

# Halifax innovator feeling no pain

Origin Biomed named on Red Herring Top 100 Global Companies list

Times may be tough across the economy, but Halifax, Nova Scotia-based Origin Biomed isn't feeling the pain. In fact, in addition to recently earning rank on the esteemed Red Herring Top 100 Global Companies list, the company's star product, Neuragen – a novel therapeutic for nerve pain – is on an upwardly mobile sales trajectory as consumers snap it up at drug stores across North America.

The Red Herring Top 100 Global Companies list, which the publisher describes as identifying "promising start-ups that will lead the next wave of disruption and innovation," has a penchant for picking winners. Google, Skype and YouTube are among the technology titans Red Herring spotted early on. This year, of 1,800 firms

worldwide scrutinized by the San Francisco-based magazine's editorial team, just four young Canadian firms – including Origin – made the list.

Red Herring CEO Alex Vieux said, "We look for companies that have products with universal appeal, products that are as valid in Toronto as they are in Paris, New York or Bangalore. We also want companies with great IP (intellectual property), and the capacity to become internationally successful. They need to show they are capable of deploying technologies one after another in different territories, and reaching critical mass and profitability. Origin has all of these qualities. They passed all those benchmarks with flying colours."

While privately held Origin has several products in its

pipeline, the engine of its growth is Neuragen, a bio-therapeutic rooted in a novel blend of essential oils. Sold over-the-counter, Neuragen is used to treat peripheral neuropathy, a painful nerve condition associated with diabetes and shingles.

"This is a therapeutic product that addresses nerve and pain problems for millions and millions of people," says Mr. Vieux.

Origin Biomed founder and president Bob Cervelli recognized the potential for a winner when he came across a novel bioactive compound developed in academic research labs in the U.S.

"The science was done. It was ready for commercialization. We created a suite of products based on these bioactives," he says, noting that science behind them



Market success and international accolades are among the indicators of a bright future for the staff of Origin Biomed including founder and president Bob Cervelli. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

offered another advantage – solid patent protection, a rarity in the bioactives field.

Origin launched Neuragen in response to an unmet need in the marketplace for people suffering nerve pain associated with diabetic neuropathy and shingles. The only available prescription alternatives are slow to act, offer modest benefits and are fraught with side effects.

"We realized we had the potential of a blockbuster," says company vice president of Operations, Robert Silverstein.

Consultant Barry Turner, former president of health products titan Warner Lambert Canada, is among the people now helping guide Origin's growth.

"Neuragen is uniquely positioned in the marketplace," he says, "It is better and faster acting than its competitors, and it has no side effects other than a somewhat floral smell. This product works and works quickly – far better product than its Rx

competitors."

While Neuragen's clinical efficacy exceeds 70 to 80 per cent – a number high even by Rx standards – that alone was not enough for the fledgling company to capitalize on its innovation. To realize Neuragen's potential Origin also needed to get its product on shelves and promote it.

Mr. Turner acknowledges that building out distribution, "so consumers could find the product at their convenience," was a challenge. While Neuragen is now available in Shoppers Drug Mart and other major drug store chains across Canada, and in Rite-Aid, CVS, Walgreens and other U.S. locations, Mr. Turner isn't ready to settle. "We are about two-thirds of the way there."

He adds, "They have also had to manage the rate of that expansion to match manufacturing capacity."

They are now bringing a U.S. partner on stream who can move product at a higher rate than presently available

This will be able to meet their growth demands in the U.S."

Early on, drumming up marketing and advertising dollars was another hurdle. Today, Origin's success is resonating with venture capitalists, says Mr. Cervelli, who adds the company is investing in the development of an array of line extensions, and Neuragen's promotion.

Mr. Silverstein says, "Without doubt we will continue to grow. We are prepared for that and are increasing our marketing – building advocates across diabetic educators, pharmacists and consumers – so that more people will learn about the credibility of our products."

Mr. Vieux says, "I think they have a chance to become a global player. They are certainly a company to watch and to be aware of. The real question is whether they will remain independent or whether a larger firm will buy them."

They are going to make headlines, that's for sure." ■

## Red Herring awards

### Four Canadian firms ranked among world's best list

Chosen from among a field of 1,800 competitors worldwide, four Canadian technology companies made this year's Red Herring Top 100 Global Companies list, a ranking of promising young enterprises with big potential. Here they are.

#### OmniDate

OmniDate is on a mission to bring online dating one step closer to the real thing. The Toronto-based company's plug-and-play application turns traditional dating sites into 3D Virtual Dating experiences. In addition to its OmniDate online service the company's technology is now also available on dating sites in the U.S., UK, and Ireland.

#### Origin Biomed

Origin BioMed may employ just 36 people, but the company's innovative health products are improving the lives of people across North America. Company vice president, Operations, Robert Silverstein says, "We work hard together, and we play hard. When we hear from people who are experiencing pain relief because of our product, Neuragen, it makes us feel very good."

#### Nulogy

With the strategic importance of supply chain management on the rise, it's little wonder that the stock is also rising on Toronto-based Nulogy's PackManager software. PackManager delivers real-time labor, production, and inventory information enabling packaging companies to better manage their businesses. Nulogy's customers include Unilever, Ontario's The Beer Store and Quality Packaging Specialists International

#### Telepin Software

Ottawa-based Telepin Software has made a name on the success of its mobile financial platform solutions. The company's open architectures and standards based-interfaces leverage existing infrastructure and hardware for flexible and compact distribution and payment solutions. Among its accomplishments Telepin now has a market presence in the Middle East, North America and Africa.

## Novel pain reliever an engine of growth

As a former Dalhousie University industry liaison officer Bob Cervelli had seen plenty of promising technologies cross his desk. But the discovery of highly efficacious, patentable bioactives for the treatment of nerve pain, spelled irresistible opportunity. Today, the result is Neuragen – a blockbuster non-prescription pain reliever that is fuelling the growth and expanding product

lines of Origin Biomed, the privately held Nova Scotia-based company founded in 2001 by Mr. Cervelli.

"We didn't start out as an R&D company," says Mr. Cervelli, noting that the bioactives now underpinning Neuragen and Origin's other products were originally developed at the Pennington Biomedical Research Centre in Louisiana in collaboration with a chronic

pain centre in California.

What Origin has successfully done, however, was to formulate the complex blend of natural, aromatic oils into Neuragen and tap into a substantial unsatisfied market by bringing relief to people suffering from peripheral neuropathy, a painful nerve condition associated with late-stage diabetes and shingles.

Unlike its prescription phar-

maceutical competitors, Neuragen provides relief almost instantly, and has no side effects. Demand has risen briskly, and the product is now available in drug stores across North America. While continuing to advance Neuragen's marketplace success, Origin is also broadening its horizons.

"We're doing more R&D in house and with partners in university and government labs to

better understand the specific compounds within Neuragen to discover other potential products. We are still filing patents. It's looking extremely positive."

Other products developed by Origin include Herpestat Lip Shield for treating cold sores, and a Polyphenol Green Tea Skin Cream that protects and rebuilds skin cells. "All of our products are based on patented IP (intellectual proper-

ty) associated with bioactives of one type or another."

Mr. Cervelli admits Neuragen is the cream that rose to the top.

"We've been quite happy with the product uptake," he admits modestly, while underscoring Origin's objective: "Our goal is to establish Neuragen as a dominant brand for pain relief, and a leading trusted brand for health care." ■

This report was produced by RandallAnthony Communications Inc. (www.randallanthony.com) in conjunction with the advertising department of The Globe and Mail. Richard Deacon, National Business Development Manager, rdeacon@globeandmail.com.

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