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BEYOND SYNERGY WHY DTC DEMANDS CONVERGENCE



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Dozens of publications — ranging from the *Wall Street Journal* to *Media Life* — have printed stories documenting the link in pharmaceutical advertising between television and the Internet. These two alternatives, long considered the opposite ends of the media spectrum — and debated by countless pharmaceutical executives as being either “too broad” to do any good or “too narrow” to reach the right people — have suddenly emerged as compatible sides of a single marketing coin.

Research has proven that the combination of on-air and online produces measurably better results. For example, a January 2004 study from Dynamic Logic found that the addition of an Internet component to a typical TV campaign can boost sponsorship awareness by more than 28%. A study from Manhattan Research released in January 2004 found that half of the consumers who visit drug company Websites do so after seeing a TV commercial. Moreover, as reported in the *Wall Street Journal* in January 2004, the number of online visits resulting from a commercial is double the number of calls to an advertised toll-free number.

THE REVOLUTION

As a practicing physician who specializes in emergency medicine, I am not surprised by any of these findings. The first stirrings of the Internet revolution were visible in my own practice, where I created one of the first Websites for doctors in 1995. At the time, it was clear that patients were determined to exercise some control over healthcare decisions. When the FDA loosened its guidelines and began allowing DTC advertising in 1997, most patients leapt at the prospect of empowerment. Today, patient education, long dispensed by the doctor, is largely patient-driven. TV, radio, and print — the so-called consumer media — serve to introduce the patient to a topic. Formats may range from a magazine-style TV show, to a newspaper or magazine article, or the classic 30- or 60-second audio or video commercial. Whichever vehicle is used, the presentation is often superficial but entertaining. If the patient or caregiver wants to learn more, he or she is advised to call the toll-free number or visit the Website indicated in the segment or ad.

While the Internet is twice as popular as the toll-free number, it is not without limitations. According to Manhattan Research, the most savvy consumers are more likely to explore generic portals than to visit branded drug company sites. The promotional quality of some proprietary sites, along with the lack of fair balance, may discourage patient trust. Most patients prefer to get their information from a respected third party on a specific medical condition. One solution is the use of generic Websites, which allow drug companies to have the best of both worlds, using the unbiased setting as a backdrop against which to provide links to their own brands.

Another problem is the proliferation of low-cost Websites that

are full of medical misinformation. These sites are damaging to everyone involved. Yet there are few legally enforceable standards for weeding out the pages of unproven claims that currently clutter the Internet. Even more common are examples of “alternative media” that do not take advantage of Internet technology. These are Websites that look like print or TV ads. They are neither user-friendly nor interactive. Since they give no reason for the patient to respond, they provide no basis for follow up or qualifying leads.

The best Websites are always interactive. In medicine, feedback is particularly important, both to the patient and to the marketer. Diagnostic assessments, based on patient-administered check-ups or questionnaires, can give the patient the tools that he or she needs to determine whether, and when, to see a doctor. The sponsor can use the results to decide whether to send a video or a patient magazine. That’s customer relationship management, or CRM. And CRM is the route to an increased return on investment, which is the Holy Grail of marketing.

CREATING CONVERGENCE

Convergence, of course, is another word for synergy. We have found that a healthcare segment on an independently produced TV magazine can increase visitors to a Website on a medical condition — with links to the sponsoring drug — by as much as 140%. The addition of radio can drive those numbers even higher. More importantly, seven to 10 times more people than those that initially respond will eventually follow the mandate to “see your doctor for more information.”

But synergy involves more than leading the patient to the doctor and the doctor to the brand. The accumulation of messages can play an even more valuable role after the drug is purchased. Studies show that many of those who visit branded drug sites do so to learn more about a product they are already taking. A strong TV presence, combined with a good Website, can do wonders to keep a patient motivated, even when the product has side effects that are unpleasant or inconvenient. Increased compliance is a benefit that helps everyone — the patient, the physician, and the pharmaceutical company — by promoting good health, forging a personal relationship, and building loyalty between the customer and the brand.

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