

Agencies scramble for healthcare talent

[Jaimy Lee](#)

February 04, 2010



(clockwise) Wendy Lund, Chris Foster, Jeanine O'Kane, Mike Kan, Gail Cohen, AnnaMaria DeSalva

NEW YORK: The healthcare practice leaders at seven holding company agencies in the US have left their positions in the last 11 months, triggering a shake-up in senior-level staffing.

MS&L, Burson-Marsteller, and Hill & Knowlton have lost at least two of their top healthcare leaders in the last four months. Euro RSCG PR, Cohn & Wolfe, Ketchum, and Porter Novelli have also reported healthcare practice leadership changes since March 2009.

While the reasons for the executive departures vary, the turnover indicates that the traditional healthcare practice model is changing, especially at agencies that have long relied on large pharmaceutical accounts.

"Most of the big holding companies are so heavily weighed on pharma that when that business model changed, it had an impact on everybody," said Jim Tsokanos, president of the Americas for MS&L Group. "One of the things we have to ask ourselves is: What is the new business model in healthcare communications?"

Industry sources say leadership changes in healthcare remain a concern for much of the agency leadership, in part because of how in-demand specialized healthcare leaders are both in and out of a recession.

At MS&L, Wendy Lund, EVP of global business and client development; Monique da Silva, global healthcare director; and MaryEllen O'Donohue, director of North America healthcare, left the firm in January.

Tsokanos said that after MS&L examined the healthcare market, it plans to diversify its healthcare offering to include biotech clients as well as work focusing on M&A, issues and crisis, and litigation rather than traditional pharmaceutical product PR.

Jeanine O'Kane, a former group head at Ogilvy PR Worldwide, was named North America

director of healthcare and will be instrumental in shaping the practice, he added.

As the economy has picked up in recent months, opportunities for healthcare leaders, many of whom are the highest paid of an agency's practice leaders, have opened up, as well, said Norman Sherman, partner at executive recruiting firm Troyanos Group.

Because healthcare practices are considered mostly recession proof, practice leaders have faced increased pressure to maintain the work with current clients, as well as carve out new areas for growth.

"The economic environment was basically hurting all practice areas but there was an expectation that healthcare was the brass ring and that it was growing," said Sherman. "Over the course of the last year, they have been increasingly disillusioned and open to making change."

Some firms, like C&W, were able to capitalize on the market challenges. In the last two weeks, the firm has announced that it hired Lund as the first CEO of GCI Health and tapped Mike Kan, a former MD of health for Edelman EMEA, as a global healthcare practice leader.

It also said that Linda Dyson, who was hired in August 2009 to lead global healthcare, would lead a healthcare public affairs offering. Donna Imperato, president and CEO of C&W, said the firm will be making another senior hire announcement this month.

"It's a little bit of an investment," she said. "But I think if we don't do the things we need to do to help our clients stay on top of business and make sure they don't get into trouble, we're not going to have healthcare clients."

She also noted that the firm will be doing more work for its healthcare clients in public affairs, corporate reputation, and digital.

"Having more people understand these different aspects of the healthcare industry is going to be very, very valuable to our clients," said Imperato. "I think, in the short term, you're not going to get paid for all of this extra time but it's what the clients need from a service standpoint."

But what remains to be seen is who will fill the top healthcare practice positions.

Burson, which lost Gail Cohen, its global chair, and Chris Foster, its US chair, since the start of 2010, is searching for replacements, said Pat Ford, US president and CEO of the firm. Cohen was given a global MD role at the WeissComm Group while Foster took a position as a principal at Booz Allen Hamilton.

H&K is still searching for a worldwide healthcare leader to replace AnnaMaria DeSalva, who was offered a new position at Pfizer as the VP of worldwide communications for research, science, and technology in late 2009.

The agency said this week that had filled its director of New York healthcare position following the fall departure of David Kyne. Susan Thiele, a former group head at Edelman, began as director of New York healthcare February 1.

"Opportunities come along and you're going to see more rearranging of the deck chairs because pressure will continue to be put on all practice leaders," said Sherman.