

Inside Track


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Trinity Biotech

By Lori Sichtermann

An Interview with Dana Thomas, Director of Marketing

In 1992, three entrepreneurs founded Trinity Biotech based on an innovative saliva-based HIV rapid test kit. Over the course of the next 12 years, Trinity grew to what is now a \$80 million company specializing in the development, manufacturing, and marketing of diagnostic products. Headquartered in Bray, Ireland, the company attributes its aggressive expansion over the years to internal and acquisition-led growth. Clinical Lab Products recently spoke with Dana Tomas, director of marketing at Trinity Biotech about company growth and the process of reintroducing the company to the evolving coagulation and infectious disease market.



Dana Thomas

CLP: What needs do Trinity's products satisfy in the clinical laboratory market?

Dana Thomas: With our primary focus being coagulation and infectious disease, Trinity offers the clinical laboratory a complete solution for its testing needs by offering both reagent and instrumentation. It's very unique for a company in this field to offer both instrumentation and reagents. Typically what happens is that a company will do one or the other well, and if they try to do both, neither end up turning out well. Trinity, however, does manufacture instrumentation and reagents, and we do both of them quite well since we've been able to acquire companies that specialized in either instrumentation or reagents. As a result of this acquisition strategy, we are a fully integrated company, which means we manufacture everything from nuts to bolts. We even manufacture the disposable components, such as injection-molded disposables used on our instruments.

CLP: What kinds of products does the company offer the market, and how have they impacted the industry?

Thomas: Our entire product offering consists of more than 750 products. Our two primary areas are coagulation and infectious disease, but we also offer some specialty chemistry diagnostics, and just recently we gained

marketing approval for our rapid HIV test kit that provides results in 10 minutes.

The Uni-Gold™ Recombigen® HIV rapid test will impact the medical community in a number of ways. It's applicable for emergency room settings when patients come in with an unknown HIV status. Emergency room staff can quickly perform the test to see if the patient is HIV positive so that appropriate precautions can be taken during the patient's care.

At STD clinics, the impact of the test will be felt in an entirely different way. The current process involves sending out a sample to be tested on an EIA platform. This process takes several days to obtain results. What happens is that 30% to 40% of people who came in for the test never return to the clinic for their results. There's a large number of people out there who are HIV positive and don't know it and who are out there continuing to spread the disease.

Our rapid HIV test will allow STD clinics to test individuals and have the results back in 10 minutes. Should they get a positive result, the clinic can then counsel that individual, explaining to him or her about what to do, about lifestyle changes, and the risk factors associated with HIV.

Regardless of the benefits of rapid testing, the concept has been slow to catch on here in the United States. A lot of it has to do with acceptance in the ways to counsel people once they find out they are HIV positive. STD clinics and the federal government are trying to develop a process for handling the immediate impact of a person finding out he or she has been infected with a deadly virus. Until they get this procedure in place, clinics really can't completely implement rapid HIV testing as the standard.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been behind a number of initiatives and programs to push rapid testing into the marketplace, but it really hasn't gained acceptance yet. However, the CDC has been buying many of the rapid tests that are run here in the United States and distributing them to public health centers and programs in an effort to increase market awareness of rapid testing here in the United States.

CLP: What difficult issues has Trinity observed within industry?

Thomas: There are a couple of issues that our company has had to overcome throughout the past several years. For example, acquisitions are a great way to grow, but you also have to deal with integration issues when you take over a company and its products. We are certainly dealing with those kinds of issues with regard to the companies we've acquired. However, I'd say that the biggest issue we've faced here in the United States was that up until November of 2003, we sold through a distributor in the US market. A year ago we took over the marketing on a direct basis and established our own marketing and sales organization to deal with our customers directly. Our goal is to satisfy our customer's needs, and we feel

we can do that better than a distributor. But, when you set up an organization like that from the ground up, you have to build the infrastructure to support it, and that's what we've been doing for the past year.

The second biggest challenge is making sure that our customers know about the products we offer. Because of our growth through acquisitions, customers know the product names, but they're not familiar with the fact that Trinity owns those products now, which is basically name recognition in the marketplace. One of my objectives as director of marketing is to make sure people understand who Trinity is, and that we own the products they're familiar with and have been using for years.

CLP: What is the company doing to overcome these issues?

Thomas: In terms of developing our direct sales infrastructure, we've had to develop, hire, and staff a complete sales and marketing organization. From now until the end of the year, the marketing group is going to put its plans together for the next year to aggressively enter into the marketplace to deliver the message of who we are, what we're doing, and the products we have to offer. We're doing that through a number of different programs, such as setting up Webinars and attending trade shows—we're going to six international and 38 regional trade shows throughout the next year.

There is value in the product names that are out there, such as MicroTrak®, Captia™, Bartels, AMAX™, and MarDx®, and we don't want to diminish that value in the customer's mind. They feel comfortable with those products, and they are familiar with them. We'll diminish the value that we have in the marketplace already if we start making dramatic changes. All we want them to know is that we now own those brands and products, that we're a bigger organization, and we have more resources to support our customers than the companies that originally owned the products.

CLP: Where do you see the industry in 5 years?

Thomas: The diagnostic industry, as a whole, is constantly evolving. Diagnostics started changing dramatically in 1985 with the implementation of diagnostic related groups--when reimbursement from Medicare and Medicaid for diagnostic procedures was capitated. Today, it really comes down to three primary problems that our customers face on a day-to-day basis. One is availability of resources. There are not enough qualified technicians to run the tests in the laboratory. As a result, our customers are always looking for ways to automate thier testing so they can limit the amount of resources they have to supply the laboratory.

Second, the laboratory is still a cost center, therefore is forced to work from limited budgets. Because of their tight budgets, laboratories are always looking for cheaper ways of meeting their diagnostic testing demands.

And finally, and this is probably the most important point, customers have

to have confidence in the results. Laboratorians have to know that the results they report to physicians are true and accurate. Therefore, they need high-quality products that give them confidence when reporting results.

Due to all of the demands customers are experiencing in the industry, we as a supplier have to comply by supplying products that are faster, better, and of extremely high quality. We are answering these demands in a number of different ways, such as automation. We're making automated, walk-away capable, push-a-button, LIS interface types of products in that share information between the hospital laboratory system and our instrumentation.

I don't see these trends in the diagnostic industry changing in the course of the next 5 years. In fact, I see it getting worse for our customers. But, in the mean time we will strive to make it even easier for our customers to run and use our products through better automation and faster products while maintaining the high standard of quality our customers expect.

CLP: What would you like CLP readers to learn about Trinity Biotech?

Thomas: I'd like the readers to understand who Trinity is. One of the problems we are facing as an organization is making sure that customers understand that Trinity now owns a number of name brand products they are currently using in their laboratories, and we are here to support them. We are a larger organization, and we have the support mechanisms in place. For example, we have 28 field service engineers out there to service instrumentation and 40 sales reps out there to answer their needs. This growth in capabilities is something we're proud of. In November of 2003 we had a quarter of this amount of personnel resources. We've grown as an organization substantially, and we're here on a direct basis to address and answer the needs of customers regarding the products they are currently using from us.

Lori Sichtermann is associate editor of Clinical Lab Products.

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