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PATIENT POWER WHY YOUR DAUGHTER'S WEBSITE CAN MOVE A MARKET

THE MOVE AWAY FROM DIRECT TO CONSUMER AND TOWARD DIRECT TO COMMUNITY

Social networking has become a major force driving media to reinvent itself and find a way to survive in a world where mass media no longer exists. Our children's addiction to text messaging on cell phones, reading blogs, and maintaining personal Websites has significant meaning to the marketing world. Before 2000, the big media companies were the dominant forces in driving trends and opinion. Now, thanks to real-time communications and self-publishing, the average Joe has the power to move a market.

Rupert Murdoch, the powerful media mogul who has more ways to reach citizens than almost anyone else in the world, has purchased InterMix Media, owner of MySpace.com, the fifth most-viewed Internet domain in the United States and owner of other sites. According to a May 2006 Nielsen NetRatings, MySpace.com is one of the leading social networking communities on the Internet with more than 38 million unique visitors per month. MySpace.com is a premier lifestyle portal that allows individuals to network, connect with friends, and discover trends related to popular culture. By integrating Web profiles, blogs, instant messaging, e-mail, music streaming, music videos, photo galleries, classified listings, events, groups, college communities, and member forums, MySpace.com has created a connected community.

POWER SHIFT

It's clear that there has been a major power shift from media to the public. This same power shift is occurring in healthcare — from the physician to the patient. No longer is the physician the most influential source of treatment information; the Internet is increasingly impacting patient behavior and, more specifically, the communities that maintain the influence.

Why should patients read what an expert writer on a credible health Website has to say when they can learn from someone who personally experienced the treatment and is acting as an adviser to anyone who clicks onto a blog? This type of interaction may be fine if one is buying a new MP3 player and wants to go online to ask folks what is the best model; but when it comes to healthcare, patients should be listening to someone with the expertise to understand the risk-benefit equation of each treatment option. But this is not the case today.

For verification, just go online and search through the thousands of patient Websites that are distributing health advice, for example, Dawn's page (www.geocities.com/dawnsmspage/Copaxone.html). This is just one of a thousand sites where multiple sclerosis patients discuss their treatment experiences. Patients rely on these sites for product information. After a physician hands a multiple sclerosis patient three starter kits, he or she has to rely on other patients to make

the decision, in this case, to choose between convenience and low side effects or efficacy. These patients' voices are being heard.

EXPERTS NEED TO BE HEARD

What this means to our industry is that as communicators we have to ensure that our voices are being heard as well. Our challenge is to bring our expertise to the table, and we have to be part of the dialogue. In the old media model where the TV networks dominated, direct-to-consumer (DTC) messaging was the natural approach to influence consumers and patients. Now, in the new world of social networking, the broadcast model won't work. The new model demands that we join the social networks and provide expertise.

Taking it to the next step means that we, as well as our clients, need to forge new relationships and partner with patient key opinion leaders. Developing advocacy relationships is something we know how to do pretty well; we've done it with physicians. Now we need to apply the same expertise to patients. This is not a new model nor is it DTC or direct to patient.

Reaching out to the early adopters and influencers who dominate the healthcare dialogue in cyberspace can be critical to the success for a brand launch.

Today, there are many specific tactics available to do this, such as:

- Develop a sponsored third-party Website staffed by experts available to chat and interact with information seekers.
- Develop a patient speakers' bureau that brings together active, information-seeking patients to hear from a patient advocate and/or a healthcare professional.
- Seek out a panel of vocal influencers on the Web and provide them with accurate information on a timely basis; it's better they get the data from a reliable source than from other less credible sources.
- Set up a corporate blog where selected teams of professionals can address any concerns that arise; it's important to be open to your customers' comments and concerns.

It's time the industry acknowledges that the balance of power has shifted. Without smart, patient-centric marketing, the brand will be defined by the community and not by the marketer.

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