aspects of message communication can be strategically coordinated and nurtured. There is a free flow of information, expertise and viewpoints, which eliminates log jams and can provide added value in terms of ideas and creative thinking. Taken together, the complementary range of skill sets form a powerful resource.

Conflicts of interests and interagency ‘bickering’ are issues that must have caused many promising young product managers to grow old before their time. Lacking the full picture and desperate not to offend, independent agencies feel they must continually check back with the client before sharing information to avoid compromising confidentiality. Unsurprisingly too, separate agencies can be uncomfortable working together and do not wish to share their hard-earned knowledge of proprietary tools and processes which are jealously guarded along with their staff. It can be a relief to realize that you do not have to be caught in the middle, fending off balls from every direction. The appointment of an overall programme manager as a single point of contact means that you can sit back and watch while the machinery glides into action.

But at the top of pharma’s wish list may be the possible benefits in efficiency and cost effectiveness that the integrated approach so temptingly offers. From the holding of joint briefing meetings and the shortening of communication chains to the shared learning curves, which mean that all members of the team are fired up and ready for action at the same time, the benefits are clear. Billing too is simplified, with savings likely on a programme-wide scale, and more transparency possible. And overall, the larger scale of operation has an energizing effect, building momentum and drive with an economy of scale which means that, in the end, more, truly effective communication programs are achievable.

Not only can the publications strategy be developed and managed, it can also be translated into a meaningful medical education and advertising campaign as the product approaches launch, according to Nick Blakemore, sales and marketing manager at Janssen-Cilag. “This combined approach,” says Blakemore, “has led to savings in time and money and, I believe, has greater influence when it come to influencing our prescribers. Furthermore the planned and synchronized communication of key product and market issues achieved using peer review publishing, creative campaigns and representative detailing produces a more powerful platform for securing product acceptance.”

Figure 1: Strategic planning for communication programmes.
Despite the widely held belief, medical education is not just publications planning and is not limited to the routine production of newsletters or monographs.