

Contributed by Jack Trout

EDUCATION IS THE WAY TO DIFFERENTIATE

Sy Syms, founder of the off-price designer clothing chain that carries his name, loves to say that “an educated consumer is our best customer.” In fact, he loves the concept so much he registered the phrase “educated consumer” as a company trademark.

But that doesn't mean Sy has a patent on using education as a differentiating factor. Any company that spends the time and effort to educate the people who use its products will reap the differentiating benefits of name recognition, brand loyalty, and word-of-mouth advertising.

INFORM VERSUS EDUCATE

Inform means to make someone aware of something, usually facts. Every company makes an effort to inform its prospects and customers about its products, mainly through advertising, brochures, and instruction manuals. Educate means to help bring someone to a higher level of understanding or acceptance, ideally as part of a mutual, active endeavor.

If a company simply wants to convey information, inform. If it wants to build relationships and change behavior, educate.

With all due respect to Sy Syms, nowhere is the differentiating value of educated consumers more important than in healthcare. For patients, being educated about their conditions and treatments can mean the difference between health and illness, even life and death. For companies in the healthcare business, effectively educating patients can mean the difference between being a leader and a laggard.

Among pharmaceutical companies, the need for differentiation is especially acute. New drugs are introduced into the marketplace after years of costly R&D and many dead-ends. Not only must the brand managers compete with similar drugs from other companies, they must compete for one of the most precious resources of all — the time and attention of busy doctors.

Even though pharmaceutical companies now advertise many of their drugs directly to consumers, doctors still write the prescriptions. Brand managers devote tremendous resources to get their corps of knowledgeable sales representatives in front of doctors to explain the uses and benefits of their drugs, but it's far from easy. In this era of managed care, doctors face unprecedented demands on their time.

THE POWER OF EDUCATION

Nevertheless, doctors place a high value on building strong relationships with their patients, and they also view education as an important part of their role as a physician. Indeed, doctor is derived from the Latin word for teacher. The two go hand-in-hand; patient education efforts lead to strong doctor-patient relationships.

Savvy pharmaceutical brand managers know that by helping time-pressed doctors educate patients about diseases and treatment regimens, they can differentiate themselves from the competition.

Describing the features and benefits of well-designed patient education efforts gets the sales representatives more of that crucial “face time” with physicians. Pharmaceutical marketers also know that creating an association in the minds of consumers between their brands and patient education leads to product loyalty and word-of-mouth referrals.

Education efforts also help companies meet their social responsibilities. By building strong patient-education initiatives, pharmaceutical companies become part of the “treatment team.” The result is better health outcomes because educated patients are more likely to stick with their medication regimens and make lifestyle changes. That not only cements patient and doctor satisfaction with the brand, it carries a tangible benefit right to the brand manager's bottom line by increasing the number of people who complete their course of medication.

ALL EDUCATION IS NOT CREATED EQUAL

Unfortunately, many patient-education efforts fail because they don't overcome common communication gaps. Again, the healthcare sector offers the most dramatic illustration of this point, but the lessons apply to everyone.

In patient education, the most significant obstacle to communication results from what healthcare providers call “low health literacy.” As many as 90 million adult Americans — almost 50% of the adult population — have limited or extremely limited reading skills. These people have difficulty understanding and acting on any written information. Add to that the number of Americans who aren't proficient in English (about 11.5 million according to the U.S. Census), plus those with moderately to severely impaired vision (roughly 8 million, says the National Center for Health Statistics) and you end up with a surprisingly large number of people who have difficulty decoding most of the written information offered as patient education.

Educational materials also fall short if they aren't relevant to the target audience because of cultural, learning style, or lifestyle disparities. (Think about giving a single mother from the inner city a brochure about respiratory allergies that has a picture of a young couple hiking in the woods.) Education efforts also fail if they are out of sync with a reader's ethnic traditions or core



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beliefs. (People who believe in the power of traditional or new-age remedies, for instance, may be reluctant to accept educational materials that discount or ignore alternative or complimentary therapies.)

To ensure that education efforts hit the mark, they must bridge these communication gaps. Materials must be written in clear, simple language, and laid out in a pleasing, easy-to-read style. Most important is lots of input — from the people who'll be delivering the materials and the people who'll be using the materials. In our healthcare illustration, that means doctors and other health practitioners, as well as patients from all walks of life.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING

For many companies, educational materials are often a promotional after-thought — a quick brochure that gets lumped in with other leave-behinds like clocks, sticky notes, pens, and calendars. That's a fine tactic — for those who want their brand lumped in with all the others out there.

But as some pharmaceutical companies have learned from the boundless consumer interest in health information (more than 20,000 health-related sites on the Internet), spending the time

and effort to truly educate consumers about their products and the conditions they treat yields tremendous dividends in brand differentiation.

Strategic education efforts that are effective, innovative, and widely accessible — that bridge communication gaps and forge bonds between a company and its customers — will build brand awareness and lasting relationships. They will help the connect to the market and differentiate the company as a provider of helpful, even vital, tools. And being the first to do it will certainly give a company an edge over its competitors. And an "edge" in today's killer economy is worth a great deal.

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