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CRM CAN IT REALLY BE PULLED OFF?

It's official — all direct-to-consumer (DTC) ads now look the same. TV commercials have gone the way of concerned physicians depicted as animated characters who look like Pixar movie extras or the loving, older couples, who will never retire, sitting or walking on the beach.

But before we hang up on DTC, customer relationship management (CRM) programs are here to save the day. CRM is not a novel concept. Grab 'em, give 'em what they want, and keep shaking them until they are loyal, lifetime customers has worked well in other industries. Think about auto manufacturers, book-sellers, and adult entertainment. As far as I remember, CRM first sprung up in the business-to-business world, where it makes loads of sense: customers who need to buy products and keep buying them for the next 100 years.

REACHING OUT AND TOUCHING SOMEONE

Of course, in the consumer arena there is much to be said for programs that talk to customers one-on-one and, on the surface, are driven by the participation of willing consumers. This approach is definitely better than pumping precious brand-marketing dollars into more of those embarrassing and ineffective TV commercials, although I will miss the cheering of the TV ad storyboards at the agency meetings.

Most pharmaceutical company marketers agree that those dollars need to go somewhere else. So why not reach out to patients and future patients to develop a loyalty that has been sadly lacking to date?

Cynics in the industry might say, "hang on a minute; we're peddling pills not wheels." The pharmaceutical industry is focused on telling baby boomers that they need its products (and they do), but can we, as marketers, really serve these medicines up like luxury items?

EMBARKING ON AN ODYSSEY

Consumers sign up online to build a relationship with brands because they want to — not because they need to. Yes, they're searching for health information, but once they've found it are they ready to set out on an odyssey?

Building relationships is rather complicated, as those of us in marketing well know. Sure, all that behavioral data we're mining are great, but oftentimes we've forgotten the question by the time we get the answer.

And by the time we think we understand the customer, they've moved on. Throw in cross-channel marketing and convergence, and it seems as if a team of Ivy League Ph.D.s is needed to pull off a successful campaign. Those formulaic TV campaigns were so much simpler.

MOVING CRM TO THE NEXT LEVEL

So where does that leave us? Providers of interactive CRM pro-

grams have been touting the advantages for Web 2.0, not to mention asking for a seat at the integration table.

There is documentation that proves that a well-executed CRM program can motivate patients and increase compliance and loyalty. But, alas, if we've learned anything over the last few years it's that there is no guarantee that any of these highly touted programs will be any good.

KEEPING IT REAL

Consumers love video and animation on the Web. Guy Ritchie's online movies for BMW are a perfect example. We want consumers to manage their conditions and dietary habits online, but what they really need is some help balancing their checkbooks. We need to provide consumers with the interactive tools that engage and assist them. Marketers need to remember that online CRM programs shouldn't be more complicated to navigate than the management of a health condition.

From the marketer's perspective, they want online support tools; they want integrated data that easily link all of their marketing programs under one roof; and they want their CRM program to be different from the other guy's.

WHAT CONSUMERS WANT

- Video and Animation
- Help With Managing Their Condition
- Interactive, Easy-to-Use Tools

WHAT MARKETERS WANT

- Online Support Tools
- Integrated Marketing Programs
- A Differentiated CRM Tool

WHY NOT GIVE CRM A CHANCE?

Satisfying the needs of both consumers and marketers is possible using CRM. As we herald in the age of CRM, convergence, and cross-channel marketing, marketers have nothing to lose, so why not give it a try?

If the baby boomers end up being as excited about their drugs as their second homes or vacations, I'll eat my words. But whatever the future holds, it's got to be better than those TV ads.

But wait a second; we'll need one of those to promote our new CRM program.

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