

Magnifying the Authentic Voice of the Patient

How the patient ambassador model is addressing the industry trust gap

Some pharma marketers are building successful outreach programs by working with real patients who are committed to raising awareness about their diseases and sharing their experiences with Rx treatments to help empower other patients.

BY BRENDA SNOW

There are few pharmaceutical or biotech companies who do not subscribe to the need for patient-centric marketing strategies. And while many companies have good intentions, there is often a gap between their intentions to be patient-centric, and the fulfillment of their intentions by placing the patient at the core of their marketing plans and strategies.

Many feel that a patient-centric approach is necessary if the industry is ever going to close the trust gap with patients. Numerous surveys, including those by Harris Interactive and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC)¹, have reported on the extent of the trust gap that currently exists between pharmaceutical companies and their patient consumers. Trusted Advisor Associates chief executive Charles Green has said that, “pharma needs a fundamental recontracting with two critical constituencies – patients and physicians. It’s a business thirsting for trust...”²

Is it possible to address this deficit by utilizing patients as brand ambassadors?

Both the pharmaceutical industry and the patients they serve have unmet needs. The pharmaceutical industry is full of good marketers genuinely committed to the disease areas in which they work, but they are struggling to connect in a meaningful way with the patients they serve. The industry has invested huge



Audience members during a Snow ambassador meeting

sums of money in traditional forms of communication, but has struggled to achieve notable return on investment.

The PwC study showed that only 10 percent of stakeholders and consumers think that direct-to-consumer advertising (DTC) provides complete and useful information, and less than one-half of industry executives, 40 percent, feel it provides the right information.

Three-quarters of industry executives interviewed in the same study feel that drug companies spend too much money on drug promotion overall. This data provides a strong indication that the pharmaceutical industry needs more targeted means of communicating with consumers.

So what is the right information to communicate to patients? And what is the best way to communicate this information effectively? What is the patient perspective? First and foremost, people diagnosed with a chronic illness want access to valuable information that they can trust. While there is a huge body of medical information available online, it is often difficult for patients to easily discern reputable sources amongst the mass of information. People want information they can trust relevant to their particular circumstances. Social media presents an opportunity to discuss issues with people in similar situations, but this is still a communications channel in its infancy. A report by Envision Solutions concluded that

“Americans are being profoundly impacted by health content even if they are skeptical about whether it is credible and reliable.”³

No relevant or useful information

I founded my company in response to my experiences when I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). There was virtually no information available to me that I found relevant or useful. As I started to come to terms with my condition, I wanted to talk to people in my situation, people experiencing similar issues. My experiences led me to the realization that it was possible to bring pharmaceutical companies and patients together in a mutually beneficial format, that the industry could provide the platforms for patients to provide that information, leading to a generation of patients making educated treatment choices.

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Traditional pharmaceutical company marketing typically includes journal advertisements, a digital component, and a relationship marketing program. Each tactic has its place in the marketing mix. However, journal adverts containing a few brief lines of copy, however well crafted they may be, are unlikely to address the core needs of patients. Many pharmaceutical companies are investing in creative digital strategies, but the majority of sites still fail to provide a compelling reason for a consumer to return. Don't get me wrong, there is still a place for these traditional tactics, but we must look at ways to make them more effective and meaningful. Is it realistic to expect a relationship to form once a consumer has received a few mailings? Good communication is a two-way street. Most of these traditional tactics are one-way, and do not give the patient a voice.

So what do patients really want and need? This isn't just my view, by the way. We've worked with thousands of people living with a variety of chronic medical conditions like MS, epilepsy, cancer and rheumatoid arthritis. While people react differently to news of a chronic diagnosis, there is a common theme among most patients, regardless of their disease, and that is the need for information and support.

Instant authenticity and credibility

What more responsible and effective way is there to address patients' needs for education and support while at the same time promoting a product, than through leveraging real patients' voices and stories? Connecting real people with others who have walked a similar path is enormously important because it provides instant authenticity and credibility. Their experiences are the most authentic. They don't pretend it's all

straightforward. They don't guarantee success. Pharmaceutical companies have the opportunity to bridge some of the trust gaps that exist between the industry and the consumer by building greater connections with patients. They have a chance to be seen as thought leaders in the disease areas in which they operate, thus gaining respect from all stakeholders.

These opportunities, and my personal experiences, both as a marketing professional and of living with a chronic disease, led to the creation of the Patient Ambassador™ model. The Patient Ambassadors are real people committed to raising awareness about their diseases and sharing their experiences with treatments to help empower others to be active participants in their own health care choices.

While many people have a compelling story to tell of their journey living with a chronic illness, not all of them are appropriate Patient Ambassadors. When establishing a program, it is important that the Patient Ambassadors' authentic stories align with the company's marketing strategies. This ensures that the brand's key messages are communicated both accurately and genuinely within FDA-regulated guidelines. It is imperative to have a clear understanding of patient segments and conduct a rigorous screening and training process with all potential Patient Ambassadors so they can be seamlessly integrated into a brand's essence and identity while still upholding and adhering to regulations set forth by the FDA.

Once Patient Ambassadors are properly trained they can be used throughout the marketing mix of tactics, including featuring their stories and images in all collateral materials and online properties, educational patient Webcasting, and healthcare professional meetings and communications. One of the most effective uses of Patient Ambassadors is at local grassroots educational events at which people are invited to interact with other patients who share their same disease and struggles. Their passion makes them extraordinarily powerful communicators, both empowering patients in the audience while at the same time bringing a brand to life. Guests also hear from a key opinion leader about the disease aetiology, diagnosis, prognosis and treatment options. It is an honest, transparent and highly targeted form of patient communications, which is why it is becoming ever more popular both here in the U.S., and overseas.

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Inevitably, a number of critical success factors underpin the successful implementation of Patient Ambassador led marketing initiatives.

Strategic Planning:

1. Analyze brand strategy and goals to determine Ambassador needs prior to recruitment. Have a role for all Patient

Ambassadors that are recruited.

2. Ensure that Patient Ambassadors are representative of the target patient population. The Patient Ambassador should represent the average patient. The Patient Ambassador pool should be diverse and meet desired patient segmentation.
3. Take a holistic approach. The Ambassador's story should present a real picture of their personality and their life, rather than just basic facts and treatment data.
4. Ensure complete transparency and disclosure. Be open about the fact that Ambassadors are speaking on your company's behalf. This level of transparency enhances the credibility of the Ambassador without taking away from the program.

Implementation:

1. Train Ambassadors on legal and regulatory guidelines. Be very clear about all legal and regulatory requirements, and the responsibility of being a spokesperson for a brand and a company.
2. Leverage Ambassadors with all brand stakeholders. Include health care professionals, internal audiences and the media.
3. Maintain program momentum. Incorporate the Patient Ambassador program into a long-term strategic plan and build on the program from year to year.

Bringing brands to life

The voice of the patient speaks loudest. Patient Ambassadors make it possible to address the diverse brand challenges faced by pharmaceutical companies. The marketing tactics help to bring those brands to life, and they address the information needs of the customers served by the pharmaceutical industry. This is a truly innovative and highly flexible form of customer marketing, as it can address so many issues, ranging from disease awareness, generic substitution and concordance. It's a model that is helping to close the trust gap. **DTC**

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- 2 Charles H. Green, chief executive, TrustedAdvisor Associates LLC, www.trustedadvisor.com/trustmatters/153/How-the-Pharmaceutical-Industry-Can-Increase-Trust
- 3 Envision Solutions Insight Report: Trust & The Health Web, July 2008

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