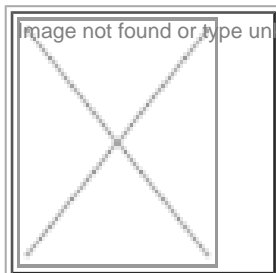


A USP that stands out before customers

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The biotechnology sector in India has seen a rapid growth in the last decade. The gold rush towards developing generic versions of therapeutic proteins and mAbs (commonly termed as biosimilars) have seen many pharmaceutical companies setting up biotechnology divisions. This has resulted in new job opportunities for biotech professionals and opened up newer business opportunities for service providers in the growing ecosystem.

This, to some extent, is the driving factor behind the foundation of Abexome Biosciences in 2007. My colleague, Dr Manjula Das, and I — both scientists by training with PhD degrees from the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, and some years of experience in the biotech sector in India — were looking for an opportunity to make a positive impact in the ecosystem. While the more attractive option was to get into the business of developing biosimilar clones, we thought that would probably limit our option of working with many pharmaceutical companies since, many times, we will be in direct competition with them. So, we decided to set up an analytical service company that would have a more inclusive business model of working with all

biopharma companies and also research labs without any potential conflict.

Using science as the USP

The first and foremost marketing challenge for a service organization, whose offerings are not based on platform technology but on science capabilities and quality system, is to identify the unique selling point (USP) that stands out in front of the customer. We decided to start the business in India as there were apparently fewer competitors here. For developing biosimilars, one requires molecule-specific antibodies and assays for characterization of the molecules, which was the main service offering of Abexome Biosciences.

The question of USP kept coming back. Like most start-ups, marketing activity of Abexome was also done by the management team and we had to answer the question posed by every customer about why they should outsource such key jobs to a new start-up like Abexome. In a few cases, the customer also had capabilities to do the antibody and assay development themselves, which complicated the equation further. We realized cost was not the main proposition. Customers wanted antibodies and assays that worked and could be delivered as soon as possible.

Our science capabilities were the main USP that we could fall back on and we did exactly that. We wrote detailed proposals explaining the key scientific steps of the work that we will undertake. We made the entire process transparent, which was key to gaining the confidence of customers and getting some early breakthroughs.

We stuck to this approach for project management and always kept the customers in the loop. There were setbacks when a project did not work but our openness with customers resulted in alternative strategies that saved the project. Integrity to science, thus, became a core value for Abexome, something that never failed us and something that will always remain as the core.

Getting solutions

We were servicing the biopharma industry that was mainly geared towards developing biosimilar versions of about 10-to-12 high-potential therapeutic proteins and mAbs. Soon, we started working with multiple customers for the same therapeutic molecule. For example, in 2009, we developed antibodies for three different versions of erythropoietin and granulocyte-colony stimulating factor (G-CSF) and all of them were for different customers.

There was no conflict of interest as we maintained complete confidentiality within our organization. However, as we showcased our capabilities of handling such molecules, the customers wanted more ready solutions than going through longer cycles of antibody and assay development.

The essence of the marketing challenge was to present a time-efficient solution that utilizes our experience more optimally. We decided to combine our service model with a product portfolio. It was imperative that we develop antibodies and assay kits for the therapeutic proteins and mAbs and offer them as ready solution. We developed antibodies and kits for a few drug molecules, such as Pentosan polysulfate, GCSF and polyethylene glycol (PEG)-GCSF, but there were many more to go. Public-private partnership programs of the Department of Biotechnology, Government of India, provided helpful support for developing these products. We started developing antibodies and assays for all common therapeutic mAbs, such as Rituximab, Trastuzumab, Bevacizumab, Infliximab, Adalimumab and Etanercept.

While the service model continues for customers who want antibodies and assays for their specific molecules, the kits are likely to offer them a complete solutions package.

Moving towards partnerships

Once the footprint of the company is established in the biotech ecosystem in India, the next marketing challenge is growth of the business, both vertically, by moving up in the value chain, and horizontally, by expanding into other geographies. For a start-up which is dependent on revenue generated on a month-to-month basis and does not sit on cash reserve, it poses a significant challenge to expand the business operations accordingly. Striking partnerships with other service providers or clinical CROs appear to be a more attractive proposition. Hence, the focus of the marketing team shifts towards finding such partners having business presence in other geographies with whom there could be possible synergies.

One example of a potential partner is a clinical CRO that could use the assay methods developed by Abexome to conduct large trials. While having access to a validated method (like the ELISA method for detecting pentosan polysulfate in human plasma) enables the CRO to get contracts for such trials, it also boosts the sales of the assay kits developed by Abexome, leading to a win-win partnership.

The uniqueness of a start-up is the belief in its capabilities and its ability to re-discover itself according to market requirements. Abexome is no exception. However, the strength of its core values and the ability to respond to the situation quickly without compromising the values is what sets apart a start-up from its competitors. That is what Abexome aims to be.