Safeguarding Animal Healthcare Packaging & Labelling

The animal healthcare business is experiencing strong growth presently, with significant investments being made by some of the largest players across the globe. Increasing investment opportunities in emerging and immature markets, as well as the continuing prevalence of animal diseases, are key drivers to this growth.

Rapid market growth, however, can often present itself with significant challenges for manufacturers if care is not taken to ensure their products are safeguarded across the supply chain. Multi-market distribution can be a significant challenge, especially where differing regulatory guidelines exist.

The Risks in a Buoyant Marketplace:
When rapid market growth is experienced in any sector, a number of significantly steep learning curves are presented to those involved. Managing your way through such challenging time requires dedication, attention to detail, a thorough knowledge of the local regulations and, above all, strategic management.

Significantly adding to the burden of the global market, counterfeit products pose a significant threat to the industry and the general public. They can cause a serious side-effect to the animal or pet or, at worst, a fatality.

This article will address some of the steps that currently are being taken and may well be taken in future to safeguard veterinary care medicines and products.

Emphasis will be placed on three key areas:
1) Multi-market distribution,
2) Serialisation &
3) Counterfeit products

1) Multi-market Distribution
The veterinary market is the third most profitable in the pharmaceutical sector with over 10 million units sold annually (*). The complexity of the products, however, can be stifling, with a wide range of products and formats to suit many applications. As far as companion pets are concerned, administering drugs can be challenging to say the least, especially considering their mobility and often great reluctance to take seemingly foreign products into their mouths. The pet-owner is often by no means trained in any form of healthcare, so ensuring the right amount of a drug is given can be a nightmare. Carefully worded and often illustrated packaging needs to be designed so that patient compliance of a canine, feline or any other –line can be achieved as easily as possible.

So the job of the manufacturer is complex to say the least. They have to design a product and packaging that is not only easy to follow, but also protects the product in a manner that ensures it reaches the consumer in a safe state. Furthermore, the pressure to save packaging and reduce the number of SKUs held on stock is of high priority. Cartons and inserts have long played a pivotal role in helping to communicate user instruction. However, there is always a risk that the product information may be discarded or lost, leaving the consumer without further guidance should a problem occur part-way through the medication. For this reason, more and more manufacturers are looking at alternative packaging solutions such as inserts, onserts and multi-page labelling.

By example, a UK based company, Anglo-Scandinavian, recently employed an 18-page leaflet label to illustrate the usage and benefits of their seaweed-based products.

They manufacture a range of products for human use and also a pet and equine version. New to the market, the product requires detailed explanation to help sell the benefits.

This kind of labelling system is frequently used to replicate user-instruction in a number of different languages also. Occupying only the space of the primary label, 24, 36 or more pages of information can be added to reduce the number of country-specific SKUs held on stock. Vetark UK incorporate a multi-panel construction onto their specialist animal care products, enabling them to include user-instruction in several languages. Managing Director Peter Scott commented:

“I’m afraid we were simply using English labels and we found it was holding us back. Equally, for a small company, producing a full label in every language was simply not feasible. The use of leaflet labels has allowed us to be very targeted.”

The trend for ways of streamlining packaging and reducing the net weight of products for environmental reasons is fast becoming a major concern for manufacturers. It not only helps to raise the company’s green credentials, it also has a wider benefit on the environment and the impact the packaging has once discarded and sent to waste.
2) Serialisation
Recent changes in regulatory requirements mean that unique data serialisation on pharmaceutical packaging will need to be in place by all EU members by 2017. In accordance with the provisions laid down by the FDM, each pack of medicine will be required to carry a unique ID number, enabling it to be tracked and traced throughout the supply chain.

The impact on packaging manufacturers is significant, and will mean investing in the means of generating and printing such data directly onto the packaging. Printing one or more unique codes at a good level of quality on a high-speed line can be highly challenging. Once acceptable equipment has been found, creating the space within packing lines can also be a challenge.

Turkey has already implemented such a system, known as ITS. South Korea and Argentina will follow this trend. The “Track & Trace” involves the use of a unique DataMatrix code (instead of the formerly-used barcode) enabling traceability of each and every drug unit to be tracked through every single step and action throughout the supply chain. In this manner, the sale of fraudulent drugs, drug theft and barcode scams are prevented. In addition, if required, drugs can easily be recalled due to traceability of stocks. This system is currently only in place for human medicines, but there is great scope for it to be integrated in future in animal healthcare and even other areas of medicinal products in future.

How will this Affect Veterinary Packaging?
Presently, there is no indication that the regulation will cover veterinary healthcare products. However, once fully integrated and proven as a success, there is every reason to believe it will be enforced. The benefits of such system will be far-reaching, in allowing much tighter control over the products that enter into the market. Inventory control, distribution and even recalls will be far easier than before, once the system has been fully integrated.

3) Counterfeit Products an Increasing Concern:
The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates around 15% of all medicines worldwide are counterfeit. In the past five years, sales of counterfeit drugs have almost doubled. Where human medicines are concerned, most people buy them to treat obesity, hair loss and diabetes, but some drugs are being sold to treat strokes and heart conditions. The total value of the market is around $45 billion per year.

“Counterfeit drugs often contain minimal traces of the active ingredient which means the patient or animal will get little or no health benefit. Effectively, it hijacks the brand and infringes upon the patent and trademark rights of legitimate drug manufacturers. Not to mention the health concerns that come with them.

Whilst Asia and China account for the biggest share of trade, according to industry-funded organisation, the Pharmaceutical Security Institute, counterfeit medicines are found in all parts of the world. Interpol officer Aline Plançon commented: “There is a flow of products from everywhere and going to everywhere, there are so many hubs.”

Furthermore, human medicine is not the only sector to have been hit by counterfeit drugs. In 2011, thirteen people in the UK and France were arrested for smuggling £6m of veterinary medicine into the marketplace and distributing it illegally.

“A similar case was reported in 2014 when a 20mg solution of Boehringer Ingelheim’s Metacam, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug, was found on a UK farm. The counterfeit vial carried a poor copy of a label on a bottle made with different glass, stopper and cap, as well as a false batch number and expiry date.

This is clearly a significant risk to animal health and potentially down the line to human health as well. Steve Dean, Chief Executive of the Government’s Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) stated: “Incorrect use of medication of unknown origin and dubious quality compromises animal welfare, increases the risk of harmful residues in the food chain and raises the spectre of unnecessary antibiotic resistance.”

What Measures are being Taken by the Industry to Minimise the Risk of Counterfeit Drugs Entering the Market?
Counterfeit products are a growing concern and not just confined to medicinal drugs. In 2008, major retailers Sainsbury’s and Boots were duped into selling counterfeit toothpaste. A recall notice was instantly placed and the product was thought to have not had health risks, however, it firmly illustrates that even a low-cost product such as this can easily be faked and enter into the marketplace.

In such cases, undermining the public trust is a key issue that needs to be tackled quickly and firmly. Major manufacturers such as Pfizer have been working hard to combat counterfeiting for a number of years now. The use of radio frequency tags (RFID) on certain highly-counterfeited products help to ensure safety within the United States.

Additionally, a range of specialist printing techniques are also being employed across the industry to ensure packaging cannot easily be replicated and is also easier to spot across the supply chain. This includes hidden graphics, trust-seals and covert printing techniques using unique printing techniques and specially designed computer technology.

What does the Future Hold for Animal Healthcare Packaging?
Whilst the market continues to expand in all directions, there is no doubt room for improvement and indeed a need for innovation. There remains speculation within the packaging industry as to how best to safeguard these products. Whilst there are a range of packaging solutions and labelling options that can help to minimise the risks, decisions need to be industry-led and driven by regulatory requirements.

Multi-market distribution will by itself require considerable management by manufacturers and packaging providers alike. Serialisation and anti-counterfeit measures will not, in
they own right, address all of the challenges faced within this market, but will certainly help to minimise the risk of rogue products entering the market.

(**) A single global data synchronisation system would take time and cost, but would enable veterinarians (or any authorised users of animal healthcare products) to check the integrity of the origin of a product and ensure data is current and kept up to date. The challenge in this system would be the creation of some kind of scanning system that would communicate with a primary database. This is not entirely practical at this moment due to the lack of stability in some countries of data connection.

Conclusions:
According to David Weill, CEO of Primequal SA (***)**, the need for innovation within the veterinary pharmaceuticals market is challenging. Containing and delivering medication, whether it is for a pet cat in the kitchen or a cow in a field, can be challenging. “Pre-filled, multiple delivery devices that are easy to use and allow no contact to the operator with the product being delivered is really the goal.” Packaging for all healthcare products will continue to play a key role in encouraging patient safety and patient compliance. After all, it is the last form of communication left between consumer and dispenser once the product is handed over. The animal welfare industry will undoubtedly continue to grow in years to come, with increasing investments of leading industry players.

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Sources:
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