

PR TODAY: *The Best of Times, The Worst of Times*

With the litany of struggles the industry is facing every day, it is no wonder that the role of public relations in the marketing mix is more important than ever.

“Through physician leaders and patient advocates, PR offers a unique opportunity to change customer thinking and behavior in a credible and cost-effective manner.”

JOE BOYD / MCS Healthcare Public Relations



Public relations will continue to play an increasing role in marketing communications, particularly with the advent of social media, and as there are further restrictions on the role that advertising could play in marketing a product, says Tony Russo, Ph.D., chairman and CEO, Russo Partners.

“Media relations, patient advocacy, and physician support are all areas that help edu-

cate consumers about a brand, differentiate it from the competition, and help develop loyalty,” Dr. Russo says.

According to Scott Evangelista, principal, national commercial practice leader, Deloitte, public relations personnel will have to adapt and learn to react quickly to an increased frequency of crises due to social media.

“They will have to get up to speed and stay ahead in dealing with the continually grow-

ing content on social media and be ready to respond to comments and crises faster than ever before,” he says. “Pharmaceutical companies need a constant presence to trumpet their belief systems and support those parts of the ecosystem they deem important and where they have a role to play, therefore there is much more noise today about companies and products.”

As the voice of the company, PR messaging needs to be clear, consistent, and persistent, and when there is a negative occurrence, the crisis needs to be addressed immediately and without equivocation, he adds.

In today’s social networking environment, the traditional avenues of reaching consumers and physicians are failing as ways to offer branded information, our experts say.

“From the disappearance of pens and giveaways at congress booths to the limits on both print and television advertising, marketing executives have a lean menu to choose from moving forward,” says Joe Boyd, CEO of MCS Healthcare Public Relations. “Therefore, public relations is making a comeback as a primary communications platform by which companies can educate the lay public about disease and preventive health, and incorporate branded information where appropriate and within regulatory guidelines. Through physician leaders and patient advocates, PR offers a unique opportunity to change customer thinking and behavior in a credible and cost-effective manner.”

This is no easy task, and one of the toughest challenges is understanding each product’s specific environment and placing the right messages, which are different from sales messages, into the right channels, says Elliott

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DR. TONY RUSSO / Russo Partners



“Public relations is an essential component to any marketing and branding campaign.”

LISA RIVERO / Hamilton Thorne



Berger, VP, global marketing and strategy, Catalent Pharma Solutions.

“Achieving the right mix is the ultimate key to success,” he says.

Contingency planning and resource cultivation for rapid response to potentially negative publicity are also vital.

“Brand trust issues in this industry make independent opinions a key element in forming customer perception,” Mr. Berger says. “If a company’s experts and outside collaborators come to its defense first, the company will be in much better shape versus internally driven corporate responses.”

The most crucial time for brands to benefit from PR is usually during development and launch when key audiences need to understand where the brand makes a difference.

“If this understanding is incomplete then the brand’s chances for success are greatly diminished,” Mr. Boyd says. “Public relations is credible advocacy, and it is most impactful when advocacy is needed for an action to be taken.”

Proactive public relations will lead to faster uptake of brands.

“Companies are under tremendous pressure to get to a position of profitability right

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away because every day counts with impatient shareholders,” says Ken Ribotsky, president and CEO of The Core Nation. “Public relations plays a crucial role in shaping consumer opinions. It is also an excellent method of providing early education for target audiences.”

Lisa Rivero, director of corporate communications at Hamilton Thorne, says public relations is an essential component to any marketing and branding campaign, because it can provide the backstory and education that marketing messages cannot.

“While marketing focuses on the selling points of a product to a niche group of prospects, public relations allows for the story of a company or product to be shared with a wider audience to raise awareness for the bigger picture; treating a devastating disease, providing new approaches to medicine, or uncovering exciting new data on groundbreaking science,” Ms. Rivero says. “While working in conjunction with marketing, public relations can interpret the business goals of the marketing and sales teams, and be able to disseminate these messages through a wide array of communications channels, such as the media, patient advocacy groups, shareholder communications, and general public messaging.”

Through poignant patient stories and education, PR can also humanize messaging so consumers can more easily relate to the communication.

“Putting a face on someone suffering from a disease or a researcher struggling to discover a new treatment can be tremendously impactful for a company,” Ms. Rivero says. “Messag-

ing can certainly focus on innovative technologies and cutting-edge science, but it also needs to show how the technology will ultimately improve lives.”

Measuring Change Behavior and ROI

Mr. Boyd says the elements of a PR campaign vary greatly, but all campaigns have one major commonality: they all strive to encourage change in behaviors, thoughts, or action.

“Unfortunately, this can be one of the most difficult elements to measure,” he says. “The best measurement tool for PR campaigns is a multidimensional one that uses quantitative numbers to determine the reach of the campaign, qualitative evaluators to determine the effectiveness of the messages, and a combination of qualitative and quantitative to determine the impact the campaign has had on changing behaviors, thoughts or actions.”

A successful PR campaign may start with a business objective, but then when one engages in the actual outreach tactics with all of the different audiences that PR touches, including the media, investors, regulators, patient advocacy groups, third-party payers, and customers, it can become difficult to determine ROI, Ms. Rivero says.

“It’s important to have a clear set of goals at the start of a program, such as X leads resulted from a webinar turned into a sale can provide some tangible ROI metrics, however, social media can also be a great way to measure ROI,” she says. “Tracking the growth and participation of LinkedIn and Facebook groups, or

Twitter followers, can show that the brand is gaining measurable traction with the public.”

When public relations involves crisis management, the ROI is determined by the ability to manage the crisis effectively with little damage to stakeholders, brand, or company reputation, says Tony Russo, Ph.D., chairman and CEO, Russo Partners.

“With public relations, each program can be laser targeted,” he says. “The goals should be established at the start of the program so that it is clear what will define success.”

According to Dr. Russo, the ROI of any PR program is measured by the positive regard received from the relevant target audiences involved.

“For a physician outreach program, for example, it would be the positive comments from the physicians about the brand,” he says. “A patient-focused program would measure the positive regard of the brand or company loyalty from patients. A media outreach program would measure ROI through the positive regard of the brand or company from the media.”

According to Mr. Evangelista, public relations efforts can only be effectively measured over a long period of time with good actuarial models built to provide guidance on spend and return over the long term.

“Good PR is founded on great relationships and consistent messaging,” Mr. Evangelista says. “PR is a bit like insurance from a measurement perspective; paying for it today does not necessarily yield a return today, but it will later.” **PV**

EXPERTS



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