

The Keys to Effective Patient Communications in the New Information Environment



In today's rapidly changing information environment, patients can assess brand information and be heavily involved in treatment decision making. At the same time, patients today are better informed to evaluate a brand's message as they tap into new online communities for information and analysis.

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Effective communications to patients about a brand should first build awareness, not only of the brand, but of the disease itself. The brand's message needs to inform patients, allowing them to start the process of decision making about their health. It must provoke the recognition of a possible need and begin the process of searching and learning about the disease itself and about the brand that may help treat the disease.

None of these steps are novel and each would be known to any brand team; however the information environment and patient decision making process into which a brand's messages emerge is radically different today than it was just a few years ago.

Twenty years ago a patient's information gathering and decision making process might involve a discussion with a family member, but would typically start and end with a visit to his or her doctor. Ten years ago the process would very often include a search online for information about the disease and about the brands that treat the disease. Today, online communities are now added to the list of information sources for patients. Not only can they read the ongoing discussion, but they can engage in and direct the discussion. Unlike online searches for disease and brand information that commonly provide summarized trial information or brand-team developed information, online communities allow patients to hear direct, personal experiences with the disease and its treatments. Fur-

ther, patients can ask their specific questions and receive immediate and specific information in response.

This dramatic change in the information environment has greatly altered the nature of how patients assess brand information and their involvement in treatment decision making. In parallel to the changes in the information environment just summarized, not that long ago a brand's message to patients was only subject to the critique of the patient, and most typically a patient ill-equipped to make such a critique (and indirectly by the doctor). Today, with expert information instantly available, many patients are well informed and able to judge the merits of a brand's message. Further, a brand's message is no longer evaluated by only the individual patient, but by online communities of well-informed patients.

A brand's message can no longer only raise awareness, exhibit "stopping power" or persuade its use; rather it must provide meaningful and valuable information to the patient, as well as add to and move forward the online discussion about the disease and its treatments. To be successful in this new information environment, several areas must be considered when developing a brand's message.

Raising awareness

The first step in creating effective brand messaging for patients is starting with the important goal of raising awareness. Brand messages should both raise the awareness of the disease itself, and the potential need to speak to one's doctor, as well as

the awareness of the product's treatment of the disease. Awareness of both the disease and the treatment will begin the patient's decision making process which culminates in a decision of whether or not to take the treatment. However, awareness is the lowest level of brand perception. What is communicated about the brand at the point of creating awareness is critical to the outcome of patient decision making process that follows.

Focus on what patients need to know

A brand's message needs to provoke and inform a patient's decision making process regarding their disease. To do so fully, the brand's message must provide meaningful and valuable information to the patient. Such information might include: how successful the treatment is, what types of patients might benefit, what types of side effects one might experience, what future risks exist, how the drug is administered, and other questions such as these. Additionally, the message needs to inform patients about what further research they should do and what questions must be answered by a healthcare professional before using the product. Messaging should provide the information patients requires in order to speak to their doctors, allowing them to ask the right questions and improve the quality of their treatment outcome. Enabling patients to be comfortable and confident with their decision to try a product by removing uncertainty and reducing risk is key to a brand's message. Not fully understanding and providing the information that is most important to patients may mean a message that only raises awareness, but does not lead to action.

Building compelling messages

In today's information environment, developing and identifying messages that provide valuable information requires more than just traditional primary market research with patients. Of course, primary market research is critical to the success of a brand's messaging, but the new informational environment demands more than what traditional research can provide because of several critical factors.

Expert Markets – Although not experts in the sense that physicians are, patients are no longer uninformed or naïve decision makers. Patients are commonly knowledgeable about their disease and its potential treatments, and have easy access to “expert” support through online documentation. Understanding this new frame of reference regarding patient knowledge and access to information will necessarily reshape both the context of message development and the nature of identifying compelling messages.

What does Google say? – Many of the questions about pharmaceutical brands that once only physicians could answer can now be answered by anyone with Internet access. Understanding what can be learned about a disease and a brand

online by patients is one of the vantage points necessary to developing meaningful messages.

Online Community “Endorsement” – Unlike online disease and brand documentation that is most commonly static information about clinical trials or brand sponsored Web sites, online community information is dynamic and interactive. Online communities provide 360 degrees of personal, uncensored brand experience. These discussions can range from a brand's clinical features, to patients' conversations with their doctors, to cost and coverage. To be compelling, a brand's message must not only successfully sustain the scrutiny of the online community, but it also must add to the conversation, providing information or a “point of view” to move the conversation forward. Listening to the online community and developing and testing messages in a like setting is critical to optimizing a brand's message.

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Encroachment on Physician Decision Making – Although the balance of treatment decision making is moving toward the patient, physicians remain the gatekeeper of brand access. Mindful of this access point and the important relationship between patients and physicians, a brand's messaging should foster constructive conversations between patients and physicians. A brand's message to patients that alienates physicians will not provide the right foundation for treatment discussions between patients and physicians. Understanding physician perspectives on messages directed toward patients would avoid this problem. Further, research with physicians will also provide insights into the questions that patients are currently asking about the brand in order to better craft those messages and improve the quality of the patient/physician discussion.

Providing meaningful information

The new information environment demands that brand teams rethink how they develop and identify optimal messages for patients. Gone are the days when patient brand awareness was sufficient. Brand messages need to provide meaningful information to patients and online patient communities, allowing patients to have informed treatment discussions with their doctors in order to improve the quality of their treatment outcome. **DTC**

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