With point-of-care becoming more digitized, new opportunities are being created for marketers to more effectively target and engage with their consumers. Innovative digital point-of-care offerings allow marketers to micro-segment, provide the most current and accurate information, and create a new level of interaction with consumers.

By Dan Stone

Integrating digital solutions at the point-of-care can help DTC marketers build immediacy, connectivity and relevance among consumer/patient prospects – while increasing brand awareness, physician-patient dialogue and compliance for prescription therapies and treatments. At the point-of-care, marketers have a unique opportunity to engage and interact with their target audience in a captive trusted environment, thereby engaging the elusive, multi-tasking target consumer.

A digital evolution

But this wasn’t always the case. In the mid-to-late 90’s, point-of-care programs were almost exclusively limited to paper-based solutions, and even the waiting room networks were delivered via analog DVD and, true to the times, lacked interactivity and segmentation beyond demographically-defined networks.

Today, technology has allowed media platforms to evolve from analog, static marketing to a digital landscape of customer-centric marketing tools that offer cutting-edge ways to
interact with consumers, thereby ushering in the age of digital marketing – and point-of-care has reacted.

The new point-of-care is composed of digitally-delivered programs with nimble, flexible reach and opportunities to communicate with targeted captive consumers/patients right before the patient-doctor conversation and the critical prescription-writing decision.

Making DTC messages an interactive experience

One of the factors that makes the digital environment so potent at the point-of-care is interactivity. With the rise in patient consumerism and the growth in Web-based resources, consumers/patients are no longer passive participants in their own healthcare. Today’s empowered patients are seeking information on options, side effects, alternatives, cost/insurance coverage and often bring their own health recommendations to an appointment. The movement to self-health advocacy has made interactivity integral to a DTC brand-marketing strategy.

[QR codes or MS Tag technology] allow the user to continue the waiting-room education experience long after the visit.

Consumers/patients are actively engaged, experiencing a brand through a variety of media and methodologies: print, broadcast, online, and experiential events. Attracting consumer attention at the point-of-need, when and where it matters most, and generating invaluable interaction at the moment patient meets doctor, should be an imperative goal of any DTC marketing plan in 2011-2012.

A captive environment creates a digital laboratory

The waiting room has truly become the “doing” room, as patients use this captive time (27-minute average wait time) to educate themselves about health issues, and find information tailored specifically to their condition. Existing digital technology allows waiting-room patients to experience brands with the kind of full sight, sound and motion they’ve come to expect – and to which they are most responsive. Adding interactive digital capabilities at the point-of-care moves one of DTC’s most effective methods of customer acquisition into the realm of compliance and adherence. Consumers/patients are increasingly entering the waiting room with their smartphones and iPads. So what are some of the digital technologies savvy DTC marketers are utilizing at the point-of-care to reach an ever more elusive, multi-tasking consumer/patient? SMS text messaging, quick response codes and MS Tag technology, and health-related software apps.

Smartphones are the go-to tool for consumers on the go. Consumers are using their hand-held devices regularly to access news, information and entertainment – and not just among early adopters, but among a growing number of Americans of every age. In fact, a recent Manhattan Research study reports that over 10 million online adults looked up health information via their cell phone in the last year. And every year that goes by, the distribution of active users includes older and older consumers/patients.

Innovative waiting-room programs have consumers/patients interacting with the big TV screen to create action on the smaller cell phone screen. Text-based messaging programs lend themselves to more personalized messaging and help marketers add to their databases and capture all important e-mail addresses for future contact. Plus, text messaging provides the ease-of-use consumers expect – and the guaranteed privacy they need. Companies making best use of text messaging are currently using SMS patient programs to drive traffic to their websites, build their CRM databases, stimulate membership in online communities, offer downloadable coupons, and allow patients to take advantage of co-pay reduction programs.

QR codes or MS Tag technology – two-dimensional bar code technology – enable patient participation through the use of bar-code reader applications. Patients scan the image of the QR code posted in the office – on video screens or static walls – to display text, display contact information, connect to a wireless network, or open a Web page in their phone’s browser. These technologies allow the user to continue the waiting-room education experience long after the visit.

Health-related applications – Apple’s positioning that “there’s an app for that” – is gaining momentum in the healthcare space. Aimed to help change, improve or monitor healthcare behavior, free and for-pay health-related apps offer consumers everything from calorie-counting calculators to recipe downloads, smoking cessation programs and step-by-step exercise moves.

An example of a company that demonstrates the synergy between iPhone and iPad apps and the point-of-care environment is Everyday Health. This health-based content provider offers a free downloadable app to help patients eat right, stay in shape and lead a healthier life in general.

For practitioners, Epocrates provides clinical solutions to healthcare professionals and interactive services to the healthcare industry. Most commonly used on mobile devices at the point-of-care, this app helps healthcare professionals make more informed prescribing decisions, enhances patient safety, and improves practice productivity.
What about the much-hyped social media in the digital space? With the lack of clear FDA guidelines, increasing sensitivity to HIPAA rules and hard-to-evaluate “experts” weighing in on vital issues, social media in the pharmaceutical space is still in its infancy. A lot of work needs to be done within this digital platform to ensure accuracy, privacy and protection for its users. Cautious DTC marketers are generally taking baby steps at this point.

**Digital provides efficiency through micro-segmentation**

Perhaps the most significant impact of digital technology at the point-of-care is the ability to segment and target audiences with great precision. Imagine purchasing a traditional TV schedule where you could beam your brand’s commercial into the homes of only the most relevant viewers. With point-of-care digital television, DTC marketers can air their message exclusively in the waiting rooms they most desire. Micro-segmentation not only reduces media waste, but also gives marketers the means to speak directly to their best prospects in the way that best meets their objectives and budgets.

Instead of educating an entire network with a targeted health message, brands can strategically target only the waiting rooms of patients who are being treated with relevant medications.

Digital technology allows for robust waiting room networks with maximum desirability, delivering customized messaging to a target audience. AccentHealth (my company) now offers 12 condition-specific networks and 4 demographic-defined networks composed of relevant specialists and/or high-writing prescribers. Context Media offers two small, highly targeted networks composed of Diabetes and RA specialists. Instead of educating an entire network with a targeted health message, brands can strategically target only the waiting rooms of patients who are being treated with relevant medications.

This concept can be taken even further with micro-segmentation, thereby extending to regions, zip codes, specialists, etc. as a supplement to reduced direct-sales force efforts.

Targeting patients by condition – from allergies and diabetes to depression and heart disease – offers DTC marketers the ability to speak to only those patients being treated for that condition. Relevant content on specific medical conditions helps to reinforce the need for preventive and follow-up care and helps to ensure that patients are kept up-to-date on the latest developments in the areas of health they care about most.

**Digital takes national to neighborhood**

National programming at the point-of-care can now be brought to the local level with geographic locators, retail finders and local weather forecasts. Patients can learn about the upcoming weather forecast along with local health information about flu, allergies and colds happening right in their community. Retailers can air a national ad followed by information telling where the closest store is in relation to the office where the viewer is located. Consider how convenient it would be to receive a prescription and then see the location and phone numbers of the three nearest pharmacies. Patients become more involved with content that speaks to their own “backyard” and provides them with important local resources for post-visit purchases – a win for both the DTC marketer and retailer.

**Digital provides flexibility for fall-out and fast-action**

Digital technology at the point-of-care allows DTC marketers an unprecedented level of flexibility either to blast a campaign into a market or pull the plug on a potential issue. In 2010, DDMAC issued more than a dozen warning letters creating potentially dangerous situations for DTC advertisers, indicative of the volatility and sensitivity around DTC ads. The ability to adapt a campaign in real time offers marketers a safeguard in times of relative regulatory uncertainty. By the same token, this technology allows for new creative to enter a schedule with only days notice. This flexibility offers later creative deadlines, allows for airing longer creative units, absorbs the impact of FDA/DDMAC compliance issues, and is reactive to recalls – keeping patient information accurate, competitive and up-to-the-minute.

**Measuring impact and delivering ROI**

Measurability has always been a critical component at the point-of-care. In fact, point-of-care media
companies have a unique capability to achieve the media “holy grail” – explicitly matching media consumption with physician interaction and Rx purchasing to measure a true ROI. eHealth companies are taking advantage of the significant investments in online measurement technologies to calculate ROI, but few of these approaches are directly matching consumers/patients with prescriptions, relying instead on panel-based research or projections based on heuristic models.

What’s next?

Direct-to-consumer marketers need to develop a solid grasp of the breadth of digital strategies at the point-of-care, or they risk missing out on channels most relevant to their target audiences – and missing out on the opportunity to engage and interact in a captive environment, thereby reaching an elusive, multi-tasking, consumer/patient with trusted content. And with rapid changes in technology, we can expect to see the point-of-care environment as a media becoming even more digital in the future.

In the year ahead, look for greater integration between point-of-care and eHealth companies forming a virtuous circle on the consumer/patient path to purchase; from online research at home to promoting patient-doctor conversations at the point-of-care, to signing up for a drug manufacturer’s CRM system via e-mail in the waiting room, to participating in a compliance/adherence program. Digital technology enables a true 360° approach to providing patients with the education and the help they need when they need it most, in the format that they prefer. We expect to see point-of-care companies invest directly online with consumer applications, and perhaps more significantly, start to partner with eHealth companies to offer integrated solutions.

The future of marketing at the point-of-care is bright…and increasingly digital. DTC


Dan Stone is chief executive officer of AccentHealth, LLC, a leading point-of-care media company featuring America’s largest Health Education TV Network, with award-winning programming provided by CNN, and aired to 158 million viewers annually in over 12,300 physician waiting rooms nationwide. Today, over 40,000 physicians complement their patient-education efforts with AccentHealth’s award-winning programming customized for 12+ condition-specific and demographic segmented networks. Stone can be reached by e-mail at DStone@accenthealth.com or by telephone at (212) 763-5100.