
Web-based medical advice circles the globe



By Jane Williams

North American online health advice seekers have long been served by WebMD. Now an ex-Google developer is aiming at the rest of the world with Medico.com.

Having grown up the son of a World Health Organisation worker in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines, **Elan Dekel** appreciated the impact health services have in remote areas very early in his life. Later, while travelling through Africa and Eastern Europe as product manager for Google, Dekel noticed large gaps in the online services available to remote regions. And he found, specifically in health, people tended to engage much more with online resources that are targeted at them; sites that feel local and that include people who look like them and talk like them. With this in mind, he left Google with a clear picture of where he was heading next. “I went to Google to learn,” Dekel told Knowledge. “Then I saw this big untapped opportunity which is what I decided to go after.”

Targeting a market

His business, Medico.com, was launched in Spanish in June with a Portuguese-language site due to come online before the end of the year. The site, based in New York, offers culturally sensitive, healthcare information online across the world, targeting areas with limited access to similar services.

“The first phase of our business is very much a consumer-focused site,” Dekel explains. “It will be monetised using advertising, sponsorships and things like that. Later as we grow and become a recognised brand and launch other kinds of products, then I can see us experimenting with other business models. But right now we are very much a consumer internet company.”

Spanish was chosen as the initial language because it covers a huge population across Europe and the Americas, including the Hispanic market in the U.S., an area Dekel hopes to expand through partnerships with existing portals. His Google background helped attract seed money from U.S. venture capital firms: First Round Capital, FirstMark Capital, Graylock Capital Management and the leading Indian fund, Nexus Venture Partners.

“I have a lot of experience building teams and recruiting and dealing with all the legal issues of launching in different markets, so I could make a reasonable case to an investor that I knew how to take a product and launch it globally,” he says. “I’m very much influenced by how Google does things.”

Logistical challenges

As well as adopting its global mindset, Dekel says Google taught him the importance of setting up a software platform that will enable a rapidly-growing, international business to scale up fast.

“The first issue you have to deal with is internationalising your software platform so it can support multiple languages and within these languages different things like a payments system and currencies,” he says.

And then there are the regulatory concerns. “You have to get lawyers in different markets and they have to analyse for you what you can do in advertising space and what doctors can do or not do online, that type of thing.”

And of course there is content. Finding out what medical conditions affect each market and which to promote first. Creating a product people want,

prioritising the roll-out of services, finding appropriate partners and marketing the product.

Finding a local face

The site relies on input from the community and local healthcare providers, along with local information on disease and other health issues. It aims to find physicians who can answer questions and direct consumers to relevant information.

“We’re actually signing up medical ambassadors in each market who can help us understand the market, help us think strategically and also help us with their network,” Dekel says. “For example, we just announced one in Spain. He’s a doctor who actually appears on TV and on the radio so he’s fairly well known. “We’re going to try to replicate this model in multiple markets. There’s a whole bunch of things to consider, each one of them is not particularly difficult. It is just keeping it all straight and making sure that it all happens on time that is the challenge.”

Moving offline

A big test will be the reaction of the local medical centres in each market. “We’re not interacting with them much yet,” Dekel admits.

“I assume at some point we will but right now we are trying to go directly to the consumer via Google and social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter.”

Growth will also require people on the ground in these remote locations.

“The point at which we start selling and having salespeople in a market full-time is when the story gets a bit more complicated,” he says. “We have to set a business in each country, so we can hire people and establish offices in different markets to enable us to sell and engage with partners. We’re currently in the seed stage of the company but the next round of financing, which we hope to do shortly, will be to scale up the business.”

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