

Assessing DTC From a Creative, Media & Engagement Perspective



With DTC advertising, the key issues for marketers today are finding ways to address consumer engagement and improving creative content, according to Bob Hogan, a former general manager of Saatchi & Saatchi Consumer Healthcare.

Hogan left the agency in mid-year and is now launching *cognito!* communications, a full-service consumer marketing communications agency specializing in “knowledge branding.” Simply put, knowledge branding closely links brands to category/disease state knowledge, so that they become consumers’ trusted, reliable sources of information in their respective categories.

DTC Perspectives: What is the state of DTC marketing in terms of creativity, use of media and concerns about regulation?

Bob Hogan: It’s definitely mixed. I’ve seen some bright spots, but if you asked me that question six months ago I would have said dismal. Everybody seemed to be scared of the FDA and possible legislative changes with the Democrats taking control of Congress. Creativity seemed to evaporate. Now there are some glimmers of hope, and there are some smart, solid campaigns out there. Could the industry be more creative even within the DTC guidelines? Absolutely.

DTC Perspectives: What current DTC advertising has caught your eye?

Hogan: I think in DTC, the simpler the better. The Vytorin work fits this bill. It’s very clear, easy to understand; there is no need to complicate it with anything fancy or complex. Certainly, some of the brands I worked on, such as Crestor, present a simple message – good and bad cholesterol; Crestor lowers the bad and raises the good. And Plavix – no matter how formidable you are, you’re no match for a tiny little clot. These are very simple, very accessible message platforms. The Ambien CR work [with the lampshade] is another lesson in clear simplicity – fall-asleep, stay asleep. I get it.

I applauded what Rozerem was trying to do. You know, “your dreams miss you.” Very clever, [and an] engaging way in. But they never paid it off in differentiating the product. After all, this is DTC for Rx products. You also need to execute on the fundamentals.

DTC Perspectives: Do you think we’ve run the gamut on the ‘white coats and doctors’ and that angle?

Hogan: I certainly hope so. There is a herd instinct among pharma marketers. They see something once and think it’s a great idea, so they order their agencies to figure out a way to try it. I don’t know what [the white coats] did. I think there were some interesting uses of it, but I don’t think these were watershed communications with a great effect on the market. It was more political than anything else.

DTC Perspectives: What about some of the ‘more innovative’ approaches tried recently, such as the ‘Viva Viagra’ spots?

Hogan: As far as intent to differentiate, I give them an ‘A.’ To go out and do consumer communications for this condition and drug that goes against the prevailing grain is a good thing. It appeals to my contrarian nature. Creatively and executionally, however, I don’t get it.

DTC Perspectives: Pfizer has always been a little bit different with marketing Viagra than the other companies have been with their ED drugs.

Hogan: Yes, they have. I watch The Golf Channel a lot, which is heavily supported by DTC advertising. From a creative standpoint, it's all just so vanilla, so uninspiring and ho-hum. There is nothing engaging about it whatsoever. While I don't think Viagra is good advertising, I like what the brand is trying to do. At least they're not afraid to try something different.

DTC Perspectives: How is the role of TV evolving?

Hogan: I think it's become fashionable to say, 'TV, oh, we don't want to see that anymore.' I've heard this from former clients. The truth is – for as long as the demographics are what they are, as long as baby boomers can be efficiently reached by TV – TV is going to be a major factor in DTC. There is just no getting away from it and you can't beat it for awareness. You can use print or you can use CRM and all other media, but nothing builds awareness faster, more effectively and more efficiently than television. From a media standpoint, it needs to be a part of the mix.

DTC Perspectives: What about other media options?

Hogan: Let me first say that media is not the issue with DTC. Creative content and consumer engagement is. I don't care what medium you use, if you can't creatively engage your audience on a sustaining basis, you are wasting your money. That said, I do believe the Web is totally underutilized. Print, too, from a creative standpoint. There are a lot of otherwise smart people out there who still believe DTC print has to mirror the TV executionally. Not only do I not share that belief, but I know it also severely

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hamstrings creative engagement. In-office needs to be done better. All the media pieces are very important. People talk about the waste of TV, but don't forget about cable. Cable has become huge for DTC advertising. The audiences are easier to target, and you don't get the waste. I go back to The Golf Channel – I am in their demo and am seeing the appropriate commercials. I can guarantee you that it is not costing a lot of money. Cable has changed the game from the old days of the three networks. For a manufacturer to make a blanket pronouncement, 'TV is too big and too expensive,' that's really not the case.

DTC Perspectives: Based on your experience, have marketers under-focused on compliance in their efforts to continually add new scripts? Is this changing?

Hogan: I believe so. I think there are two schools of thought. One would say compliance – adherence – is an age-old problem and you're not going to change human behavior. There's some truth to that. You can't change everybody's behavior... but you can make a difference in communicating to those people who can be influenced. Even if you make your consumers 10 percent more adherent, you've made a big difference. There is a tremendous cost to the healthcare system when patients are not adherent. This is one of the only markets in which you go through tremendous effort to get new customers all the time without the same effort to get more from the ones you have. We haven't done the job in using communications to accelerate adherence. Most of the efforts to date entail simply pushing information at consumers. Very little is being done to engage them and bring them in on the conversation. Let them steer the discussion and maybe you can get them involved on an ongoing basis.

DTC Perspectives: How do you look at ROI?

Hogan: Let me first say that I think there are inflated expectations, unless they are looking at gross ROI and not the net return. Think about it...if I can get a 15 percent return on my personal money every year, I am ecstatic. But in pharma, people aren't happy with 50 percent. I hear people throwing around numbers like three or four hundred percent. Wow! From an investing standpoint, that's hitting the jackpot.

Of course, you have to be accountable. But I'm not aware of a universal standard model of measurement that works for everybody – it's hard to find one. Vendors talk about in-office programs and their varying ROIs but what role did the other marketing pieces have in that? Nothing operates in a vacuum...everything is interconnected. ROI is vitally important and there needs to be a lot of discussion about it, with a lot more realism involved in determining what is reasonable and what isn't.

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DTC Perspectives: Overall, media spend for DTC continues to climb, not at the 20 percent rate that it was in 2003 or 2004, but there still seems to be a healthy climb for DTC. Do you think single-digit growth will continue?

Hogan: It has to. For one, you have the baby-boomers who want to do everything possible to live as long as possible. Health is probably among the top three searches on the internet, and that will only rise. On top of that, there is far less meaningful contact between a physician and patient than there used to be, so how is that communications gap going to be filled? DTC is the natural way to go. It answers the need for education, awareness and having a dialogue. The stars are lined up pretty well, as long as Washington agrees – that’s what I worry about the most.

DTC Perspectives: Why are some people so adamant that pharmaceutical companies shouldn’t advertise?

Hogan: Especially when it comes to big business, politicians, the media and the public all need to have an enemy. It used to be the managed care companies, but somehow the mantle got passed to the pharma companies. DTC is a political lightning rod. If a candidate were to publicly say, ‘DTC is a terrific idea,’ they wouldn’t get elected. But it is a terrific idea and I believe we have only scratched the surface in terms of what it can accomplish – not just for business but even more for public health. I am practically evangelical in terms of the good I think better healthcare communications can accomplish with today’s media tools. It’s by far the most exciting opportunity in the advertising/marketing communications industry. I just hope politicians will work with us to reach that potential rather than going for the easy sound bites and easy votes.

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