

PR Can Help Brand Planners DO MORE WITH LESS

A pharma product manager who fell asleep in the 1980s and woke up today would feel a lot like Gulliver waking up in Lilliput. Everything about brand marketing has gotten a lot smaller.

Billion-dollar blockbuster drugs have gone off patent, replaced to a large extent by niche market products, such as medicines to treat rare diseases. As a result, patient populations are smaller and so may be the pool of provider specialties you are looking to target. These shrinking target markets can often mean smaller marketing budgets and diminished field forces to make those face-to-face connections. But product managers developing their 2013 brand or launch plans can still find ways to achieve big success in this “new” small world.

While brand teams are facing an industry with a “do-more-with-less” ethos, many of these changes actually work to make public relations and its many sub-disciplines — media relations, advocacy relations, physician relationship building, and social media — even more relevant as cost-effective tools for strapped marketers. Among the multiple communications channels and technologies now available to tell a brand’s story and deliver your messages, creative PR programs remain one of the most efficient means to reach your audiences and help you, the marketer with limited resources, turn a relatively small investment into a big ROI.

Generating Buzz in Markets with Small Patient Populations

For chronic, prevalent diseases that affect millions of people like diabetes, asthma, and rheumatoid arthritis, a variety of safe, effective, and FDA-approved therapies are available to treat and manage these conditions. And, the media covering healthcare tend to report new developments in these therapeutic areas precisely because these large patient populations are a big part of their audience. But with a

move to investigational therapies to treat rare diseases, large-scale, broad-reaching media efforts are not always the most efficient and cost-effective means of disseminating a message.

An increased focus on rare diseases has spawned grassroots patient advocacy organizations whose *raison d’être* is to spread the word about these largely unknown disorders and light the way for other people who may have them to know the symptoms, seek care, be diagnosed and receive appropriate treatment. The patients who founded these organizations have struggled with these disorders and are passionate about guiding others in the same situation. Evolving technologies have made the groups more organized, vocal and often willing to collaborate with pharmaceutical companies that are developing innovative therapies to treat their rare conditions. These groups are often looking to initiate unbranded PR campaigns to raise awareness not only about their disease, but their mission and goals as an up-and-coming organization. This creates an opportunity for companies, and product managers, to demonstrate their commitment to the patient community. PR can step in to initiate a relationship with the group and help implement media-driven initiatives that educate both the public and professionals about the disease and the patient organization.

Third-party partnerships often result in a triple-win. They benefit the pharmaceutical company, the third-party group and, most importantly, the patients, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of PR programs that focus on education. Through these collaborations, pharma

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companies distinguish themselves by providing value to and building relationships with their customers, thus creating a positive marketplace, while third-party organizations are able to raise their profiles and expand services to their members.

Reaching Physicians in a Niche Market

While patient populations are getting smaller, avenues for reaching physicians are also narrowing. Large-scale marketing efforts used in the past have been impacted by field force cut backs, the scarcity of physicians’ time and availability, and their increasing reliance on new technologies to secure timely product and prescribing information. Consistent with the increased focus on rare diseases and niche products, marketers are now being charged with reaching physicians who work in unique and narrow sub-specialties.

But you can target physicians in niche mar-

kets by taking a page from the PR handbook. Rule No. 1: know your audience and bring something of value to them. Knowing a specialist's prescribing habits is not enough. What are the unique challenges this physician faces? Are there up-and-coming providers or organizations focused on this sub-specialty?

These niche markets often provide a tremendous opportunity for PR to work with key opinion leaders in a particular therapeutic area to develop educational content and programs designed to reach their colleagues. PR, working in concert with your med ed team, can identify the most influential physicians, bring them together through such activities as roundtable meetings and webinars, and build consensus on a medical issue which PR can in turn communicate to other physicians through the target media that reaches them. And all the while, PR is helping you build meaningful relationships with these thought leaders.

Breaking Through in a Crowded Market

Diminished market share is an inevitable part of the current pharmaceutical landscape, with older products going off patent and new molecules/drugs coming down the pipeline. For aging products or new therapies entering a heavily saturated market, maintaining or securing an appropriate share of voice with audiences is an important aspect of brand success. While battling with competitors for prescriptions may be a daunting task, strategically employed media relations can help you win that battle.

For many reporters, editors, and producers, email inboxes are bombarded each day with hundreds of pitches trying to convince them to cover the newest awareness day or product. Ensuring that your brand shines in the media spotlight requires carefully crafted messages that demonstrate to journalists — who in turn influence consumers and prescribers — that your therapy is one of the most compelling stories of the day. This can be especially true in a crowded market, with newer therapies on the horizon, and that's precisely when it is most important to emphasize the differentiating (on-label and clinically proven) benefits of your therapy while also emphasizing how it impacts the disease state overall.

Mature products have already established a

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voice and PR can best help leverage it by working with you to design which messages differentiate your brand from the competition and most importantly will capture the attention of media. Was it the first product of its kind and now has years of clinical experience you can draw on to talk about the disease? Is the delivery method of your product unique for patients or even just a sub-set? Positioning your expertise through the media helps keep your product top-of-mind for physicians and consumers who are sorting through the many therapeutic options now available.

Getting the Best Bang for Your Buck

Brand managers, pharmaceutical marketers, and PR professionals alike can all agree on one thing — budgets are shrinking. Much of this is being driven by marketplace realities already highlighted: aging products, blockbuster brands losing patent protection, a shift to niche market products to treat smaller patient populations, and the economy in general. Fortunately, PR can be one of the most cost-effective tools at a marketing manager's disposal.

PR can accomplish the goal of changing physician or consumer behavior and because results are relayed through third parties, like the media or patient organizations, these messages carry more credibility with your target audiences. Strategic and targeted media relations often generate the best ROI. By targeting efforts versus a national "hit 'em all" approach, budgets can stay conservative while the bottom-line impact remains significant. For example, conducting media outreach highlighting patient success stories in the top

five media markets with the largest concentration of diabetes patients, rather than a large national campaign, focuses your message in an area where it is likely to have a larger impact. Or conversely, you can focus PR outreach on markets where the brand itself is looking to make in-roads. While reaching prospective patients and prescribers is the main goal, a side benefit to this outreach is that it helps foster relationships with key physician influencers.

PR programs directed at a specific population can also help. Would your message resonate best with physicians rather than consumers? Women rather than men? Mothers rather than the general public? Dermatologists rather than general practitioners? Targeted PR — using a host of vehicles such as traditional media outreach, third-party partnerships or social media — can reach your audiences with the focus, credibility, and cost-effectiveness that are often missing from other marketing tools. And PR can support, complement, and amplify your other promotional efforts, such as ad buys, by keeping your brand high on the media radar through earned coverage versus paid placements.

The New Big

In the legendary final scene of the classic film *Sunset Boulevard*, aging, faded Hollywood movie star Norma Desmond is recognized by an admirer. "Aren't you Norma Desmond?" he calls out; "You used to be big!" "I'm STILL big," she retorts adamantly. "It's the pictures that have gotten smaller."

Similarly, your brand can still be big, even if everything else — market size and share, patient/provider population, marketing budget, field force, etc. — has gotten smaller. Public relations and all its strategically targeted components can help you reach the right media and stakeholders with the right story in a credible and cost-effective fashion. **PV**

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